

Chapter Fourteen

THE SUMMIT AS HOME

THE PRESIDENTIAL RANGE IS UNIQUE AMONG THE MAJOR mountains because the highest point has been an outpost of civilization from the earliest days. The first party to climb to the summit of Mount Washington went up in July 1784 and the mountain they climbed had been called, variously, Agiococook, Waumbekket-methna, Christall Hill, and Trinity Height. When they came down it was called Mount Washington, because the six climbers had gone up for a christening to honor the man who would soon lead the new nation. In the same festive vein, five of the men named the river flowing out of the great eastern ravine after their companion Dr. Cutler.

The first shelter on the summit was a primitive stone hut built by Ethan Allen Crawford. That was in 1823 and, pleased with his work, he immediately built two more. Always alert to a commercial future, the epochal mountain pioneer installed a sheet of lead upon which visitors could scratch their names. Needless to say, they often scratched more than that. Samuel Cowles, of Farmington, Connecticut, started toward the summit with Thomas Crawford on June 10, 1823, and reached the top the next day. He was the first to leave his trace on the register, but he saw very little beyond that, an experience that would be repeated many times over in the years to come. "The

Creator," he wrote, "had spread a veil over the grandeur and beauty of His works."

The summit of Mount Washington proved to be a dependable source of inspiration. *Many American citizens never went beyond their letters and numbers, but those who did often became intimates of the classics.* Not only could they explain without hesitation the distinctions separating elocution and rhetoric and oratory and declamation, but if surviving diaries are to be believed, outbursts of eloquence threatened to overtake them at every pleasing prospect. On July 8 of the same summer, a visitor spent an uncomfortable night in one of the Crawfords' stone huts, but found that the morning made up for it:

The Muses' most inspired draught,
From Helicon's pure fountain quaff'd—
What is it to the rising sun,
Seen from the top of Washington!
Canst thou bear a dreary night?
Stranger! go enjoy the sight.

Spiritually rewarding as the heights might be, the Crawfords' stone tourist court was a financial failure because the huts did not keep out very much weather and visitors soon discovered that the summit of Mount Washington had a variety and a force of weather entirely beyond the experience of most mortals.

Mr. Crawford already knew about that. An early commentator wrote that his stone cabin "was ever by the winter's storms rendered a most desolate object, though sheltered behind a bold crag. The shingle roof, split down in the woods on the mountain side and packed up on the backs of men, was scattered to the four winds. The levers of the frost, and the wild hurricane, tumbled down the thick stone walls; and every spring a roofless heap of ruins, with a rusty old stove, and the iron chest, was left to tell a sad story of the invisible power that over these towering summits stretches the arm of destruction."

Undeterred by these elemental setbacks, Mr. Crawford abandoned his stone cabins and put up a tent, thoughtfully equipped with a wood stove to keep out the damp. This innovation brought the windy nature of life on the

summit into sharp focus, and the first good blow ended the era of canvas on Mount Washington forever. Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, it always does, so the Crawfords continued to compress the whole history of lodgings into this short time and small span and they built a tiny shelter made of wood. This proved inadequate to vacationers, so in 1852 Lucius M. Rosebrook and Joseph Hall of Lancaster and Nathan Perkins of Jefferson built a handsome and substantial building of wood, masonry, anchor bolts, and steel cables. This new hostelry promised so much that they named it the Summit House.

Nothing succeeds like success and that same year Samuel Spaulding built a larger hotel called the Tip-Top House. A contemporary guide wrote that "cement and iron hold this monument of daring enterprise, in proud defiance of wind and storm, to the most bleak top crag of Mount Washington." The new hotel measured twenty-eight by eighty-four feet, and it was provided with a telescope on the roof and fresh dairy goods in the kitchen, the latter supplied by hardscrabble cows tethered about a mile below the summit in the Cow Pasture. Many lodgers rode to the summit on horseback, using the four bridle paths that had been built by then. Work on a carriage road up the eastern flank was begun in 1855 and then the cog railway on the western flank reached the top in 1869, and the larger throngs they brought required a larger hotel. This was an even grander Summit House, a full-service installation to meet every need for 150 summer lodgers. By now there were also buildings to serve the needs of patrons of the carriage road and the railroad, a large three-story observation tower, a building for the U.S. Army Signal Service, and a building for the editorial staff and press gang of *Among the Clouds*.

