

Climbers find passage to serenity

Mt. Jefferson provides respite

By JEFF PETERSEN
Of the Emerald

There was the sun, wind and big sky, and in the middle of it all there was the mountain. Tons of rock, snow and ice anchored the horizon and made man small.

Central Oregon's Mt. Jefferson was big, immensely big.

Its 10,495-foot pinnacle poked at the hazy evening sky, and gusts of wind buffeted the mountain and the two men who stood and stared. The men were wind-burnt, darkly tanned and sticky with sweat. Fingers of wind caressed their tangled hair.

One man — lean and sinewy and clad in shorts — turned away from the mountain and looked about. He saw glacier-carved lakes and ponds, beds of red and yellow flowers and wind-sculptured groves of trees. On this particular evening the wind was playing havoc. It rushed in swift gusts through the narrow, hanging valley of Jefferson Park, which was in long shadows just north of Mt. Jefferson.

As the sun dipped lower in the west, wind began to blow stronger. Soft yellow light poured in from above and behind the men and mixed with shadows, transforming the park into an eerie, inspirational, almost magical place. Silhouettes took the stage.

The next morning the men would perform on a stage of their own. Their stage would be the hazardous, perilous and tricky Jeff Park Glacier, which has been called one of the most challenging snow routes in Oregon. If a route up the glacier could be forged, the men would continue climbing until they reached the volcanic remnant's summit.

At 2 a.m. they leave the tent's warmth and comfort and scramble under the starlit sky toward Mt. Jefferson's north face. Clouds of steam issue into the night. The men's breathing and the crunching snow underfoot are the only sounds that break the silence. An hour slips by.

Above the timberline the men clamber over a rock moraine — a gouge in the rock created by the crawling glacier. A streak of yellow light begins to illuminate the eastern horizon and, although dimly, the grotesque monster — Jeff Park Glacier — begins to take form. Rapid thawing and freezing has changed the glacier's face. What once was a smooth-complexioned child has now become a pocked and pitted monster.

As the men struggle to attach crampons — spikes that help the climber stick to ice — to their boot-bottoms, a chilly breeze rushes off the glacier and cuts to the bone. Tying into the safety rope with numb and spasmodic fingers becomes a painful activity.

Then come the first steps onto the ice. Crampons crunch and ice axes jingle. One man makes a joke and they laugh tensely.

A gaping crevasse intercepts the path, but after some difficulty passage is made via a "bridge" of snow. The crevasse cuts far into the glacier's entrails: it is a "bottomless" blue hole of dripping ice.

Beyond the crevasse, a steep ice fall makes climbing hazardous.

The men take turns leading pitches (one pitch is a rope length of 150 feet) and belaying (securing the safety rope in case of a fall). Crampons barely bite into the strewn ice

blocks, and attempts to cut steps in the blue ice prove futile.

Upward movement comes to a grinding halt. To the right is a maze of snow cracks, fractures and splits. Because the way left looks more docile, the climbers make a forced traverse in that direction, moving off the hard ice onto softer ice. Here the ice is less steep, but steps must still be cut because footing is treacherous.

The lead climber strikes vigorously with his ice axe, causing an ice sliver avalanche to cascade on his belayer. Tiny cups are carved and then stepped into with as many crampon points as possible. Making his way methodically up the glacier, the lead climber carves one step at a time.

Up 200 steps, then up 200 more — at each step the crampon points gouge the ice. Two hours slide by. Finally, the head of the glacier is reached and the climbers can rest in relative safety. Fallen rock from towering pinnacles litters the snow. The climbers look at lake-dotted Jefferson Park far below. To the north, Mt. Hood reigns over a sea of clouds.

At 9,000 feet the oxygen is much thinner. Breath comes in shallow pants.

After a long rest, the climbers traverse on crusty snow to the lower lip of a yawning "bergschund" — where the glacier's weight has torn the ice body apart from the mountain, leaving a chasm 50 yards long, 10 feet deep and 40 feet across.

Making a reconnaissance check of the bergschund's west end, one climber is startled to hear a sharp crack deep within the ice under his feet. Unknowingly, he has ventured onto a cornice that hangs serenely over 1,000 feet of thin mountain air. The climber carefully, quickly and quietly retreats to safety.

An airplane circles Mt. Jefferson and dips its wings: the pilot swoops so close the climbers can tell he is wearing sunglasses. They welcome this intrusion because it breaks the tension.

The airplane roars out of sight, its shadow slipping silently across the grotesque icy expanse of Jeff Park Glacier. The sound of the lonely wind returns. The wind is blowing sand loose from a trio of nearby pinnacles.

One climber yodels. He has found a route to negotiate the bergschund. "I think it will go," he says. They go for it.

Then there is the jump 10 feet down to the crumbly red rock. After that up the loose, rocky talus slope of glacial debris they scramble until a snowy headwall is reached.

