

‡8 Cook's Curious Timetable

A A "spool of mysteries"

A1 Attempting to extract a clear and consistent narrative from Frederick Cook's various accounts of his climb of Mount McKinley in 1906 is a daunting task. For many years anyone who wished to do so had only the two published accounts in *Harper's* and *To the Top of the Continent* to puzzle over. It might be said of the story they contain, as Dr. Cook said of the "supra-cloudland" he only imagined he had visited, "It is difficult to grasp the thread with which it rolls up its spool of mysteries."

A2 Except for Bradford Washburn,¹ most readers have been so hopelessly diverted or confused by the many verbal flights of fancy, digressions and asides in Cook's published writings, that they have never noticed that the day to day sequence of events Cook describes comes up one day short of the date he says he reached the summit, September 16. Turning to his 1906 diary only confuses the issue further, since it contains alternate accounts for two of the days, has an additional day not described in Cook's published narratives and still comes up one day short.

A3 Ed Barrill swore that his diary entries recording the events of the climb were dictated to him by Cook. They are somewhat more in line with what is generally accepted as the outline of Cook's attempt. But they also contain the extra day left out of Cook's published reports and are therefore out of sequence by a day with Cook's published story most of the way. Because it retains the extra day, Barrill's account is the only one that actually reaches the summit on September 16.

A4 According to Helene Cook Vetter, it was exactly this "mixup in dates" that caused her to keep secret her recovery of her father's diary in the 1950s. These inconsistencies, both internally and with Cook's eventual story, condemn Cook's diary as a fabrication. Conversely, these variations and differences from his eventually published reports also indicate that Cook's official account was a story improved and adjusted as it evolved and not one based on even the content of his own original diary, much less actual experiences.

A5 To allow the reader to "grasp the thread" of this tangled web, the three accounts of the climb are here (§B) compared day by day. Notes on the contradictions they contain as well as other points of interest follow this comparison for each day. The *Harper's* article, being in almost every respect no more than a word-for-word, but shorter version of the account in Cook's book, is not examined here in detail, but is only called upon when a simplification of the convolutions of the book's text is needed.

A6 Barrill's diary for the days of the climb is brief, informal, unscientific, and occasionally humorous. Cook's is even briefer, with even less detail than Barrill's, and very sober. It generally contains no scientific notes other than barometer readings, temperatures and a few compass bearings. As was Cook's habit, his running account is written on the odd (right-hand) numbered pages only, his notes and sketches occupying the even (left-hand) ones. Cook's diary has a large number of blank pages. He generally sets down a characterization of the content of each page in a label at the top, or gives a heading which summarizes each dated entry. Therefore, it is easy to outline. The narrative in Cook's book is, on the other hand, a "spool of mysteries," rambling and diffuse, requiring concentration and often inference to decipher. So there is far more room for opinion about just what happened on what day, though there are several very definite time cues that help check the validity of any inferences. Thus an understandable chronology can be produced with care and patience.

¹ *American Alpine Journal* vol.11 no.1 [1958] p.6.

A7 In the summary that follows, anything in quotation marks is a direct extract from the item in question. The rest is paraphrase. The notes are aimed at giving insight to any reader attempting to come to grips only with what Cook *says* that he did — not with the *truth* of what he said he did, which is a far more challenging proposition. However, even the difficulty of doing the former goes a long way toward settling the latter proposition by suggesting reasons why these confusions in Cook's texts exist.

B Daily Comparisons

In the comparison that follows, each day of the climb is numbered in sequence and its date is given. The three sources are compared for each of the days Cook said he was engaged in the climb of Mount McKinley: BD = Barrill's diary; CD = Cook's diary; TTC = the narrative in *To the Top of the Continent*; BA = Barrill's affidavit of 1909; HM = the account in *Harper's Monthly Magazine*. Barrill's diary is unpagged; the pages referenced in the others are given. The quotations here are from the original diaries, not the inaccurate and corrupt transcriptions published by the Frederick A. Cook Society. All other accounts, and there are several incidental reports, are left aside due to the fact that they are reported second hand and are, therefore, strictly hearsay. Barrill's affidavit of 1909 purports to be what actually transpired while he and Cook were alone together on Ruth Glacier in 1906.