Everything except the Tip-Top House burned in 1908. By 1915, the third-generation Summit House was open, a lovely heavy-timbered place with twenty-two double guest rooms and every amenity the stylish traveler could desire. In 1924 a small cabin was built near the Summit House and named Camden Cottage to salute an admired employee of the cog railway who slid down the 3.25-mile track on a board in only three minutes. This refuge was for climbers and it was left open all year round, partly to deflect the attention of cold-weather visitors who might otherwise break into the hotel.

The U.S. Army Signal Service served as the national weather bureau and a detachment of soldiers set up an observatory on the summit of Mount

Washington in November 1870, using a building with two heavy chains run up over the roof and anchored to bedrock.

Heavy and reassuring as the construction was, there were times when the men thought it might not be enough. Consider, for instance, the experience of Private Doyle in January 1877. As the account of that year describes it, "Anticipating, from the aspect of the heavens in the afternoon preceding the gale, when the clouds spread for miles around—an ocean of frozen vapor—and became, late in the day, so dense as to reflect the colors of the spectrum, that some great atmospheric disturbance was impending, the observers made everything snug for a storm."

Night came on and the wind rose to 100 mph, driving sleet so thick the men dared not make their outside observations. At midnight they recorded winds of 120 and the thermometer stood at -24° . The small building was heated with a coal stove and this night they stoked it until it was red hot, but water froze less than three feet from its glowing sides.

By one o'clock in the morning the wind touched 150 and blew through the sturdy building so freely that the carpet floated a foot above the floorboards. Soon one of the windows collapsed. There were only two observers on summit duty and they struggled mightily to close the inside shutters, but the repair held for only a few moments before the wind burst through again. As described in the account of that year, "After a hard tussle, they again secured the windows by nailing a cleat to the floor and using a board as a lever. 'Even then,' said Private Doyle, 'it was all we could do to force the shutters back into place. But we did it. We had to do it.'"

"The remainder of the night was spent in an anxious and alarmed state of mind, as was but natural when they did not know but that at any moment the building would be carried over into Tuckerman Ravine and they swept into eternity with it." Private Doyle and his fellow observer were increasingly confident in this unpromising forecast, so they wrapped themselves in blankets and quilts secured with ropes and then they tied on iron crowbars lengthwise as further strengthening against the long fall that seemed inevitable. Thus encumbered, they attended to their duties until the storm abated.

The Signal Service recorded temperatures down to -59° and wind as high as 186 mph and they occupied the summit year-round until the fall of 1887 and summers-only until 1892, when the government closed the observatory.

The warm-weather population remained strong, but year-round occupants did not return until the International Polar Year was announced for 1933.

Joe Dodge led the campaign for a new weather observatory on the summit and four observers moved up in the fall of 1932, getting along as well as they could in what was known as the stage office, a building remaining from the carriage trade. It had been built for summer use, but the thick accumulations of rime ice on the outside walls helped keep out the wintry blasts. A good thing, too, because these observers recorded the all-time record for surface winds on the earth at 231 mph. A new facility was built in 1937, it was framed with 9 x 10-inch timber bolted a minimum of four feet into bedrock, and it was reported to be the strongest wooden building in the world. Borrowing an old trick from coastal fisheries in Maine, it was insulated with seaweed.

This new building was equipped with thick plate-glass windows covered with heavy steel grates, and it had a full kitchen and a chemical toilet adjacent to the kitchen. All plumbers know about the need for vents built into their pipes and the summit contractors did not neglect this duty. They also knew about the summit winds and they inquired as to the least likely direction for severe storms, then they placed the plumbing vents so they would have maximum protection from all the other directions. The direction they left with the least vent protection was southeast.

The great Thanksgiving hurricane of 1950 was one of the worst sustained storms ever to strike the summit, and it came out of the southeast. The observatory records wind speed on a revolving circular chart; the wind averaged 120 for an hour and then the pen went off the chart at 162. This wind was blowing straight into the plumbing vents, which argued for caution when using the chemical toilet.

