



AAC Publications

The Citadel: First Ascent

Alaska, Neacola Mountains

The “Clarkachamna Peaks” are a very remote group of mountains, west of Cook Inlet and the Aleutian volcanic peaks, and lying about halfway between Lake Clark, to the south, and Lake Chakachamna, to the north, hence my joking unofficial name. [Today these are known as the Neacola Mountains, and Ch’akajabena is the recognized name of the lake.] **Very little mountaineering has been done in this area, probably because these are low-altitude peaks. When climbers go to Alaska they usually have the big peaks in their sights.**

George and Frances Whitmore, my wife, Joan Firey, and I flew from Kenai to the north fork of a pitchfork-shaped glacier, located in the center of the Lake Clark D-1 USGS map. This Pitchfork Glacier is the origin of the Glacier Fork of the Tlikakila River, which flows southwest out of Lake Clark Pass and into Little Lake Clark. Most of the peaks in this area appeared to be granite, but two of the highest peaks were of a steep-sided, jet-black rock, perhaps intrusive gabbro.

We climbed a prominent 8,300-foot peak on the south side of this north fork of the glacier and named it Citadel [now given 8,305’], due to its fortress-like appearance. We also ascended two peaks at the head of the north glacier fork. An attempt on a 7,800-foot peak on the north side of the glacier was turned back by snow avalanche conditions. All of these climbs appeared to be first ascents.

The two prize peaks in this area eluded us: an 8,900-foot black tower at the head of the middle fork of the glacier [Peak 8,908’], and a 9,400-foot black block of a peak [Mt. Neacola, 9,350’], just a bit south of the head of the Neacola Glacier, which feeds the Neacola River. The weather in this area was not cooperative, and during a stay of over two weeks we only had four days of good climbing weather.

The return flight to Kenai was challenging. The Piper Cub, with ski wheels, needed to be rocked back and forth to keep the plane mostly on one ski at a time, since the double-ski drag prevented picking up flying speed. The pilot took us one at a time off the glacier, so there was always someone available to rock the plane while running along outside. On the last flight, I ran alongside, rocking the plane, and then, at the last minute, jumped into the plane. This was all very exciting, and my adrenaline content didn’t taper off until after we landed at Kenai.

Editor’s Notes: The late Joe and Joan Firey, whose first ascents in the Cascades and Coast Mountains appeared frequently in the AAJ throughout the 1960s and 1970s, never reported this pioneering trip to the Neacolas. Joe Firey provided this account to Lowell Skoog (alpenglow.org) in a hand-written note in 2006.

Alaska mountaineering historian Steve Gruhn and Carla Firey, daughter of the Fireys, have clarified details of this previously unreported 1965 trip after reviewing various notes and correspondence, including letters between the team members and Vin Hoeman collected at the University of Alaska Anchorage.

The four-person party flew to the north branch of the Pitchfork Glacier on June 15, 1965, placing a base camp at around 4,200 feet. The climbers first attempted the east face of the south ridge of the Citadel, climbing within 50 feet of the ridge crest before retreating in the face of fog and overhanging rime. The Fireys then attempted Peak 7,850’ (60°53’N, 153°18’W), from a col north of the summit, getting about 300 feet

above the col.

After moving camp to the Neacola Glacier's eastern fork (4,300'), the four climbers summited Peak 6,310' from the southeast, via third-class snow and mixed rock. On June 26, the Fireys and George Whitmore attempted another mountain, east of the Neacola Glacier headwall, but the precise elevation and location are not certain. On June 27, all four climbed Peak 6,920', now called Mt. Anklyosaur, a snow climb via the east slope.

After returning to the Pitchfork Glacier, the Fireys went for the Citadel again on July 3. Deviating from their earlier attempt, they angled across the upper east face to gain the south ridge higher up. The climb was mostly snow, with a short rock pitch, and they summited after eight hours. The second known ascent did not come for another 50 years.

Images



Joe Firey on top of Peak 6,310' in 1965.



Joe Firey and George and Frances Whitmore take in the view from Peak 6,310', above the west side of the east fork of the Neacola Glacier. The view is to the southeast, toward Peak 6,925' and Peak 7,230' at the head of the glacier.



Climbing in the Neacola Mountains, 1965.



Camp in the Neacola Mountains, 1965.



The Citadel: Historic Ascent

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