Day 1: September 8

BD: "We reach the ice cliffs at 7.30 PM"

CD, version 1, p.45: No heading. "Crossed a creek and camped along the first ice walls."

CD, version 2, p.51: No heading. Cook, Dokkin, and Barrill set off with heavy packs to explore the glacier.

TTC p.195: "We started from the [boat] *Bolshoy* where the altitude was 1000 feet, on the morning of the 8th of September."

Notes: It is only the first day and there are already complications aplenty. It is unclear from the two diaries when Dokkin, Cook and Barrill started from their boat. BA says that on September 9 "Dr. Cook and I started alone for the purpose of exploring Mt. McKinley." Barrill's map says they left the boat the "morning of the 8th," but since Dokkin is said to have turned back after the second day out, this would seem to imply they left on the 7th, but at its end BA says Dokkin turned back on September 10. CD p.47 implies two previous traveling camps (see below), but this might be corrupt, because Cook apparently set back his dates, and so this might be the description of a later day than the date given. On CD p.43 Cook writes: "On the 6th day we pulled into the Tokoshitna and there Brill make a dock for the *Bolshoy*. John baked the bread and on the next day Sept.9 we started for the gl." Cook left with Dokkin and Barrill in his motor boat on August 31, so the "6th day" out with the launch would be September 5, so the "next day" could not be September 9. In TTC, however, Cook definitely sets September 8 as the first day of the climb, so we will observe this convention throughout. Notice that there are two completely different versions of September 8 on two completely different pages in CD. It appears that the "second version" is an attempt to move the progress forward up Ruth Glacier on the first two days to allow longer for the serious climbing later, since the distance covered is far greater in the second version than that recorded in the first. BA says that all the early entries in BD were adjusted backward for this purpose. Both BD and CD show evidence that some of these early dates have been changed, Barrill's being erased and Cook's written over. BA states, however, that the events recorded up to September 8 in BD are true. The first version of CD matches BD; the second does not.

Day 2: September 9

BD: "We take to the ice today."

CD, version 1, p.47: No heading. "Last night and the night before we made superb camps beside the gl."

CD, version 2, p.55: Entry headed: "N. face of Gl. to 2nd Lake". Cook mentions stopping for lunch 15 miles from the boat at the first lake.

TTC p.196: "On the evening of the second day we took to the ice, crossed the first northerly tributary, and camped on a beautiful moss-carpeted point about fifteen miles from Mt. McKinley."

Notes: There are again two versions on two different pages. Neither CD version agrees with TTC, but the first version partially agrees with BD. The two lakes mentioned can be seen on the map on p.46 of CD, and both are far short of the "moss-carpeted point" Cook later called Glacier Point. BA says they did not camp at Glacier Point until the sixth day out, September 13.

Day 3: September 10

BD: "We seen a higher place here so we moved camp up this morning. . . . I don't think we can go any higher in this direction . . . Camped in 3 feet of snow to night."

CD p.59: Entry headed: "Cerac & amph exp." It describes the camp at Cerac pt. "on a bed of picturesque moss. . . . made a scouting trip into amph." Then they "ret[urn to] the big gl[acier]". Cook describes (†7 §G14) the top of McKinley as seen from this location.

TTC pp.201-202: They continue up the glacier, making "splendid progress"; they stop for lunch for two hours. "Before dark we pitched the tent on the glacier at an altitude of 8000 feet within a few miles of the northern ridge."