It also suggested an experiment. One of the observers noticed a bottle of child's soap bubble mix on a shelf; nobody knew how it got there, but there it was. So the next time there was a lull in the wind he poured the whole bottle into the sink drain and washed it down with a hearty dose of hot water. When the wind speed went back into three digits there was a demonstration of bubble-making power that set an entirely new standard for this once-gentle art.

Given Joe Dodge's inclinations, radio loomed large in the lives of summit personnel. Electronics made a major move to the summit in 1940 when a

transmitter, tower, and domestic facilities for experimental FM broadcasting were built there. This forced the issue of water. Ever since the cog railway trestle reached the summit, water was pumped up from the base station for summer use. The new observatory had an open-top wooden cistern in the cellar and just before the railway closed in the fall the cistern was pumped full, then replenished with ice when the original supply dwindled. This was sufficient, and the observers learned not to think about it too much—when the cistern was drained in the spring a startling variety of drowned rodents would usually appear on the bottom.

A new age dawned with the FM building. When the concrete floor was finished, an artesian well rig was driven up the road and parked on the concrete. Then it started to drill. Water was finally hit 1,112 feet down, just slightly above the surface level of the Lakes of the Clouds, and when the drill was removed the water rose to about 240 feet below the cellar floor. Full happiness was not realized, however. Some time afterward, one of the crew was pumping fuel oil from the storage tank to the cellar tank and he forgot to shut the valve when the cellar tank was full. This oversight was not discovered before a considerable amount of oil ran out onto the floor and down the artesian well. Every theory and effort was applied to ridding the well of the noxious slime, but a distinctive taste remained in the water for as long as the well stayed in use.

World War II accelerated scientific research, as wars always do, and Mount Washington contributed its weather to the cause. The benchmark research for cloud seeding was done by the observatory crew, aircraft wing sections were tested up there, and when jet engines were being developed for military use a prototype of each model was hauled up the road in the fall. This was a joint project by the navy and air force, and at first a whole navy Phantom carrier fighter, minus the folding part of its wings, was mounted in the building, so it was called the "hanger." Then only the engine was mounted, freeing so much space that a second mount was built in the hanger. At first it was anti-icing tests, then production engines were being tested to see if they met their specified performance. The hanger was an immense block-like building at the end of a former parking lot and there was an even more conspicuous dormitory building on the level section of road called Homestretch which is just below the summit, the place where Dr. Ball wandered to such poor effect 100 years earlier.

The dormitory had beds for sixty and this new age brought flood tide in summit population. Previously there were two men in the electronics transmission building and three or four in the observatory, but the military and engineering presence of the 1950s and 1960s put as many as sixty-five men in winter residence, boom times that brought amenities never dreamed of by the pioneers as they braced against the wintry blast in their blankets and crowbars. For instance, two of the engineers set up a bar and imported liquor and beer from the valley which they sold at a favorable rate, though not neglecting their own profits. They also brought up several slot machines to extract pocket change from their summit mates, but it must be said that the slots were set to pay off at a generous rate.

The jet testing program also brought an adaptive response by the summit cat. This was Felony, a beast of such remarkable dimension that his tail could be brought forward over his head and tucked under his chin. Felony began life at John Howe's house down in Jackson, where he liked to spend the night outdoors. Winters were cold down in the valley, and year by year the frost chewed away at Felony's ears until there were hardly more than stubs. Then Felony moved to the summit, where he liked to sleep in the jet building. The grease made it difficult for Felony to keep his coat in good order, but he slept in the hanger and hardly seemed to notice when the engines ran up to full throttle. The effect of Felony's blighted ears on his acoustic defenses was never adequately studied.

Nome also spent most of those years on the summit. He was a malamute dog and, like Felony, he adapted. He lived in the observatory, he was a well-brought-up fellow, and he made his visits outside as required and regardless of the prevailing conditions. One of Nome's most admired achievements was the technique he developed for dealing with the winds of winter and the accumulation of rime ice during these outings, but it was lonely up there and, unlike the other men, he had no scheduled days off. So Nome carried on a long-running romance with Joe Dodge's faithful and very attractive dog Tanana and, when the spirit moved, Nome would go down to visit her. The observatory would know when he left and Joe would note the moment when he arrived, and on the next radio contact they'd calculate Nome's elapsed time. The ardent canine would regularly achieve all-weather descents in times that approached free-fall.

