

He's all heart

Mountain veteran vows more climbs

by Bill Dietrich
Times staff reporter

At age 77, famed Seattle mountain climber Orme Daiber is beginning to resemble the Tin Woodsman whittled away by his ax in the "Wizard of Oz" book.

Daiber long since lost the tips of three fingers to a power saw. He has been battling blindness for two years and his hearing has faded. Now both of his feet have been amputated, partly as a result of an injury suffered in one of his early mountain rescue expeditions in the 1930s.

But like the Tin Woodsman, Daiber is missing nothing where it counts: he remains all heart.

"Does anyone want to bet a hundred dollars that I won't be climbing Mount Si?" Daiber challenged yesterday while painfully practicing to walk with artificial feet between two parallel bars at Virginia Mason Hospital.

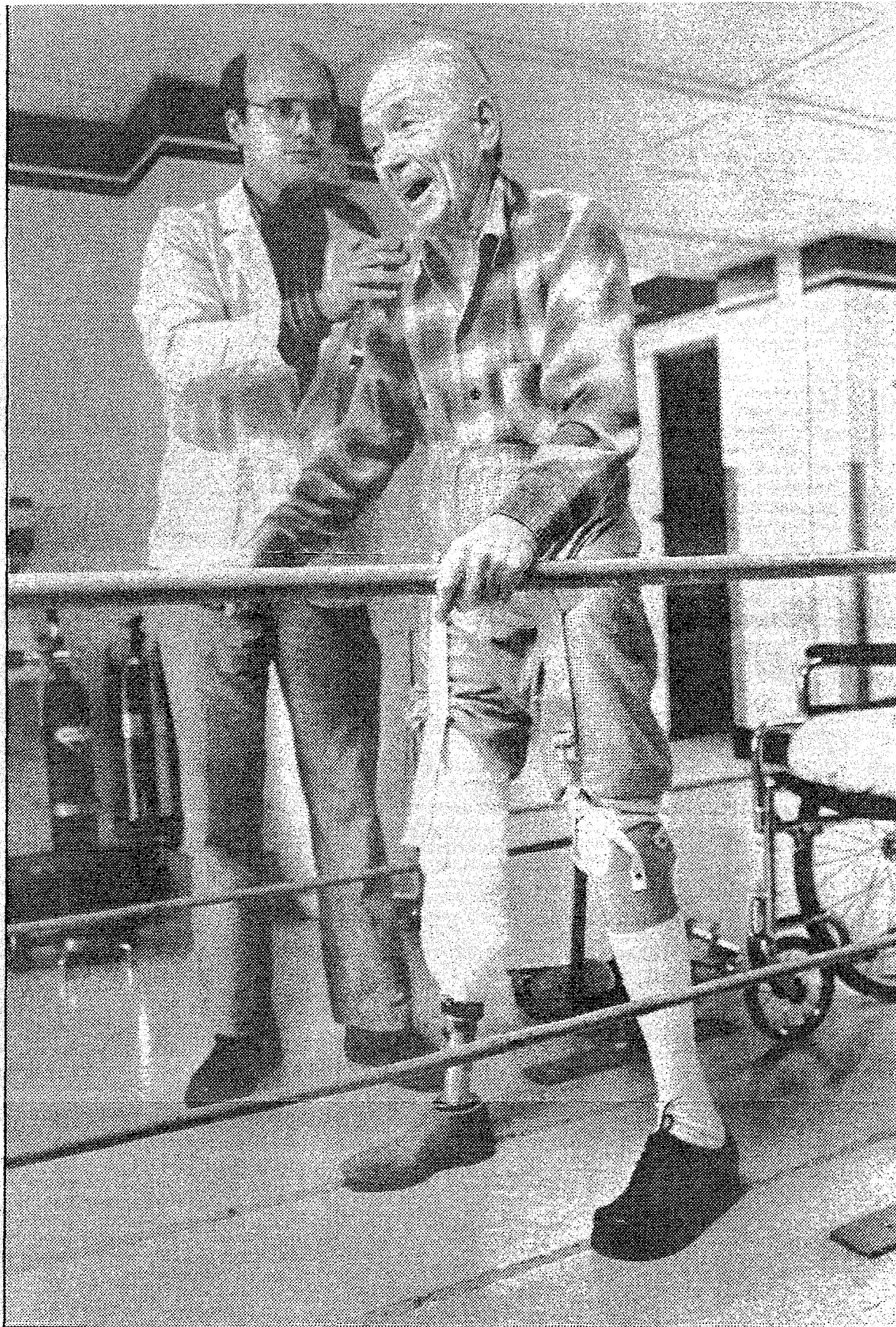
No one did. "I'm going to start on Si and go higher, God willing," Daiber vows — when he isn't cracking cornball puns, trying to explain how to tape a sprained ankle or flirting with a hospital aide.