Notes: "Cerac pt." (a misspelling of serac) was what Cook called Glacier Point in TTC. (See †7 fn 19.) CD describes the side trip into the amphitheater containing Fake Peak, and BD seems to imply the same. However, TTC skips this day completely and thus is now one day ahead of CD. Unlike the first two days, there is only one version of the subsequent events in CD for the rest of the climb from here on. BA says that they visited the Fake Peak amphitheater on September 12, and camped there in the snow. According to BA, they did not camp at Glacier Point until the next night.

Day 4: September 11

BD: Barrill complains that it was so cold and his sleeping bag was so damp that it prevented him from sleeping, and describes the glacier at this point as "rough" and "scarry." He says they are about five or six miles from the top of Mount McKinley at this point.

CD p.65: Heading reads: "Cerac to 8300 camp at base of N. Ridge." Cook complains of his damp bag preventing him from sleeping.

TTC pp.204-210: Cook mentions they are now 35 miles from their starting point (or about 5 mi from the summit). "We chose the lateral moraine of the serac of the first glacial tributary as a route into an amphitheatre." They drop in the snow and eat pemmican for lunch. Then they climb the ridge and find themselves on the divide where the arctic air currents meet the tropical ones. They build a snow house at 12,000 feet.

Notes: CD and BD agree as to date and events. TTC is still one day ahead. BA says all these events and those from this point on are fiction, and that the night of September 14 was spent about half way between Glacier Point and the Gateway (see Fig.32). The camp shown in Fig.9 (Gateway) is the one of the night of September 15, according to BA, which says that they went no farther toward McKinley than this camp. From here on, the altitudes given for the same places in CD and TTC do not agree.

Day 5: September 12

BD: "It is 8000 feet high where we start." They make a snow house at 12,000 feet.

CD pp.71 & 73: Entry headed: "8300 to 12100 ft. Snow house N. Ridge. Base N. Ridge to top of Ridge." They build a snow house at the top of the ridge. Cook describes mirages and the meeting of the arctic and tropical air currents.

TTC p.213: After an hour of observations they set off. "We . . . started on the morning of September 12th"; p.217: They spend the night roped together in a ditch at 14,000 feet.

Notes: BD and CD agree, but TTC remains one day ahead.

Day 6: September 13

BD: "We camped here at an elevation of 14200 . . . We had to make a hole in the snow tonight." Barrill states they are "on the main ridg — That goes to the top."

CD p.77: Entry headed: "12,100 to 14,200. cut a hole in the side cliff after cliff step-cutting." Cook complains of a violent headache.

TTC pp.218-221: At daybreak they decide to go on. "Soon after noon we swung from the arête easterly to the glacier . . . to the gathering basin near the summit." The night in the ditch had exhausted them, so "under these circumstances it seemed best to seek a good camping spot on the glacier with a view to resting for a day to recuperate and store up force for the final spurt of the upper ascent." They camp early and build a second snow house.

Notes: CD and BD continue to be together, but TTC is still one day ahead. Here something strange happens in TTC. The text suggests that they might take the next day off to rest, but it does not specifically say they did so anywhere in the succeeding pages. On p.221, after they build the snow house, there is a long digression including what seems to be a recapitulation of the sensations of the climb up to that point. There are musings on the view from the icy ditch of the night before, the unreality of the whole present scene, clouds, colors, angels, boyhood notions of heaven, the peculiar dark sky, and then Cook states that "we were able to build a snow house and in it we packed ourselves for a long rest." What are we to make of this? On p.221 he has already mentioned building the snow house, and he is clearly inside it cooking dinner. By the end of his musings on p.224 he is building a snow house again. This might be interpreted as two different snow houses, but the action in between seems to be purely mental. Although there is no definite mention of two days passing, two might be inferred from the content of the reminiscences. But the heading of the chapter says "from 16,300 to 18,400," implying only two camps, so another day of travel and a third snow house seems improbable. There is no mention of a rest day in CD, and BD's time schedule does not allow for one at all, as we shall see. Likewise, there is no mention of a third snow house in either of the diaries. This question of whether or not they rested one entire day is important, however, and will be returned to later. Later in CD Cook mentions a camp at 15,600, and BD mentions the latter as the altitude of their first return camp, but this altitude is not mentioned anywhere in TTC. Referring to HM for guidance, we find the two pages of musings in TTC are absent, and there is no mention of even the possibility of "resting for a day to recuperate." On this evidence, the two mentions of building the igloo in TTC seem to be merely careless editing of the additional musings into the already existing magazine text, which contains the exactly worded second reference to building the snow house, but not the first.

