

THE O'NEIL EXPEDITION

A Century Ago This Summer the Olympics were Explored

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Because they do not lie athwart the beaten paths of commerce, the Olympic Mountains were not explored until late in the nineteenth century. As so often was the case in exploration of the American West, the United States Army led the way, the 21st Infantry making the first organized attempt to explore the Olympics. On May 22, 1882, Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Chambers dispatched Lieutenant Willis Wittich to reconnoiter a route and construct a trail from Fort Townsend to the Dungeness River. He was accompanied by a packer, pack train and several enlisted men. Later that summer, Lieutenant Thomas H. Bradley set out with a similar party to extend the trail.

The troopers attacked the Olympics with considerable energy, and after several months of hard labor they succeeded in cutting a route to and across both branches of the Dungeness. Upon reaching the last range of foothills, the men abandoned the project. Two years later another party, under Lieutenants Charles M. Truitt and Willson Y. Stamper, attempted to reopen the trail, but the men were out only ten days.

Fate selected Lieutenant Joseph P. O'Neil, 14th Infantry, to unlock the region's secrets. Stationed at Fort Townsend from July 8, 1884, to April 29, 1885, he had no opportunity to visit the Olympics, but he did make inquiries. He received scant information and concluded the mountains were as wild as Alaska, noting that the Indians did not go beyond the foothills, and only a handful of troopers, hunters and prospectors had ventured past the perimeter.

After his transfer to Vancouver Barracks, O'Neil persuaded General Nelson A. Miles to send out an exploring party, with O'Neil in charge, of course. The journey was authorized on July 6, 1885, and the lieutenant was provided with a detail of enlisted men and civilians, plus pack mules. One of the men, Private John Johnson, had been in the Olympics, having helped build the 1882 trail.

The party proceeded to Port Angeles, where the men conferred with some citizens who offered advice. The explorers planned to follow the Elwha River because it appeared to head into the center of the mountains, then cross the divide and descend to the Pacific Ocean via the Quinault River.

Leaving Port Angeles on July 17, the expedition at first utilized a right-of-way that had been partially cleared for the county road; then, guided by an Indian, they followed an old, ill-defined trail that was over-grown and obstructed by windfalls. The Indian deserted them, however, when he realized where they were going, and neither promises of big pay nor threats of death induced him to remain. He camped with the party reluctantly at the base of the mountains, then quietly slipped away during the night.

Although the first range of foothills was less than five miles distant, progress proved slow. Upon reconnoitering the terrain ahead, the men discovered the way was blocked by dense forest, almost impenetrable underbrush, and by cliffs, canyons, precipices and windfalls. Accordingly, the plans were revised. Instead of attempting to follow the Elwha, O'Neil shifted the line of march toward Mount Angeles. The revised itinerary called for the party to proceed southeasterly to the head of the Dungeness River, then travel southward along the main divide toward the mountainous center. Scouts would then be sent out in various directions to explore the interior. When these explorations had been concluded, the expedition would descend the Quinault River to the Pacific Ocean and follow the coast to Grays Harbor.

O'Neil's general plan called for scouts to go ahead each day to prospect a route; based upon their reports he would select the most promising way. Trail cutters would then clear the path. The pack train would operate in the rear, relaying supplies from camp to camp.

The men put in long hours of hard work. They had breakfast at five o'clock, were busy working on the trail by six, and, except for a lunch break, they worked steadily until dinner time at six in the evening. Despite the strenuous labor which called for adequate nourishment, the men were "almost fasting," suffering from short rations because they had had poor luck hunting. Nevertheless, they made the best of the circumstances, doing justice to their diet of pork, bacon, flour, beans and coffee.

The conditions ahead varied, and the men soon discovered that although they might progress as much as five or six miles on some days, on others they could advance no more than a quarter mile. As they progressed they also noted that the hills became steeper; consequently, the mules often lost their footing and rolled down the steep slopes, making it difficult to get them back on the trail. However, by July 24 the party had reached the base of the first range of snow-clad peaks. After having cut a trail through the tangled forests of the foothills, the little expedition was presently in a position to move into the high country and establish a base camp, then set out and explore in various directions.

