

# Climbing McLoughlin Is Natural Physical Fitness

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Ernest W. Smith, of Butte Falls doesn't talk about physical fitness.

He talks about rocks and trees, wild flowers and storms.

He doesn't need to talk about it. He doesn't even think about it. He just has it and has had it for a long time.

When Smith was the age of many valley youths, who are now prepping for 50-mile hikes in lieu of physical fitness, he was walking three miles to teach school or climbing a mountain with a 30-pound pack on his back.

He made his first trip up Mt. McLoughlin, known to old timers (and he is one of them) as Mt. Pitt or Snowy Butte, in 1909. In 1917 he constructed the first lookout on the mountain, and again in 1930 he helped construct the second and last one. It was abandoned when the forest service decided that the same fog which chilled the bones of the lookout man also obscured fires, which were always on the lower levels.

### Native of Central Point

A native of Central Point, where his grandfather, Dr. R. L. Parker, took up a homestead, Smith has spent his life in Jackson county. In so doing he has followed many lines of work—school teaching, fire fighting, surveying, fire finding, carpentering and engineering. Political history of the valley he has known well, but geological history of mountains he has always found more interesting.

Under the former heading he recalls that his father's pupil was his teacher. Smith's father, Edgar E. Smith, taught the Central Point school in 1888. The late Gus Samuels, former Medford city treasurer, was one of Smith's pupils. Later Samuels, who taught school for a while before going into other public work, was Ernest Smith's teacher.

Ernest's father was Jackson county's deputy clerk under Nate Jacobs and deputy sheriff under A. S. Barnes. He shared his school seat at Jacksonville with Don Colvig, son of the late Judge William Colvig. Ernest's grandfather doctored Jefferson Grigsby, Agate postmaster, in 1902, and received his fee in potatoes.

The review of old time names and incidents could go on and on. But it is of the mountain, not the valley,

that Smith speaks and his description of many trips up and down the steep of Mt. McLoughlin is a lesson in survival.

### Comes into View

The mountain probably came into his intimate view first when he taught the Patton school north of Rancheria in 1906. Rancheria is not far from Snow Shoe camp from which many people start the trek into Blue Canyon and up Mt. McLoughlin. It offers reserved seats, so to speak, when nature puts on an electric show with Mt. McLoughlin as the stage.

Smith taught the school for \$35 a month, paid \$15 a month board and walked three miles to the school house. He had obtained his certificate by examination from Pat Daily, county school superintendent.

He took a correspondence course in engineering and got a job with the Butte Falls Sugar Pine company before Owen-Oregon took over the holdings. Later he was surveyor for 20 years for Medford Corporation, successor to Owen-Oregon.

### Surveying for Railroad

He was surveying on the old Pacific and Eastern railroad, which penetrated the area, when the catastrophic 1910 fire blazed over Cat Hill.

In July, 1910, Smith made his second trip up Mt. McLoughlin. It was a hard trip for the members of the railroad survey crew. They tramped through six miles of forest, blazing their own trail and got lost in the darkness. In June, 1911, Smith decided to make the trip again before the smoke of late summer obstructed the view.

The group started out on foot with blankets, frying pan and enough provisions for three days, traveling by way of Four Mile lake. There the men found the ground half covered with snow and old drifts several feet deep. The next day rain prolonged their plans and after taking refuge in a cabin they decided "more grub" would be needed before they made the climb. Four of the group started out for Odessa or Pelican Bay 12 miles east. They bought supplies in a logging camp. The following day it rained again but by morning the clouds were breaking away after an inch of fresh snow fell.

### Four Hours of Climbing

After four hours of steady climbing over new and old snow, which was frozen hard, the men reached the top. The sun was shining but the wind blowing "cold and hard." They dug into the snow for the box placed there by the Mazama club, registered their names, took a few pictures and started the return trek. When they got out of snow they entered lava rock and thick brush for several miles but finally reached Mosquito Ranger station at the foot of the mountain.

The next morning Smith realized that his face had become blistered from the sun on the snow and his eyelids were so badly swollen that he could hardly see. One companion stayed with him while the others continued home and sent his brother-in-law in to get him. His eyes have never completely recovered from the damage.

In 1917, Smith was transferred by the forest service to Mt. Pitt to prepare to construct a lookout house. This time he made the trip to the Mosquito Ranger station with a mule team and wagon. The next day with Dee Wright, he packed his outfit on to horses and started around the mountain from the west side by Fish lake to the southwest side where the trail begins. A distance of 16 miles.

Wright had had much experience packing in the mountains of Oregon. He had packed the material for a similar house on Mt. Hood and other lookouts. The Mt. Pitt house was to be 12 feet square and the lumber was all cut to fit. There was one door and 19 double windows to be packed in.

At the time horses had never packed to the top of the mountain, Smith wrote in his report of the project, **Offers No Difficulties**

The first part of the trail was through open timber and offered no difficulties other than blazing out a definite course and cutting out an occasional pole or log, but as it ascended the way became more rough and obstructed by boulders and loose shale. The builders finally opened a fair trail to beyond the timber line.

