THE REST OF YOUR LIFE

The 50 Peaks That 'Changed My Life'

Dr. Douglas Butler and a climbing guide were trekking to the summit of Wyoming's tallest mountain, Gannett Peak (13,804 feet), when danger struck.

They had gotten off route and the morning sun began to loosen large rocks from steep snow-covered slopes on both sides of the trail.

"Fortunately, they were coming down one at a time," said Dr. Butler, a family physician who lives in Crumpler, N.C. "One rock came too close for comfort. When 100-pound rocks start coming down a really steep slope, you really don't have a chance."

The duo dodged the falling rocks and escaped unharmed. It marked the most threatened Dr. Butler felt in his quest to reach Gannett and the highest geographical points in the other 49 United States, a pursuit he began in 1999 and completed in 2003.

The idea—known as highpointing—came from one of his high school teachers in Denver. "He had gone over to Kansas, which was a 2-3 hour drive from Denver, and spent most of the day trying to find that state's high point, because most of the hills in West Kansas are about the same height," Dr. Butler recalled. "He said it took him just about the whole day to find the correct hill. As a teenager, the idea for the quest seemed odd but intriguing to me. As my life went on, it seemed less odd and more intriguing."

Dr. Butler starting visiting mountain peaks when he was in his mid-30s. He initially was drawn to remote destinations such as the volcanoes in Mexico and Ecuador, and Aconcagua, the highest peak in the Americas. "Then I got to thinking, … the state high points would be neat to do."

Now 53, Dr. Butler wrote a travel memoir about his journeys called "A Walk Atop America: Fifty State Summits and a Dream to Reach Them All" (www.awalkatopamerica.com), which he has been promoting at readings in North Carolina. "People have liked it," he said. "They enjoy the whole concept, especially the way that I did it, not just doing peak to peak but seeing the country and meeting the people near the peaks. In this day and age, a lot of travel writing has a cynical edge to it. A couple of people looked at the book and said to me, 'There's got to be some black stuff. You have to put in problems, mean authorities or something like that.' I said, 'that's not the trip. The trip was good. People helped me. Travel can be a lot of fun. This is a great country, full of good people.' "

Dr. Butler reached most of the summits in 2000 and 2001. Most were accessible by automobile or by 2- to 5-mile hikes, but five required assistance from guides, including Gannett Peak, Mount McKinley in Alaska (20,320 feet), Mount Rainier in Washington (14,411), Granite Peak in Montana (12,799 feet), and Mount Hood in Oregon (11,239 feet).

Dr. Douglas Butler is shown climbing Mount Rainer, the highest peak in Washington.

Here he is pictured preparing to ascend the steep rocky face of Granite Peak in Montana.

PHOTOS COURTESY DR. DOUGLAS BUTLER

His effort to reach Panorama Point, the highest summit in Nebraska at 5,424 feet, would have been thwarted were it not for the kindness of strangers. The 20 miles of dirt road that led to the peak were covered with 6 inches of snow, and a blizzard was approaching. "All I had was this little rental car," Dr. Butler said. "I got about one-third of the way and knew I was never going to reach it. It was getting dark."

He flagged down a farmer, who took him to his house and "called somebody else with a four-wheel drive, who drove me to the farm where the high point was," he said. "People left their dinners; they did all of this for a stranger."

These kinds of encounters "changed my life," said Dr. Butler, who is a locum tenens physician with Project USA, which provides medical care for Native Americans. "Physicians don't receive a lot of kindness from anybody except their patients. To get out and see that kindness made me want to go back in a system where I can work more directly with the patients and not have to fight the reimbursement systems. That's one reason I chose [American] Indian health."