Day 7: September 14

BD: "We had a hard days clime today. . . . We made a snow house here." (The entry does not give an elevation.)

CD p.85: Entry headed: "15,600 Snow House 2 to top vally". There are these two notes: "8 Am 15,600 temp —14.5. Snow House 2; 7 Pm 18,200 temp —15.4 top vally" He says they stopped early to attend to Barrill's nose bleed "and also to prepare for our last sprint to-morrow."

TTC pp.224-226: "The following morning, the sixth day of our climb, we kicked out the snow block which made our door. . . . Starting from camp, at 16,300 feet, . . . our progress was good . . . After prodigious efforts we were forced to camp at 18,400 feet." On p.227, Cook describes their difficult night and calls it "This last night of the climb."

Notes: As Hans Waale liked to say: "Mystery, Mystery!" Here the spool grows very tangled. Notice that BD gives no altitude for this snow house. CD identifies it as "Snow House 2" [not 3, notice] and places it by his heading and temperature note at 15,600 feet, an altitude, as we have seen, that is not mentioned at all in TTC, but is identified as the altitude of their first return camp in BD (see entry for September 16 below). Yet in the same entry, Cook gives a temperature reading and elevation for "top vally," indicating he reached 18,200 feet on this day. Also, he heads the page "Snow House 2 to top vally," indicating such a progression. Finally, he says that they plan to make their "last sprint to-morrow."

This leaves no account in CD of how he and Barrill got from the icy ditch at 14,200 feet to the place they built "Snow House 2." In other words, either a day is skipped here in CD, or two days are combined. So CD is now one day ahead of BD and has thus caught up with TTC, which had been one day ahead of both since September 10. Notice also that in TTC Cook says that this is the "sixth day of our climb" which it could not be, no matter how you count it up. If you count from September 8, it is the seventh day. If you count from when they started serious climbing on September 11, it is only the fourth day. Also, as noted above, the discrepancies in altitudes are growing larger between TTC and CD, in this entry they are as much as 700 feet apart at one point. However, CD and BD continue to agree as to altitudes. This is good evidence for the joint forgery BA claims, as well as for the idea of an invented story that is being improved in TTC, since it no longer matches the original diary even in specific details like the altitudes of Cook's camps.

Day 8: September 15

BD: "We reached the saddle about 4 PM. This is about 18200. . . . We will make the top or frees."

CD p.93: Entry headed: "18.200 in the split tent." "At dawn before sunrise we are ready for the final assault." He gives these notes: "Bar. 5 am. 18,150 temp —16.5. fine snow. 10am. Top. 20400 temp —16 — some snow."

TTC p.232: "Curious experience this."

Notes: Curious indeed! Under September 15, CD says that at dawn they are "ready for the final assault," and at 5 AM of that day they are at 18,150-18,200 feet. At 10 o'clock they are at "Top. 20400," in other words, on the summit. The only trouble is, the "final assault" and arrival at the summit is supposed to have happened on September 16. CD continues to be ahead of BD, which says that they didn't arrive at 18,200 feet until 4 PM. According to the chronology in the text of TTC, they spent the "last night of the climb" on September 14, which also implies that the events subsequently described are taking place on September 15, which would put Cook at the "Top of the Continent" one day early, also. The only way we might explain this away is by saying that Cook and Barrill actually rested for one entire day as suggested by the text on p.220 of TTC. But, as we have seen above (note under September 13), there is nothing specific to support this notion in the text of either the book or the two diaries. So we are left with this set of curiosities: BD is the only account that places Cook in position to arrive at the summit on the day he claimed to have stood atop Mount McKinley, but only because it retains the day dropped from TTC. CD implies that he reached the summit on the morning of September 15, one day early, and TTC, likewise, has left him one day short of getting there on the date he eventually reported. If we follow on from the text's progression in TTC, there is simply not a word about anything happening on September 15, since Cook arrives at the summit on September 16 by his definite statement on p.232.

