

Edmundson recounts his time as a mountaineer

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The Crag Rats with packets of shredded rubber resting on Mazama Rock just below the summit of Mt. Hood. John Edmundson is in the upper middle of the photo, wearing a cotton brimmed hat and grinning at the camera. The Crag Rats were burning rubber as publicity for the opera, "Bridge of the Gods"—a publicity stunt that didn't work out as expected due to cloud cover and high winds. -Contributed photo

dome putting out steam and the rock walls of the crater continuously sending rocks falling down into the crater," he says.

That first summer of mountain climbs when he was 10 years old also included ascents of the other two "Guardian Peaks" of the Columbia, Mt. Adams and Mt. Hood.

Since members of the Crag Rats had to be at least 18, it was several years before Edmundson aged into membership. That didn't keep him from climbing as often as he could—a perk of being the son of one of the members.

In its early years, The Crag Rats was a men-only club, with women allowed to go on climbs as guests. It was Edmundson's mother who made history as the first female club member. The club was eventually required to admit women to keep its tax-exempt status. A long-time member who had climbed several times with Edmundson's mother suggested she would be a fitting first woman member.

"She was admitted to membership four years after she passed away," says Edmundson. "She was approved unanimously."

During his climbing career, Edmundson climbed 13 Pacific Northwest mountains in a total of 64 climbs. Each excursion included glaciating peaks or peaks requiring rock-climbing skills. Among those were Mt. Rainier, Mt. St. Helens, Mt. Adams, Mt. Hood, Mt. Jefferson, Broken Top, all three Sisters, Three Fingers, Mt. Washington, Mt. Thielsen and Little Tahoma.

Eight of those peaks are on a list of mountains a Crag Rat must climb to be designated a life member. With multiple climbs up each of them—14 up Mt. Hood alone—Edmundson is still considered a life member of the organization.

He has also climbed outside of the Northwest, including a climb up Mt. Popocatepetl, an active volcano in Mexico.

Edmundson says it is important to have at least three people in a party so that if one gets injured, one can stay with that individual and one can go for help.

He's also the first to admit that he has broken his own rule all too often, such as with solo cross country ski treks up Black Mountain and Opal Butte.

With so many treks up steep and ice-covered mountains, it would seem impossible not to come back with a few stories—and Edmundson does have a story or two to share.

While he was still a teen attending Hood River High School, the Hood River Music Association had a performance of an opera called, "The Bridge of the Gods," featuring notable male vocalist Enzo Pinza. The opera told the story of Wy'east (Mt. Hood) and Pahto (Mt. Adams), who were powerful braves both in love with a maiden (Mt. St. Helens).

As part of the promotion for the opera, the Crag Rats agreed to pack 25 pounds of shredded rubber to the summit of Mt. Hood, set it on fire and make smoke to simulate the eruption of Wy'east as it threw rocks at Pahto.

However, their "eruption" was anticlimactic. A light cloud cover over the mountain kept anyone below from seeing the smoke, and the wind was blowing so strongly that it blew the smoke right down the side of the mountain anyway.

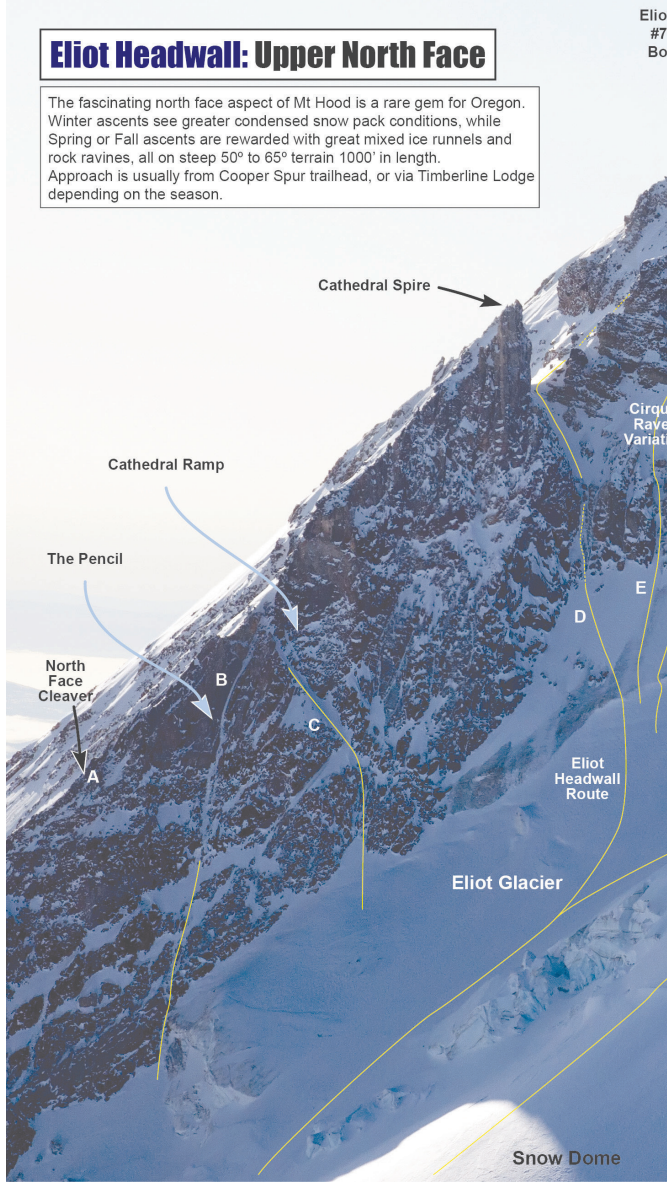
His first climb of Mt. Jefferson was after his sophomore year in high school, in a Crag Rat climb that approached the mountain from the southwest flank above Pamela Lake. It was June, when the top of the mountain was still covered with winter ice.