Dr. Butler said he can't think of any personal goal that would rival what he's accomplished with his quest of summits. "There are some mountains I'd like to climb in South America, but the knees and the hips aren't what they used to be," he said. ■

By Doug Brunk, San Diego Bureau

Ascending Mount Rainier

Editor's note: *The following passages of text are excerpted from Chapter 2 of "A Walk Atop America: Fifty State Summits and a Dream to Reach Them All" (Boone, N.C.: Parkway Publishers, 2007). It describes Dr. Butler's climb of Mount Rainier in Washington. Reprinted with permission from the publisher.*

On the southern flank of Mt. Rainier, nineteen clients and seven guides met at a place called Paradise, an aptly named location 5,420 feet above sea level. Inside a small chalet, each climber spread their gear onto the floor. Prompted by a checklist, a guide reviewed each piece. My gear passed inspection; I did not. I was wearing blue jeans, flannel, and t-shirts—all cotton garments. Cotton, the guide chided, was a dangerous fabric, one that quickly becomes wet from perspiration or rain. When damp, this natural fabric loses all insulating ability, potentially allowing hypothermia.

Chastised, I retreated to change. As I stepped into my Capilene, I realized that at least this was one less set of clothes to fit into the backpack. When I returned, a bulging Ziploc bag filled with candy, nuts, meats, and cheese—lunches and snacks for five days—topped my pile. Meanwhile other climbers were loading their packs easily and efficiently. I began tentatively, placing items into each of the pack's compartments, filling these pouches until zippers strained and the thin fabric stretched. But after all compartments were full, many items remained on the floor. Then I hung climbing gear and water bottles from the pack frame, draped assorted clothing over the top, and tied two sweaters around my waist.

As I tried to heft this hopeless mess onto my back, we were instructed to come forward and receive our share of "group gear"—cooking pots, lightweight gas stoves, climbing anchors, ropes, and more food. Nineteen roughly equal allotments were stacked atop two tables. Each climber was expected to carry one of these piles in addition to their own gear and food. I was last in line. As I stepped forward, I faced an unwieldy collection of oddly shaped items, topped by a loaf of bread. A stern-faced guide stood behind the table.

I looked at the bread, then at the guide. He looked at my bulging backpack, then at the bread. Thankfully, he carried the entire pile.

I hoped that enthusiasm and fitness would overcome my inexperience. Starting near the head of the line, I kept pace easily. As we ascended the well-maintained Skyline Trail from Paradise, we remained unroped, instructed to walk single file an arm's-length apart, maintaining a steady pace. If one needed to rest, adjust their pack or even take a picture, they were to step from the line. If other hikers approached, and many did this late August weekend, our group moved in unison to the side of the trail, allowing others to pass. Like a long snake, twenty-six climbers, each a yard apart, ascended the winding path.

As we ascended, the altitude and physical exertion each took a toll, and by early afternoon the tightly regimented line had disintegrated. While the strongest climbers forged ahead, others lagged, panting and coughing, struggling from the lack of oxygen in the thin mountain air.

I kept my pack—and maintained a steady pace. Conditioning had helped, at least this first day.

During the next three days I learned to use an ice ax, tie climbing knots, and walk on glaciers while roped with others. Sliding down icy slopes, our group practiced self-arrest, rolling and twisting our bodies to firmly implant long metal axes into the frozen surface, thereby stopping or arresting a fall. After learning crevasse rescue, a technique employing ropes and pulleys to lift a climber from an icy abyss, each participant was given the dubious opportunity, while double-roped for safety, to jump into a crevasse, experiencing the sensation and full force of a fall.

The course was fascinating. I found living and climbing in a glaciated mountain environment exhilarating. Rainier, however, is a dangerous peak, a mountain of many moods with weather that can change quickly and topography that can be unforgiving of even the slightest mistake.

Eighty-four climbers have died on Mt. Rainier since 1887. A week before our seminar, two men fell to their deaths after an ice storm coated the upper mountain with two inches of clear, hard ice, rendering crampons and standard glacier travel methods nearly useless. Since then, no one had summited. As a course finale we would try, but were told we would probably turn back far short of our goal.

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