WILDERNESS

Tuckerman Gothic

Tuckerman Ravine has a unique provenance, with as much skiing and climbing history as anywhere on this continent. In fact, it is commonly referred to as “the birthplace of American alpine skiing.” There is a queue of photos on the wall of the log-structured Pinkham Notch Visitor Center on the east slope of New Hampshire’s Mount Washington. The images reveal New England skiing’s *raison d’être*. Poorly fixed black and white photos of the area are proudly displayed in pine frames worn smooth by admirers who stroke the frames as they lean in to get a better look. Gentlemen in wool pants, sweaters, scarfs, and derbies stand together in Tuckerman’s bowl, flaunting their bamboo ski poles and leather ski boots. Women huddle in long wool skirts, chatting on Tuck’s “lunch rocks,” as the boys from Harvard and Dartmouth colleges run the annual slalom race down the headwall of the ravine. Team photos of the National Forest Service Snow Rangers and their first snowcat hang beside recent photos of ice climbers in the Huntington Ravine, proving the slopes’ 9-decade allurements persists.

Mount Washington has other temperaments as well. It is said to be “home to the world’s worst weather,” holding the record for the highest wind speed ever recorded on earth—371 km/h. Temperatures on the summit have never exceeded 23°C. The area receives recreational traffic from prepared, experienced climbers and skiers, as well as dangerously naïve parties. It is not only the weather on the mountain but the location of the ravines flanking it that make it a potentially dangerous area for recreationalists.

Tuckerman and Huntington ravines, as well as the aptly named Gulf of Slides, are situated on the east slope of Mount Washington. Each winter, these ravines, with headwalls of 30° to 50°, accumulate up to 50 feet of snow on their slopes. The ravines are in a leeward location with convex lips. This increases the frequency of avalanches—both slab and point release—especially following a storm that will often create the best skiing conditions. The National Forest Service manages this ski area, posting daily avalanche forecasts and warnings. The ravines are patrolled by the Mount Washington Volunteer Ski Patrol. Rescue is performed by these 2 organizations and, if needed, also by the Appalachian Mountain Club, as well as other local rescue organizations and authorities.

Tuckerman has always been my backcountry pilgrim-

age. Living around Philadelphia, the traditional biannual trek north to ski into “the bowl,” camp there, and ski until pleasantly fatigued was always relished. The snow conditions 2 winters ago were excellent. Driving through the night, we arrived at Pinkham just before sunrise. Packs were jammed full, skis tented, and the 3-mile hump up to the ravine was rewarded with amazing skiing. A passing storm dumped 18 inches of fresh snow on the area. As the winds picked up, the bowl was loading, but avalanche danger was still officially “moderate” for many of the gullies. Despite the less-than-perfect visibility, there were some great runs to be enjoyed. The wind blew hard that night, and in the morning, the decision was made to break camp and head up to Tuckerman. The conditions worsened, with more windslab, a few fracture lines, and some evidence of increased instability.

While fastening my boots on the lunch rocks (a pile of glacial moraine left behind from the glacier that gouged tucks 50 000 years ago), someone behind me yelled, “Look out!” Directly behind the lunch rocks, a thin gully ascends to the headwall. It is less steep, but it does not offer the same runout as the main Tuckerman bowl. This gully leads directly into a massive terrain trap, the lunch rocks. About halfway down the gully, a falling telemark skier careened, 1 ski on, the other split in half and planted tip first about 100 yards above him, splintered like a snapped Popsicle stick. Unhelmeted, he tumbled, head over heels, directly toward us into a boulder, striking it with his forearm. His body spun out on the hardpacked snow and slid to a halt just between 2 other large boulders.

The ravine patrol was assisting a rescue in the neighboring Gulf of Slides. There was a rescue cache available in our ravine, but we did not need it. The victim, Coty, a 17-year-old male from Massachusetts, was in moderate pain from a probable distal radial fracture but was otherwise intact. With a little duct tape, a few ski fragments provided the perfect volar splint. Coty then hopped up, jumped down the small cornice beside us, and glissaded down the bowl. We also decided to ski out, since the conditions were becoming more unstable, and it was getting late. On our way out, we passed him glissading on the trail.

Safely back at Pinkham Notch, we packed up and drove off. We were not parked in the main lot and never

noticed Emergency Medical Services. The Tuckerman report the next day revealed some tragic news. The previous day, an avalanche had released in the Gulf of Slides, burying a couple who were skiing. The woman was able to dig herself and her partner out. The *Concord Monitor* read: "The 42-year-old man, David McPhedran, was taken to a Berlin, NH, hospital, where he was pronounced dead."

Now, 18 months later, I am a first-year resident in Augusta, ME. In the lobby of our Family Medicine Institute hangs a portrait of the former program director, Alex McPhedran, whose son was killed in the avalanche. He is an older man, about 70. He sits at his desk, leaning in the most welcoming way, wearing a simple bow tie. His engaging smile and brilliant silver hair suggest a cup of coffee and a chat. Many of the faculty alumni observe that he is the type of person who makes an indelible

impression on those he touches and that he is the reason they came to the program. The well-known author John McPhee refers to him many times in his book *The Heirs of General Practice*, a slice-of-life work based on our residency program.

This season, I joined the Mount Washington Volunteer Ski Patrol. I hope that there will be no further tragedies, but I know better. Even the most experienced mountaineer can fall prey to this mountain. And so it will be. . . me in my red parka, standing beside familiar strangers. . . perhaps a grandfather, his son, and *his* son, as they share cheese and crackers on the lunch rocks, just as they do every spring.

In memory of David McPhedran

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