In the pioneering days of winter residency, the summit crew understood that they were on the frontier and it was only natural that they endure hardships whether they were indoors or out. They took it for granted that they'd hike up and down the mountain as needed and meet the hazards as they found them.

These assumptions could not be made in the later days of winter occupancy, these residents were scientists, not adventurers, and their regular jobs were often in the aircraft industry of southern California where the temperature on a chilly winter day was usually warmer than mid-summer on Mount Washington. This situation promised trouble, so a series of refuge shacks was built along the upper half of the auto road. The first ones were built in the 1940s and more were added as the summit traffic increased until there were shacks at five and a half mile, six mile, six and a half, seven, seven and a third, seven and two-thirds mile. These shelters were about ten feet square inside, with a heater and a telephone and army surplus K rations. These accommodations would be barely sufficient by most standards, but under the circumstances, barely sufficient was good enough.

One early test came on February 19, 1946. Vernon Humphreys was in the last stages of his military service and the army loaned him to the observatory to finish an intensive study of rime ice. There had been two days of remarkably fine weather and he started to hike up the road for what promised to be an enjoyable outing. Marshall Smith was a member of the regular observatory staff and he started down the road to meet Vernon.

The weather held fine, but there was a brutal cold front closing in and it hit the two men just before 4:00 P.M. when they were half a mile above the 6-Mile refuge. They realized that the day had turned against them, so they retreated to the refuge hut, chopped away the ice on the door without difficulty, and closed it behind them. They started the heater and called the summit and the valley to report their situation, but all the emergency food was gone except for a can of grapefruit juice. They set up an hourly phone schedule with the outside world and then, attuned to thermal physics as they were, the observers rigged heat shields to absorb the energy of the heater for later release.

The cold front proved violent indeed and the two men stayed in the shelter through the night, all the next day, and through the next night. The storm

eventually blew itself out, and at about noon on the third day two men from the observatory arrived with hot tea and soup, then they escorted Vernon and Marshall the rest of the way to the summit and set a meal before them that was entirely adequate to their great need. That is to say, both the observers and the emergency shelters worked exactly as they were meant to.

Lacking bad news from Mount Washington, New Hampshire editors looked for other sources of excitement. *The Berlin Reporter* was the nearest newspaper and it ignored the saving features of the auto road huts, but it did report that the 4-H Wide Awake Club was meeting on schedule and that the stock market had taken its biggest drop in six years, with losses ranging from one to nine points before closing at 76. The plunge continued the next day and the Dow fell to 74.6.

The next-nearest newspaper was *The Littleton Courier*, and the editors ignored the Mount Washington story, too, although they did provide a lemon recipe that should help with rheumatism. *The Manchester Leader*, the state's flagship paper, took a pass on the story in favor of stronger stuff: Jack Dempsey was in town to referee an evening of boxing, Russian spies were causing worry, and children were told to find amusements for themselves.

The winter population of the summit peaked before the perfection of winter transport, but mountaineering enthusiasm could not be assumed among the engineers arriving from Los Angeles and San Diego. Veterans of Mount Washington work worried about this. There was the day, for instance, when the chief of the permanent testing group started up the road with ten or twelve new arrivals from the sunny shores of southern California, and as far as anyone knew the most difficult hiking they'd done was from their desk to the water cooler. So they got to the bottom of Mount Washington and fitted out with clumsy cold-weather gear from the military stockpiles, then they started up, a long line of them. The weather turned bad above timberline and the chief was in the lead group, so he kept going until he hit such strong winds on Cow Pasture that the only way he could move was to lie down on his back and kick himself along toward the summit with his crampons. All of the rest of the new engineers had holed up in twos and threes in the refuge huts behind him. They spent the night in these minimalist accommodations and were rounded up the next day, not much the worse for wear.