Then it became steeper and steeper and the loose shale more difficult to cross. Wright rode up to the end of the trail and then ventured on beyond and across the loose shale and up and back and forth by many switchbacks until he reached the top. He came back down and took his whole pack train with a light load back up, and soon had a trail broken.

Smith said he was told to go along ahead as a "man couldn't keep up with the horses." With 10 pounds on his back he reached the top in 1 1/2 hours and waited

half an hour for the pack train to reach the top.

The top of the mountain was composed of piles of boulders, of broken lava rock of all shapes and sizes, from pebbles to same several tons in weight, Smith recalled.

With a crowbar and a peevy he "prried and rolled what rocks he could handle from the top to the edge of the foundation site. Occasionally he yielded to temptation and sent one down the north side where it would roll and leap and bound sometimes for a mile or more until it came to rest amid millions of others. The larger rocks he broke up with dynamite and in a few days had space large enough for the house.

In addition to building the house, it was Smith's job to watch for and report forest fires. He had a map and constructed his own alidade (fire finder) as he had previously done on Devil's peak. By taking a reading from two or more lookout stations he could locate a fire very accurately with this "crude makeshift contraption" and did.

### Far from Completion

The lookout was far from completion when Smith realized that an electric storm was brewing. He didn't anticipate being in one as he had noticed queer glassy places on many of the rocks on the summit, caused, he was sure, by lightning strikes.

He covered up the supplies as best he could and started for Mosquito Ranger station. All the ridges looked alike to him in the fog. He had always prided himself on his ability to find his way anywhere in the woods but when he emerged from the fog he found he was on the northwest instead of the southeast side of the mountain. He reversed his course and arrived at the ranger station.

Convinced that the storm was over, he left his Butte Falls home again and started his fifth ascent of the mountain. He climbed more slowly and stopped often to rest and to drink from the large depressions in the rocks which had been filled with water by the storm. He carried a three-inch mirror with him and flashed messages to his wife.

On Sept. 17, a forest officer brought him Mr. Jess as a helper. The work moved more rapidly and was nearing completion when another storm blew up. The two men got the windows in, propped up the door and decided to sleep in the house, although they were not sure it would stay on the mountain top. The guy wires had not yet been attached.

### Could Feel It Tremble

They could feel it tremble when an extra heavy gust of wind moved through. In the morning they found their bed and the lookout floor covered with a thin coating of snow. They went to their tent to get breakfast. They had closed it tightly but the wind had driven in the snow. Even the chimney of the oil stove was filled with snow. They despaired of trying to cook and went back to bed to keep warm.

About noon they started for the ranger station. And it was then found that men can get lost even with a compass it wasn't standard.

After arguing over the directions of the compass for some time, the two men proceeded down the mountain. When they got out of the snow they suddenly found themselves in a stretch of lava potholes sometimes 50 to 100 feet wide and 10 to 20 feet deep with ridges of lava rock between them. Potholes were followed by brush, which became taller and thicker and every leaf was loaded with water from the storm.

### See Scattered Pine

They were ready to despair when the fog lifted and the two hikers saw the scattering pine trees beyond and knew they were traveling toward the northwest. They changed their courses and were soon out of the lava rock. Two miles down the mountain they struck the wagon trail to the station and home.

Once again after the storm, Smith started up the mountain. Ranger Bert Peachey brought in kerosene for the stove and groceries. Jess was moved to Rustler peak to help build a similar lookout and Smith continued alone. Before he left, however, the wires were established for lightning protection.

The project moved forward rapidly in good weather. When the snowbank from which he got his water supply was almost gone, Smith decided it was time to leave the mountain.

Packing up his remaining belongings, about 30 pounds, he took the trail. Far below he saw a piece of board and recognized it as part of the shutters he heard depart with such a clatter during the storm.

Reaching Mosquito Ranger station, Smith wrote he was tired but once on his trusty bicycle and headed for home, down grade, fatigue practically left him. That was physical fitness, 1917 style.



On Devil's Peak in 1915, Ernest Smith made his own fire finder, which he was using in this photo. Forest officials said it contributed to the design of the Osborn fire finder, which was adopted. The most destructive fire in his experience was the Cat Hill burn in 1910.



This is the lookout house constructed on Mt. Pitt in 1917. The guy wires had been attached and secured against the storm when this photo was taken Oct. 12.



Even on the summit of Mt. McLoughlin, Smith has always maintained his tie with home. In 1917, he communicated with his wife when both flashed messages with mirrors. Mrs. Smith, sewing in her easy chair, doesn't enjoy mountain climbing.



This is the spot on the summit of Mt. Pitt, where the first house was constructed. Dee Wright's pack train had just completed the first trip up the mountain with supplies when this picture was taken.



This photo shows the stone foundation constructed for the second lookout house which was built on Mt. Pitt in 1930. Smith also worked on this project, abandoned many years ago.