Less than a month after leaving Port Angeles the expedition succeeded in crossing the first range, which overlooked the Strait of Juan de Fuca, and O'Neil established the party's headquarters on the second range. Here, the men detected traces of former hunters, including an old, deserted cabin. Game was now abundant, but its wildness was further evidence that it had been hunted in the past.

O'Neil was impressed by the views of snow-covered mountains rising in "wild, broken confusion," but he picked out what he thought was Olympus, the crowning point in a range that appeared to circle on itself. "There is no regularity about their formation," he wrote of the Olympics in general, "but jumbled up in the utmost confusion, and the only regularity which does exist is that the ranges nearest the Strait and Sound seem to run parallel to those bodies of water." He predicted that the day would come when the future state of Washington would "glory in their wealth and beauty."

The lieutenant decided to divide his party. Harry Hawgood, one of two civilian engineers, would go on up the Elwha with one division, then work his way to the ocean. O'Neil would take the other division and proceed southeasterly along the divide, eventually making his way to Hood Canal.

Hawgood's party had little more than started when it met disaster. After crossing a large stream, the pack animals lost their footing, and the equipment and supplies were swept away by the river. Hawgood had no alternative but to return to headquarters. Meanwhile, the party led by O'Neil proceeded as planned. Up to this point the party had been sustained by government rations, but now the game was almost tame and the men did not want for fresh meat.

Eventually the terrain became too rugged for the pack train. Leaving the mules at "Noplace," the men explored on foot. O'Neil and Private Johnson traveled southward for several days, but suffered a mishap and became separated. Upon returning to camp, O'Neil sent everyone out to look for the soldier, without result. The party then returned to its base camp. Meanwhile, Johnson worked his way out of the mountains on his own. Shortly afterward, a courier arrived with orders for O'Neil to report to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and the lieutenant had to terminate the exploration.

O'Neil had performed a valuable service. Although his expedition did not succeed in crossing the Olympics, it stimulated interest in exploration of the country. Five years later, a more ambitious group, the Press Expedition, succeeded in crossing the Olympics during the severe winter of 1889-90. But that party had no more than emerged from the wilderness when O'Neil returned to the Olympics, this time in command of a much larger expedition.

The lieutenant had been re-stationed in the Pacific Northwest on August 8, 1887. Aside from his military duties, he served as secretary to the Oregon Alpine Club, which had been founded on September 23, 1887. A year or so later the club proposed that a scientific expedition investigate the Olympic Mountains. As a result, O'Neil decided to complete the explorations he had begun in 1885, and with the club's help he succeeded in having another exploration ordered.

The proposal called for the club to furnish the scientific staff and most of the money, with the army providing the leadership (Lieutenant O'Neil), several enlisted men and a pack train. The "Olympic Exploring Expedition" would traverse the Olympics from east to west, making numerous side trips in the process. O'Neil expected to be in the mountains about three months and to explore 1,600 square miles. The intention was to obtain detailed information about the country. While half the party engaged in building a pack mule trail, the remaining men would scout the way and explore. The scientists from the Oregon Alpine Club would study the geology, flora, fauna and ornithology as well as map the region and its topography. The highlight of the exploration would be the ascent of Mount Olympus and placing upon its summit a copper box containing a record book.

The lieutenant left Vancouver Barracks on June 9, 1890, to visit Puget Sound and make arrangements. Consequently, he decided to approach the mountains from the southeast, via Hood Canal, then cross the ranges to the Pacific side. He was told that a good trail led from Hood Canal to Lake Cushman, which lay hidden among the foothills. The lake was known but the country beyond was largely unexplored. The expedition would follow up the Skokomish River to its head. After attempting to locate the terminus of his 1885 trail, O'Neil would proceed westward and come out at whatever point on the west side of the mountains the expedition could attain.