By now it was obvious that some way had to be found to manage winter-time shift changes that was less punishing and less dangerous than muscles

and crampons. The first serious attempt at mechanization involved Weasels, the tracked vehicle developed during World War II by the American army's Tenth Mountain Division. Passenger comfort was not a priority in wartime; in fact, Weasel design made almost no provision for passengers at all. The troopers wanted something like a snow-qualified jeep and Weasels had no significant heat and only a flimsy canvas top, and the ride they provided on the wind-chopped road up Mount Washington was about like a rowboat in an ocean storm. More to the point, Weasels had very little sideways traction and threatened to slide away downhill on the drifted side-hills of the auto road.

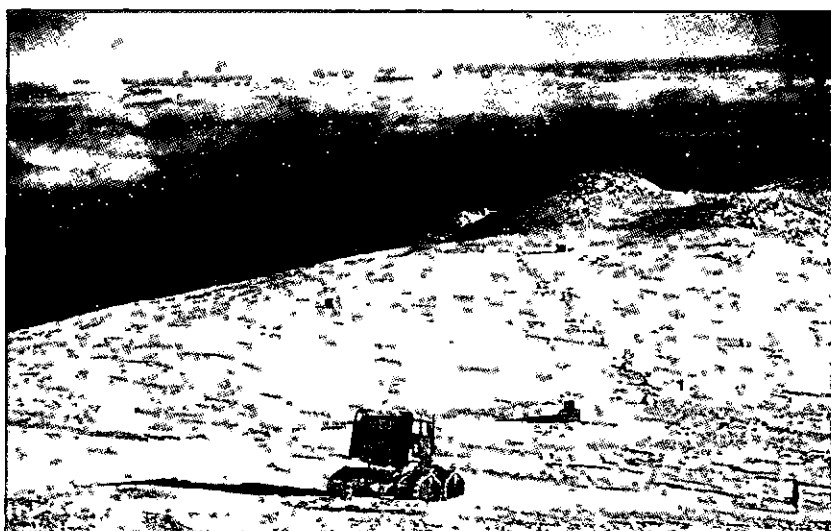
The first mechanical snow traveler of the postwar era clanked out of the back room of the Tucker household in Medford, Oregon. That was in 1945 and one of the continuously improved editions of the Tucker Sno-Cat reached Mount Washington by the early 1950s. It had a roomy interior and it was well heated by mountain standards, but the center of gravity was so high that one of them actually capsized. Furthermore, the drive train was fragile and when it broke the vehicle was in free-wheeling. Nevertheless, the orange Sno-Cats worked the summit schedule for many winters.

One persistent problem was the sidehill drifts on the out-and-back traverse pivoting on Cragway Turn. It was a mile and a half long and no track-driven vehicle could hold the sidehill slope of the drift, so a sort of notch had to be bulldozed to make a negotiable surface. Visibility is always a problem above timberline, fog and wind-whipped snow reduce visibility to almost nothing and erase all contrasts in the light, and the bravest traveler becomes almost helpless. Phil Labbe was the full-time summit driver for three decades and even he was frequently blinded by these white-outs. One early and memorable entry came in the winter of 1953 when he was bulldozing along the Cragway drift to make a level surface when the light went flat. He tried to keep going, but it was bulldozing by memory and by Braille and eventually he simply abandoned the tractor. For a long time after that, the record of his effort was visible from the valley, an increasingly wayward trace punctuated by the abandoned bulldozer at the end. Finally they got a Sno-Cat up to the end of his bulldozed stretch, then something broke and it stayed there for the rest of the winter.

The Tuckers were not the only internal combustion vehicles on the winter road. The first Polaris "Sno-Traveler" was made in 1954, a spidery little



In the 1950s, bodies were brought down from the region of Tuckerman Ravine by Weasels, which were World War II-era military vehicles. Joe Dodge is sitting astride the right headlight and George Hamilton is driving. This is at the beginning of the trail to Tuckerman Ravine, where signs warn hikers of avalanche danger.



Tucker Sno-Cats descend the summit cone on Mount Washington toward the flats known as "Homestretch" in 1960. Dr. Ball mistook this area for the summit and nearly perished before heading down toward two more days of peril.

device with a track on the ground, an engine in the rear, steering skis in front, and a seat for the driver—the prototype snowmobile. Six Polaris Sno-Travelers made a successful ascent of Mount Washington in February 1962 and hope surged, the snowmobile might be the key to quick personnel travel on the winter road. It turned out that the drifts and ice were too tough and the one-man one-machine format was too risky, and the age of the snowmobile for summit workers ended almost before it began. Finally the Thiokol aerospace company in Utah developed their line of snow tractors and these became the standard winter transit for summit personnel. The summit road, however, still wasn't main street.