Medically, such an achievement seems remote. As if he didn't have enough problems, Daiber has also had to change his diet to control diabetes. "His general medical condition precludes him from doing all those things," warns Dr. Ty Hongladarom, in the hospital's physical-therapy section.

But doctors who know Daiber personally aren't so sure. When they warned him he might go blind he vowed he would recover and, to a certain extent, he has. Though his vision is cloudy, his blood circulation to his eyes has improved since operations.

When a four-ton granite boulder on Mount Rainier crushed Daiber's foot on June 28, 1936, he shunned a suggestion he wait for rescue. "I had two good hands, one good foot and down we went," he said. Another time, he dragged himself for several miles across some snow.

"He's dealt with so many difficult challenges before," said Dr. Bob Mecklenburg, a fellow



Orme Daiber walks with the aid of physical therapist Richard Bettesworth.

Peter Liddell / Seattle Times

climber who has worked on the Mountain Rescue Council Daiber helped found. "His strength is really remarkable."

"If anyone's going to do it, it's going to be Orme Daiber," said Dr. Jock Beebe, one of a group of doctor-climbers who have coincidentally found themselves track-

ing Daiber's recovery. "What strikes me as unusual in this case is the totally positive outlook in his way of thinking. It's typical of people who are mountaineers. It is not whether you will deal with it, but how you will deal with it."

As for Daiber, he couldn't give a hoot what physicians think

of his climbing plans. "I do know. I don't really care. I might even get on a big mountain, like Rainier," he said.

The long-time outdoorsman gained fame as climber, and

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founder of the Mountain Rescue Council and youth leader.

One Virginia Mason intern from Boston, casually scanning a computer list of hospital admissions, noted the unusual name and exclaimed, "I've heard of that guy!" In mountaineering circles, Daiber is nationally known.

In 1936, when the idea of one group of climbers risking their lives to save another was somewhat novel, Northwesterners avidly followed the unsuccessful attempt of Daiber and others to rescue solo climber Delmar Fadden from a January ascent of Mount Rainier.

They found Fadden's body and returned in the summer to claim his pack. It was then the boulder struck. "I just touched it. It was there, waiting for me," Daiber recalled.

Circulation problems in his left foot have plagued him ever since. In December, lack of blood and the difficulty of reconstructive surgery required amputation. A similar problem in his right foot led to its loss two weeks ago. Since the rest of Daiber's circulatory system is fine, Beebe speculates he may have suffered cold injuries to his feet while climbing, although Daiber denies it.

With his knees saved, Daiber is optimistic his hiking days aren't over. "I'm just going to have to learn to walk on feet other than my own," he said.

He queried Beebe about a rock-climbing route in the Grand Tetons, restlessly hauled himself by his arms onto his wheelchair, then set off toward the therapy unit to endure the pain and effort of learning to walk all over again. "The trouble with me is, I haven't got any patience," he explained.

As he gripped the bars, taking those halting steps, he was asked if it hurt. "Sure," he said, smiling. "There'll come a day, though, when it won't."

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