Next is a scratch, claw and bite section of vertical ice to an exit crack which leads up and out of the snowy prison. The crack points to freedom.

What a relief it is for the climbers to relax on red saddle knowing that Jeff Park Glacier, the grotesque monster, is behind them. Tension and fatigue finally overwhelm the climbers' bodies and they begin to shake and quiver — withdrawal symptoms.

From red saddle a relatively easy scramble

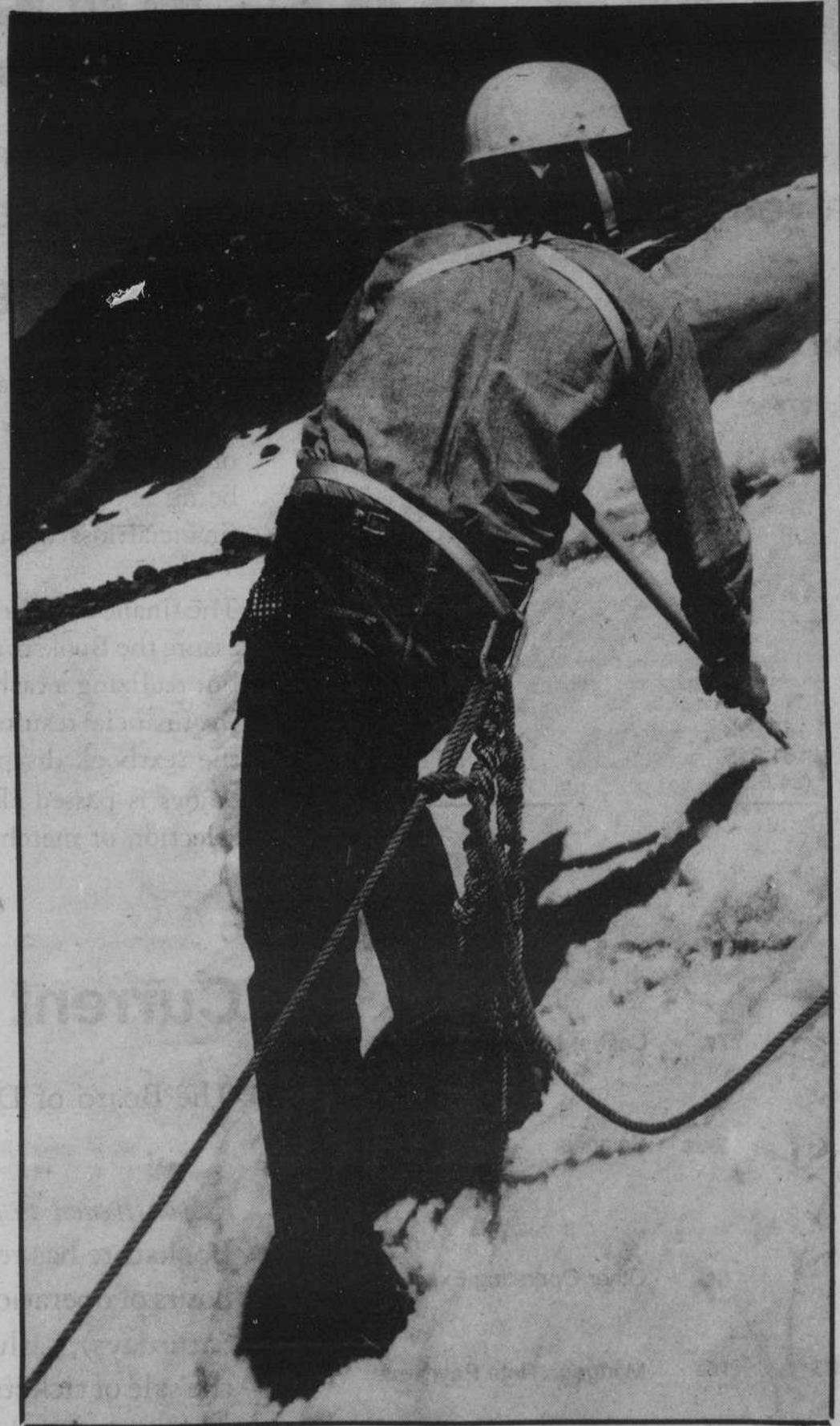


Photo by Dan Muir

The Jefferson Park Glacier in Central Oregon has been called one of the most challenging snow routes in Oregon, and is on the trail to the summit of majestic Mt. Jefferson.

traversing pink cliffs leads to the summit ridge. Climbing the summit pinnacle during summer season is an easy as climbing a ladder to pick apples, and at least as rewarding.

On top of the 10,495 foot pinnacle the climbers lay back to enjoy the sun and wind. Climbing Mt. Jefferson has not made the

mountain an inch smaller, but the climbers have become bigger, immensely bigger. They wish they could stay among the gods forever, but realize man is only a temporary visitor here. Now they must go; they leave only footprints that snow, sun and wind will soon erase; they will be back.

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