At least one group thought it could be. This was the Mercedes motor works of Germany, and they were bringing out a new line of rotary snowplows. Someone in their U.S. marketing company wanted something spectacular to launch the new line, and what could be better than clearing the road up Mount Washington? So early in April they brought three models to New Hampshire, the medium-sized one, the big one, and the huge one.

The man in charge was from Germany and he looked the job over. It had been a good snow year on Mount Washington and there had also been a considerable amount of rain, so the snowpack was both deep and solid. The head plowman said they'd take a day to clear the road to halfway and the next day they should be able to get to the summit. The summit regulars thought the Mercedes people had bitten off more than they could chew, and maybe more than they could bite.

On the third or fourth day a veteran of the summit crew went down to see how they were getting along. The surface was the kind of very hard boilerplate that summit people know so well, but he was using crampons and an ice axe and he got along all right. The Germans were not doing quite that well. They'd gotten as far as the five-mile grade and the long sidehill drift that Phil Labbe learned was impossible terrain even for a bulldozer to notch. This is the reason the Cut-off was made, a winter-only tractor route from 4.5-Mile to 6-Mile that does not suffer from too much drifting.

The Germans meant to clear right down to the surface of the road and it was heavy going. They had four or five people out in front driving stakes into the snow to show where the road was, though this had to be mostly guesswork because all they had to look at was a sidehill drift. Not only that,

but they had no crampons and their work was punctuated by many quick and desperate scrambles. If the scramble failed, a man would not slow very much until he hit timberline far below.

So the scouts would set their stakes and the huge rotary would back up about twenty feet from the frozen wall that marked its farthest advance. Then the driver would gun the engine, gather speed, and hit the wall with a mighty crash. The work advanced about six inches per crash. The hours were passing, the wind was picking up, and snow was coming on, so the observer found the German's crew boss and told him that neither the weather nor their progress was very promising. The Mercedes marketing campaign looked elsewhere for their triumph.

Phil Labbe survived every imaginable winter situation. One memorable entry came on the Cow Pasture in 1983. This is a sort of summertime oasis, an acre or more of smooth and level green in the rocky desert above timberline, there's even a small fresh-water spring conveniently placed in the middle of it. Samuel Spaulding's herd of cows was presumably happy here during their days of service with the Tip-Top House kitchen, but the cows are many generations gone. Now there are two roadside parking lots near Cow Pasture and it remains a popular place for summertime road passengers to take a fair-weather stroll.

The weather was not fair on a winter day when Willy Harris and Marty Engstrom were due for their shift change. They were waiting on top to ride down with Phil Labbe, but Phil did not arrive at the summit at his usual time, which was rare enough. He didn't arrive later than his usual time, either. In fact, he was lost.

The problem was on Cow Pasture. There were guide stakes all along the road, but they weren't working as planned. The stakes were set on both sides of the road so the driver would go between them, but when the weather was very thick it was difficult to tell the difference between two stakes on one side of the road and a stake on one side and another stake on the other side. This meant that if the driver got ninety-degrees off line he could pass through the expected pair of poles and not realize he was headed for the trackless wastes. Phil had more experience with bad-weather winter transits on the road than any person who ever lived, but he did make that mistake; he got ninety-degrees off line and soon realized that he couldn't see any stakes at all, he was lost.

A Thiokol is a very large piece of equipment, so rather than drive it blindly into an even worse situation, Phil got out to see if he could find any stakes nearby. He couldn't find any stakes. Then he couldn't find his cottage-size orange tractor. Phil did the difficult thing, he kept his head, and he was able to find his way back to one landmark, then to another, and then to his tractor. After this close call, all the stakes were put on the same side of the road and a tether was rigged for anyone who went out looking for the route.

John Howe took a job with the observatory in the fall of 1950 and, with a few absences for other meteorological duties, he worked on the summit until 1988. He was an observer of the old school, he preferred hiking to mechanized convenience under almost any circumstances, and his standards for hiking weather were considerably beyond those of most men.