Orders authorizing the reconnaissance were published on June 20. O'Neil selected ten enlisted men "three noncommissioned officers and seven privates" from among numerous volunteers.

The "scientific corps" sent by the Oregon Alpine Club consisted of a botanist, a geologist and a naturalist. The expedition also included a civilian packer, a dozen pack mules and several dogs.

The men were well supplied with arms, ammunition, tools and provisions. Game would be relied upon for food, supplemented by plenty of flour, hardtack, beans, bacon, coffee, sugar and other essentials. Calculated to last 100 days, the supplies weighed about four tons. Because the pack train could not transport all this material at one time, relaying would be necessary.

The story of the Press Expedition's adventure had not yet hit the newsstands when O'Neil's expedition arrived in Fort Townsend on June 26. By July 1 everything was ready, and after an all-night run on a steamer, the expedition arrived at Lilliwaup, a landing place on Hood Canal. The expedition then headed for Lake Cushman, said to be six miles distant via a good trail. O'Neil expected to camp at the lake that night. The trail had not been maintained, however, and was often blocked by windfalls; and the men spent much time extricating the mules from mud holes. As a result, the pack train did not go more than three or four miles that day, and the party had to bivouac in a swamp. The next morning the expedition proceeded to the lake, where it was transported to the west shore on a log raft. Here the troopers established Camp No. 1. Beyond this point a good trail extended up the river about five miles to a miners' camp which proved to be the last outpost of civilization. Beyond it, the expedition had to cut its way through impenetrable forest.

O'Neil established a work schedule similar to the one he had used in 1885. After breakfast at six o'clock, the men worked steadily all day until seven in the evening, when they had supper. They had an hour's rest at noon, but generally utilized the time to mend their camp outfit, wash clothes, and so on. Tired as they were at day's end, they spent the twilight hours fishing for trout, which were abundant in the river.

The expedition came to an abrupt halt just beyond the miners' camp because a precipice rose sharply from the water's edge. The men called it Fisher's Bluff, for one of themselves, and established Camp No. 2 nearby. Only a week had passed since they left Fort Townsend, but already the troopers faced the challenge of the jungled forests and precipitous slopes of the Olympics. This bluff was the first major barrier. The pack train could not avoid it by crossing the river because the stream was too swift at this point. Therefore, the men had to build a path over the obstruction. They tackled the job energetically and soon accomplished the task. Beyond this point, however, every step was gained by hard work, tangled windfalls had to be cleared, gulches bridged, and the trail cut across bluffs and spurs. The need for workmen became paramount and diverted the scientists from their intended studies. The continuous rain was also unpleasant, the clouds hung low on the mountainsides, blotting out the sun, and so darkened the narrow canyon as to shut out all suggestion of sky.

O'Neil now sent out the first foot parties. From this time on continual scouting was the rule, and it involved just about everything, hacking through the tangled undergrowth, negotiating canyons, climbing cliffs, following elk trails, crossing slippery footlogs, even working through snowdrifts left over from the preceding winter. The delays caused by taking the time to reconnoiter could not be avoided because parties had to be sent out in every direction to search for a route for the trail.

As the expedition penetrated deeper into the mountains, the country became more rugged, the way more difficult. O'Neil therefore adopted a plan that called for the pack train to continue bringing up supplies while everybody else went out to look for a way.

Near Camp No.5 the expedition was confronted by Jumbo's Leap, the second major barrier. This box canyon was so called because an old hound by that name had made a daring leap into it in order to avoid being left behind during one of the scouting trips. Although the men had been able to cross the gorge, the pack train could not go on until a bridge was built. In fact, this project proved to be the most difficult and hazardous work undertaken by the expedition. Eventually, however, the men succeeded in bridging the chasm.