They hiked to about the 7,000-foot level, laid out sleeping bags and caught a few hours of sleep before heading on towards the summit, arriving at the Red Saddle in the early morning.

"I was on a rope in the lead with two veteran Crag Rats. We negotiated a tricky ice and rock pitch leading up to a point just below the 10-foot vertical wall of ice that sheathed the summit pinnacle," says Edmundson.

A group of Obsidians—a mountain-climbing club from Eugene—had beat them to the summit that morning, ascending

the Milk Creek Glacier on the mountain's west side. The Obsidians threw down a rope and Edmundson's two partners were pulled up



The north face of Mt. Hood, including the Eliot headwall ascent. -Photo by John Scurlock

to the top. "Unfortunately, my only experience with rope climbing was watching Tarzan movies where Tarzan climbed up the rope hand-over-hand," says Edmundson. "I didn't have Tarzan arm muscles and could not climb the rope. I had not been trained that you just lean back with your feet on the ice wall and the people above can pull you up to them. So, they just lugged me up, dead weight, like a sack of potatoes!"

When he finally got on top, he asked, "How do you get down from here?"

The Obsidians replied, "You rappel."

He didn't know how to do that, either, so they wrapped a 200-foot rappel rope around his torso and showed him how to slowly lower himself down from the pinnacle. It was only in later years that he realized the Obsidians had not shown him the right way

to put the rope around him. "If it would have slipped off my shoulder, I would have been done for," he says.

Some of his other climbs on Mt. Jefferson might have been less terrifying personally, but they were far from cheerful. Twice, he helped recover the bodies of dead climbers from the mountain.

He was still a teenager himself when the Crag Rats were called upon to retrieve the body of a teenager from Stayton, OR. Some brothers had decided to climb the mountain without training or equipment, and the younger brother had fallen and died in the rugged Milk Creek Glacier area.

"The authorities had given up on retrieving the body, but the Crag Rats undertook the difficult task of bringing the boy's body down the mountains and to his family," says Edmundson, who was along to help with brush clearing. "When the boy's body arrived at the trail from Pamela Lake around the lower slope of the mountain, his mother was there and placed a fir bough in the litter. It was a very touching and emotional moment."

The second was when Edmundson was living in Salem. The Salem Area Rescue Group (SARG), of which he was a member, was called when a group of Obsidians climbing the Jefferson Park Glacier came upon the body of a young

summer coworker at the U.S. Forest Service, Dale Holland Jr. After moving to Heppner, Edmundson and his son also climbed the South Sister and Broken Top.

Edmundson also recalls other Heppner citizens who were involved in mountaineering with the Portland Mazamas—Oregon's largest and most famous mountain-climbing club—Bob Abrams, Bob Jepsen and Tom Hughes.

"They led some Mazama large group climbs," he says.

Two final stories from Mt. Hood come from Edmundson's junior year in high school. He was at Cloud Cap Inn in the spring when a couple of experienced Crag Rats asked him if he wanted to climb the mountain the next day.

"I had my climbing gear with me and, sure, was always wanting to climb the mountain, especially with two of the most experienced and respected members," he says.

They started the climb in the middle of the night so that the snow would be firm from the night-time cold. First it seemed to him that they were heading up Cooper Spur and the usual northeast route up the chimney to the summit.

Then they dropped down on Eliot Glacier and he thought they would go up the Sunshine Route, which reaches the summit by way of the snow dome and

they were planning to do," Edmundson says. "Some years later, they related to me that one said to the other, 'Don't you think we ought to tell him what we're planning to do?' The other replied, 'No, ---- him.'"

Later that same year, a Crag Rat party of a dozen climbers decided to climb the Sunshine Route up Mt. Hood.

They arrived at the bergschrund and the leader, who was renowned for seeking and using "short cuts," Edmundson says, decided to go straight up over the berg rather than traversing over to the right hand and making an easy crossing.

"I was roped in third on the first rope when our leader started up his short cut. His cousin was second. Part way up, the leader took a big whack with his ice axe, causing chunks of ice to come falling down," recalls Edmundson. "When the bedlam stopped, I lay there with less than a foot of climbing rope going from me to under a chunk of ice bigger than two grand pianos and so heavy that we couldn't pull the rope out. We had to cut it."

They regrouped, traversed out to the right end of the berg and proceeded on up to the summit of the mountain. On the ascent, Edmundson's cotton brimmed hat blew off. He feared he had lost his favorite hat. On the descent down the snow dome, however,



crossing the bergschrund (a crevasse at the junction of a glacier or snowfield with a steep upper slope) where the tops of Eliot and Coe Glaciers separate from the mountain.

Wrong again. They kept heading up the Eliot Glacier, straight for the top.

"We had climbed the Eliot headwall!" says Edmundson, adding that they were reputedly only the third party to make the difficult climb.

"I was pretty naïve, and they never told me what

the rope leader leaned over, picked up his hat and handed it to him.

"All in all, it was a good day," says Edmundson. "I climbed Mt. Hood, I did not get crushed by a big block of ice and I got my hat back."

"But again," he adds, "the mountains don't care if you live or die. So, get the right equipment, get the right training and proceed with caution."

"The mountains will always be there, and you can return for another trip on another day."

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