Day 9: September 16

BD: "We reach the top at last at about 11 A.M. to the gunsight." He notes the return to the 15,600 foot snow house: "the little snow house looks good to me as I am tired."

CD p.101: Entry headed: "The top." "Exhausted — nearly frozen not in shape to enjoy the scene — the slope the snow, wind, clouds out of Pacific Japan Current out of the Arctic clouds, both meeting & drifting north easterly 250 miles. 50,000 sq. miles"

TTC p.232: "It was September 16th, the temperature 16 degrees below zero, the altitude 20,390 feet."

Notes: Notice that Cook has skipped eight pages in CD from September 15's entry, where he gave the time of his arrival at the summit and its temperature and altitude. On p.101 he records what he could see from the top and a few other details including a different altitude. This suggests that this entry may have been added in an attempt to make up for the diary entry for September 10, which he would want to skip in his published accounts because it contains a description of going into the amphitheater where he took some of his miscaptioned pictures and photographed Barrill holding the flag on Fake Peak. It appears



Figure 27: Enlarged detail of Bradford Washburn 1955 photo of Mt. McKinley, taken from the Gateway (Cook's closest 1906 approach), opposite Cook's peak #7, right where Cook states (Fig.16) that his "Gun Sight" drawing was made. The sharp-summit illusion is striking. (See Barrill on "gunsight" at ¶7 §G7.) The apparent top is actually Carter Horn. (See ¶9 §B2.) The reader can determine for himself whether this or Fig.26 more closely resembles the bottom drawing of Fig.16. Photo courtesy of Bradford Washburn. (Full photo: *AAJ 10.1* [1956], taken a few minutes before plate 6b of *AAJ 11.1* [1958].)

that he originally had himself at the summit on September 15 in his diary, but when he realized he should not mention the trip into the amphitheater, lest he give his deceptions away, he added in an extra day to make up for the omission. However, the two should have canceled each other out, and he still should have arrived on the 15th. Perhaps through oversight he declared September 16 as summit day without thinking about how the two days canceled each other out, and since he had nothing to offer for what happened on the missing day, he put in his vague hints about a "day of rest" to make up for the discrepancy already published in his *Harper's* article the year before. No other explanation accounts for the finished text of *TTC*, which places him on the summit one day sooner than he reported, otherwise. According to BA, the false entries in *BD* were made up on this very day, September 16, not in a snow house at 15,600 feet, but in their tent once again safely on the mossy carpet at Glacier Point. (This is very similar to what Cook seems to have done later with his North Pole narrative. He apparently wrote his account of his polar attainment while comfortably ensconced in a stone igloo at Cape Sparbo during the winter of 1908-1909. In that account there is evidence² that he set back his time by a week for the same reason: to make his timetable seem more plausible, and all of his earliest reports³ of his arrival at the North Pole are stated as April 22, 1908, thus differing by a day from the one he eventually settled on, April 21.) Significantly, September 16 is the first day that all three accounts have ever been together during the entire trip. As for his return journey, instead of coming all the way back from the summit to his boat in a mere four days, BA says they only had to return from Glacier Point, about 25 miles and 3,000 vertical feet in four days, as opposed to 40 miles and 19,000 vertical feet. Cook claimed it took him only two days to cover this distance going up with full packs. BA allowed five days for the outward journey over the same distance. In this, and in every other respect, BA seems the most plausible account of the four.

² *Cook & Peary* p.890f.

³ *Ibid* p.894.