The large postwar military presence on Mount Washington included another visit from what was now called the U.S. Army Signal Corps, but they were not on the summit. They were working on designs for automated weather stations and they built their research facility on what is known as Cape Horn, a rocky spur of the mountain known by earlier generations as the Ledge. It's just above timberline and the auto road loops around this promontory above 4-Mile.

One shift-change day in March 1952, John started down the road with full winter clothing and his crampons and ice axe, and he also had his skis and poles lashed to a packboard for days-off skiing in the valley. The wind was blowing so hard that he had to crawl across the Homestretch flats, then the situation eased a bit and he was able to get along with his crampons and ice axe. Then just below 6-Mile it suddenly worsened a lot. The wind grew violent—lull and gust, lull and gust. John was getting along by keeping his back to the wind and sitting down into it when a gust hit, then the strongest gust yet hit him and he couldn't sit down into it quickly enough. It tipped him over the edge of the road and he started sliding on the boiler-plate surface of the snow. He was immediately going too fast to catch himself with his ice axe or crampons, and he knew that the only way to stop was to hit something. There was one rock sticking up above the ice below him, and he hit it.

He took the force of the blow under his left arm and his shoulder dislocated, but he did stop. His goggles were broken and he'd lost his mitts, but he managed to get out of his pack harness and chop and push and scabble back up to the road and he kept going down to the Signal Corps station on

Cape Horn. The men there were due to make a trip down in their Sno-Cat, but the weather was so bad they decided against it—their wind recorder showed that the gust that tipped John over registered 125 mph on Cape Horn, which was 1,200 feet lower than his knock-down. The army crew was not very sympathetic until the sergeant in charge found John squirming around on the floor of one of the back rooms, trying to find a position where he could stand the pain. After that, they started up the Sno-Cat and took him down to the valley. I was working for the AMC at Pinkham Notch and I got to the bottom of the road just as he was brought in. John is my brother and all he said was, "Don't tell mother about this."

I didn't, nor did I tell her about the time the Sno-Cat left him behind in a whiteout near Cow Pasture. It took a lot to stop a shift-change trip to the valley and this one was right at the limit: the summit wind hit 180 that afternoon. Phil Labbe started the Sno-Cat down in the morning when the wind was within travel tolerances at about 80 mph. The air was a fury of blowing snow and visibility was almost nil, so when Phil got to Homestretch he asked John to get out and walk ahead to guide him. John was familiar with the territory and the surface was fairly good for crampons, so he kept Phil on course until the end of Homestretch, then he got back in. They pushed on through the storm until they reached the drift that forms just above Cow Pasture and Phil drove out onto the drift by feeling his way through the steering gear, and suddenly the Sno-Cat slipped sideways six or eight feet. Phil didn't know if he was still on the road, so he asked John to get out again and see where they were.

"Which I did," says John. "I determined where we were and then I turned around to go back to the machine and I couldn't see it. Then the blowing snow cleared and I saw it and at the same moment I fell, a gust of wind toppled me. I must have gotten disoriented or something, because I was watching the machine—I could still see it—and it drove off. There was no question in my mind, it drove off, heading down. So I thought, Well, Phil must have seen where I was and he just wants to get off that little sidehill. So I walked on down across Cow Pasture cross-lots and found the road down at the other end and came back up the road. No machine. I got to where I thought I'd last seen it—no machine. So I did it again, I made three trips down Cow Pasture and on the last trip I missed the road. It was getting worse, the wind was probably getting close to a hundred. I ended up over at the beginning of Nelson

Crag and I thought, Well, I better get out of here before it gets worse—we knew it was going to get worse. So I just walked down.

“I was just getting to the flats down in the valley by the Glen House and here came Phil with the Sno-Cat. They’d been worried to death and finally they’d given up and called my wife to say that I was missing, and Phil stopped beside me and said, ‘Never, *never* leave the machine like that!’ And I said, ‘Phil, you left *ME!*’ Actually, they hadn’t moved, it was a visual illusion.”

As Private Doyle and his embattled companions learned a hundred years earlier, life on the summit of Mount Washington is never certain.