After scouting in various directions and finding the way impracticable, the men became discouraged. Although they were now encamped near the base of the first divide, the outlook was not promising, and they almost gave up hope of going farther with the mules. As a matter of fact, they considered sending the animals back to the post and packing the loads themselves. All through July they had worked on a trail about a dozen miles long and, still confined in the deep, narrow canyon of the river, they were "like rats in a trap, seeing the sunshine only at noontime." The invention of a flying machine appeared to be the only solution to the problem. Nevertheless, O'Neil was unwilling to turn back with the pack train. He decided to fall back upon his former tactics. He would suspend trail building and send everyone out to scout for a way. Most of the men were willing to admit defeat at this point and declare the Olympics impenetrable by pack animals, but O'Neil inspired them to new efforts. After all, he pointed out, had they not successfully overcome two major barriers?

Eventually, the men discovered that it would be possible to ascend and cross the first divide near the headwaters of the Skokomish River. After searching many days, they had located what appeared to be a route that might lead them to the Quinault and the distant Pacific. Within a few days, if everything went well, they would set up a base camp on the main divide. Foot parties would then be dispatched in all directions to explore the Olympics thoroughly, not just go across from one side to the other as the Press party had done. The expedition was, in fact, now encamped "within a day's march of the divide." North Pass, the ridge's low point, was less than four miles distant but 2,500 feet higher. Convinced the mules could cross this pass and reach the heart of the mountains, O'Neil was anxious to begin exploring. He therefore called everyone together, complimented the men on what they had accomplished, reminded them that they had overcome many obstacles, and outlined his plan. He was certain they could reach the grand divide with the animals and supplies, and replacements could be easily obtained by sending the pack train back to Hood Canal. This would permit them to work "without fear of the dread enemy of adventure, hunger," and the explorers could work outward in all directions. Should the pack train be unable to go beyond the grand divide, the solution was simple, the mules would be taken to Hood Canal and the men, packing the supplies on their backs, would strike out in various directions, going down the several rivers to finish the explorations. The completion of this work would mark the halfway point of the explorations.

O'Neil now divided the expedition into four units. Three foot parties would be dispatched to explore, while the other men finished the trail and escorted the pack train to the central camp. Upon completing their assignments, the foot parties would rendezvous at the new base camp on the grand divide. Shortly afterward, they would again venture forth, exploring to the north and west, thus undertaking the final phase of the expedition's work.

When the conference concluded, the men retired and "slept their last night under blankets for almost a moon." The next morning, which was August 17, the various foot parties left camp. During their absence, the men left behind extended the trail to the main divide, establishing several camps along the way, plus a base camp on the divide itself.

One foot party explored the Duckabush and Dosewallips rivers, following those streams to Hood Canal. Another returned to Jumbo's Leap, then struck southward to explore various rivers on the southern flank of the Olympics. O'Neil led the third foot party, which examined the Quinault and Humptulips rivers and then proceeded to Grays Harbor. The foot parties returned to Hood Canal by steamer, rail and stagecoach, then walked up the mule trail to the new base camp.

During O'Neil's absence, the trail workers had once again become discouraged after crossing the first divide because they had not been able to locate a route that the pack train could use to cross the grand divide and descend into the Quinault valley. Everyone except O'Neil believed that the pack train would have to return to Hood Canal, but the lieutenant declared his intention of going out the Quinault because he had found a good route down its valley. Once again he resorted to the tactic of sending out every available man to look for a route. One of the parties found a feasible way via a pass which was later named for the lieutenant. This meant that the expedition would be able to complete the mule trail across the Olympics and take the pack train to Grays Harbor. Time was critical, however; the end of summer was but two weeks away and, with the advent of autumn, storms would likely rake the mountains.

The lieutenant called everyone together on September 10 and outlined what lay ahead. Within a day or two he would again divide the expedition and send out foot parties to complete the explorations, with the remaining men assigned to take the pack train down the Quinault. The next day the explorers prepared for the final trip through the mountains. Everything they did not intend to carry on their backs was made ready for transport to Fort Townsend via Hood Canal.

The men then moved across the grand divide and established Camp No. 15 on the Quinault side. They also completed the trail from O'Neil Pass down to the Quinault.

