1958, Rescue on Mount Si in Darkness of Night

In January 1958, a teen-ager named Clark Phillips (not the dentist living in Bellevue) was rescued from Mount Si, in the Cascade Mountains of Washington, very near the town of Snoqualmie. Ome and a whole rescue team of the Seattle Mountain Rescue Council, including Max Eckenburg and Jerry Sabel, responded to the emergency.

Ome's wife Matie recalls that Clark was "hanging on for dear life" so that his muscles were tense and rigid. When Ome reached him, Clark was at first unable to move a muscle, but with Ome's encouragement he began to relax and do whatever was needed to get himself out from his perilous position and to assist in his own rescue. This effort included a helicopter, a spotlight shining from the floor of the vally below, a sheriff's car, a Washington State Highway Patrol car, and the air-sea rescue truck from Sand Point Naval Air Station. The following material was written by Helen Orlob and published by Thomas Nelson and Sons, pp.54-62 in a book entitled "Mountain Rescues," printed in 1963.

The Aulds and Sheldon Schiager were well equipped and had enough experience to undertake an afternoon of rapelling. They got into trouble because they had not bothered to obtain full information about their destination (and therefore climbed the wrong mountain), and because they had not learned the procedures to follow in case of an accident.

Mountain rescue people have to deal with emergencies arising from greater negligence. Often they return, time after time, to some trouble spot innocent enough in appearance to be irresistible to the inexperienced climber. Mount Si, which rises from a mountain valley 30 miles from Seattle, is such a place.

Although members of the Seattle Mountain Rescue Council groan at the mention of its name, they take pride in pointing out that the number of incidents on Mount Si has decreased in recent years, undoubtedly as the result of a council campaign for mountain safety education which includes speakers for youth groups and a film entitled "Mountains Don't Care." Nevertheless, it is a rare year that ends with no record in the Seattle Council's files of a Mount Si rescue.

Si is an ancient peak, far older than the mountains of the neighboring Cascade Range. Its 2200-foot face is deeply seamed and broken, with straggling brush wherever a pocket of soil has formed. Often the unfortunate climber, trapped on a ledge or in a rock chimney, is hidden from sight. This was not, however, the case with Clark Phillips who was reported to be in trouble on the mountain one Sunday afternoon in January, 1958. Binoculars revealed him clinging, antlike, to a rock wall about 500 feet below the summit.

His plight was clear enough to the men in the Air Force helicopter which approached from the west late in the afternoon. Only minutes before, the craft had landed in a field beside Ome Daiber's house to pick him up. Now, as he drew near the mountain in the fading light, Daiber glimpsed the flash of color that marked the position of the boy he had come to help.

For some time the helicopter hovered close to the trapped youth while the pilot surveyed the terrain. Daiber made ready to be lowered by hoist to help Clark into the rescue sling, but the pilot was obliged, at last, to rule out the maneuver. "Can't get close enough," he decided, backing away from the cliff for a descent to the lower slopes. Daiber landed from the swaying hoist, knowing that the

from the swaying hoist, knowing that the resuce of the boy clinging to the mountain far above him would be not a matter of minutes now, but of hours of climbing rock in the darkness.

Daiber was not long alone. Even as he was gathering up the climbing gear which had tumbled from the helicopter, the first men of an MRC team joined him. Preparing to climb, they questioned the boy who had come down the mountain to report Clark's predicament. "How had he got up there?" they wanted to know.

"Well, we were climbing up, three of us . . .," the boy began.

"Not on a trail?" someone interrupted.

"No sir, just over the rocks, and we got to a rockslide. Clark started across it--we told him not to--he had to jump a little way to a ledge on the other side. He missed it and started to slide down. He grabbed a little bush and got to his feet on some rocks--loose ones. That was about 1:30 this afternoon. He's been there ever since."

Shouldering rucksacks, the team, now numbering 19 men, started up the mountain. For the experienced and well-equiipped climbers, the first slopes offered little difficulty. Their problems began with the steeper pitches of crumbling rock encountered in total darkness as they approached the spot where Clark was clinging. Four hundred feet below him, they began to call out, as much for direction as to hearten the boy.

"Can you get up here at night?" he cried. The note of desperation and exhaustion in his voice was unmistakable.

"We'll get to you and get you down," Daiber shouted.

"Not at night?" Fear and disbelief spoke at once.

"You bet we will!"

Clark had then been clinging to a gnarled mountain shrub, with arms extended above his head, for more than four hours. His fingers ached with cold. Pains shot through his cramped arms and shoulders. Occasionally, to ease the agony, he had released one hand and then the other, but, for the last hours, he had scarcely been able to move his fingers. His feet had long since lost all sensation--he had not dared to move them much for fear of dislodging the rocks they had found on that terrifying slide down the mountain. Once or twice, after he was trapped, he had glanced over his shoulder at the valley below, but he soon gave that up. The sight of the 1000-foot drop had sickened him.

He had seen the helicopter, of course, and had guessed that a pickup might be attempted. When it backed away and disappeared, he thought that he had been abandoned. In mounting agony, he kept his grip on the tough little trunk of the shrub, thinking he might try sliding when he could no longer hang on. Had he done so, he would have died, for nothing would have halted his bounding plunge to the rocks at the base of the mountain.

Then he saw the lighted head lamps of rescuers moving below his perch, heard the bantering shouts from men advancing toward him and Daiber's heartening words. Clark, his strength nearly at an end, knew that he must hang on. Mercifully, he did not know that he would still be there hours later. Before he had been rescued, he was to call upon reserves of courage he did not know he possessed.

Daiber, leading the rescue team, found the going increasingly difficult in decayed rock. Belayed by two men on the rope which was fastened about his waist, he was inching up the mountain, the tips of his lug-soled boots feeling for each tochold. With each advance of a few feet, he used the hammer that swung from his belt to drive a piton, and snapped into its eye a spring clip called a carabiner to carry his climbing rope to support them. The rest of the team was ranged still lower.

From the valley, the spots of light could be seen moving up the mountain, the highest one stopping, wavering, remaining motionless for minutes at a times, as the leader sought a crack in the crumbling rock upon which no mountaineer would venture except to save a life. Once, there was a period of 30 minutes when the lights did not advance. Daiber tried one crack after another, and was considering driving a group of pitons, depending on a distributed load for safety, when at last he heard the solid ring of a piton which had set securely.

The first hour passed, then the second. The temperature dropped to below freezing. Wind whipped at the mountain. Clark's replies to the rescuer's calls were exhausted monosyllables. The end of his endurance was very near. He saw the moving pools of light, heard the plink of metal on metal as pitons were driven, and, often, the rattle of cascading rock and exasperated mumbling, when they gave way under testing. He did not know if he could last until the man with the reassuring voice reached him.

Daiber sensed the boy's growing despair. He continued to call encouragingly and, when he was about 100 feet away, he began to give instructions. "You can help yourself now," he told Clark. "Flex your muscles. Start massaging your legs, so that you will be able to move when I get to you."
He has never forgotten the sounds that came from the darkness above him--outcries that told him that the boy was trying to follow his directions.

In a sudden circle of brilliance cast by a spotlight from the valley, Daiber reached him at 9:30 P.M.
The team had spent almost three hours on the last critical portion of the climb. Clark was sagging in the final stages of exhaustion, his legs still useless, his fingers rigid in the position of their eight-hour grip on the puny shrub that had saved his life.

After securing the boy, Daiber sought to restore feeling and warmth to his hands. He told him to put one hand against his body, and taking the other he thrust it beneath his own clothing. Clark began to shake with chills For a few moments Daiber held both the boys hands against his own body. When Clark was able to move his fingers a little, Daiber began to massage his legs. Half an hour passed before he dared begin the descent.

A sheriff's car, a Washington State Highway Patrol car and the air-sea rescue truck from Sand Point Naval Air Station had trained spotlights on the mountain when Clark Phillips and his new friends began their descent. For two hours the spots followed them, as Clark, coached and secured by the rescuers, was eased to the base of Mount Si.

It was long after midnight before the last car had left the foot of the mountain and the hospital people who lived there had washed coffe pots and cups. "Well, that's that until the next time," said one of them. There was little doubt in his mind that there would be other rescues at his doorstep.

Nor was he mistaken. Several climbers have been plucked from the mountain since that January night in 1958.

They were not all trapped as high as Clark Phillips was. Sometimes a youngster finds himself in a position from which he cannot move only minutes after he has started a hand-over-hand scramble upward. "How could he have gotten himself into so much trouble in so short a time?" wailed the mother of one boy who had left a family picnic only 20 minutes before the alarm was sounded. Hours passed before Mountain Rescue Council climbers succeeded in getting him down the rock chimney in which he was perched.

"Some of us almost got killed in that one," says Jerry Sabel, one of the men who took part in the rescue. "The chimney wasn't the proper place for rope work--we had to climb free. When I got to him, I found that the kid was scared stiff. I look young, and he thought I was just another kid. He wasn't going to have anything to do with me--didn't see how I could help him. While I was talking to him, a big rock let loose from above. It nearly wiped me off my holds, went down and knocked Max Eckenburg off balance. He was dazed for awhile."

Sabel convinced the youngster that he knew what he was doing, tied him into a chest sling and,
with the help of the other rescuers, above and below, lowered him to safety.

Usually it is a panic-stricken boy who first reports an emergency on Mount Si. He races down to the nearest house with a tale of woe: "My buddy's stuck up there. I can't help him." The King County sheriff's office hears of it next, then the telephone rings in the Seattle home of an MRC member whose wife is on the emergency call committee. "We've got a kid in trouble up on Mount Si," she hears. "Can you get a Mountain Rescue team started? She calls the other women on the committee and the operation is under way.

The committee has lists of council members, with his rescue specialty--rock,search or snow--noted for each man. Calls go out for rock climbers for Mount Si. Soon the red MRC truck is on the road. A dozen or more men have changed hastily to climbing garb, and with their emergency rucksacks which are always packed, are racing toward the outskirts of the city. An hour and a half after the sheriff's call an MRC team will be at the foot of Mount Si, prepared to snatch another youngster to safety.

The trouble with Mount Si is that it looks too easy. Rising only a mile from U.S. Route 10, its rocky lower slopes have the same fascination for a teenager that a jungle gym has for a five-year old or a tree for a ten-year old. Tumbled boulders , lying at easy pitches at the base, give no hint
of crags and cliffs above, which require the best of mountaineering knowlege, and of brush-filled gullies so deep and steep-sided that one concealed for 17 years the body of a boy who fell while climbing alone.

The ancient mountain towers beside a fault, a fracture in the earth's crust, which occasionally slips, jarring the Pacific Northwest with earth tremors. Mountain Rescue men have been known to joke about the relief they would feel if the fault line should, some day, allow Mount Si to slide quietly down to the valley floor. They have calls enough on their time, energy and slender finances without going to the aid of a succession of reckless youngsters who cannot resist the temptation of Si's rocks.