Two days later, O'Neil gave the men their final instructions. Nelson Linsley, one of the Oregon Alpine Club scientists, was to have charge of a party that would explore "the northern part of the range," excluding the district examined by O'Neil in 1885. Linsley's party would climb Mount Olympus and leave the copper box on its summit. Another party, headed by O'Neil, would accompany the pack train until it was sure of getting through, then explore the rivers southward. The balance of the men would escort the pack train to Grays Harbor. The various assignments were expected to take about a month; when they were completed, the explorers would return to Vancouver Barracks. Meanwhile, the pack train would link up with a group of civilians representing the Hoquiam Board of Trade which was building a path from Grays Harbor to assist the expedition.

On these last foot missions, each man was expected to carry 25 pounds of flour, 2 pounds of yeast powder, 1 pound of salt, a half pound of tea, 4 pounds of sugar, from 6 to 8 pounds of bacon, 2 pounds of smoked meat and a half pound of chocolate. In addition, they packed axes, guns, ammunition, cooking utensils and a shelter half each. The packs averaged 60 pounds each, and the men quickly discovered they were loaded to the limit of their capabilities.

The Linsley party left Camp No. 15 on September 13 and descended the mule trail to the Quinault. After following the river several miles, the men climbed out of the valley and headed in a north- westerly direction toward Mount Olympus. About a week later they arrived at the base of the mountain. During this time they had had to climb up and down in order to cross the rivers and canyons that intervened. Before attempting to climb Olympus, they reconnoitered the peak and concluded from what they could observe that the southwestern side offered the most favorable terrain. The next day they started down the Queets in order to work around to the mountain's southwest side. Here, one of the men became separated from the others. Consequently, he traveled alone down the Queets to the ocean where he was befriended by the Indians, and then made his way to Grays Harbor. Meanwhile, the rest of the party climbed the southern flank of Olympus, and three men made the "summit climb," ascending what they took to be the peak. Although the copper box they left has never been found, the men apparently climbed one of the crags that make up the South Peak of Olympus.

According to his instructions, Linsley was supposed to split his party after climbing Olympus and explore the Hoh and Quillayute rivers. However, by this time the men were almost shoeless and their rations were running short. They concluded that the sooner they reached civilization the better, and so they followed the Queets, which afforded the most direct route to the ocean. They traveled the beach to Grays Harbor where they were reunited with their former company. They then awaited the appearance of Lieutenant O'Neil.

After Linsley's party left for Mount Olympus, the other men completed the mule trail to the point where the Grays Harbor people had agreed to meet the expedition. The pack train reached the forks of the Quinault on September 24. O'Neil now sent it, under charge of four men, to Vancouver Barracks via Lake Quinault and Grays Harbor. The lieutenant then turned his attention once again to exploration. Accompanied by several men, he set out to reconnoiter the Queets and Raft rivers. The men eventually arrived at the Indian agency at the mouth of the Quinault. Here, O'Neil learned to his disappointment that Linsley had not followed his assigned route upon leaving Mount Olympus.

The explorers were feted with a splendid banquet by the citizens of Hoquiam on October 4. Two days later the expedition disbanded. The civilians returned to their homes, and the soldiers proceeded to Vancouver Barracks.

The Oregon Alpine Club was well satisfied with the results of the expedition, although the costs had exceeded all expectations. On October 22 the club honored the explorers with a lavish banquet in Portland, Oregon.

Shortly after he returned to Vancouver Barracks, Lieutenant O'Neil began working on his official report of the exploration. On November 16 he submitted it to the Assistant Adjutant General, Department of the Columbia. The expedition had explored roughly the southern half of the Olympic Peninsula, an area more or less equally divided between lowlands and mountains. O'Neil wrote in some detail about the topography and streams as well as the natural resources, and he noted that timber was to be the great production for many years. Much of the district, however, was rough and precipitous, cut by deep canyons and gorges; O'Neil recommended that this country be set aside as a national park "where deer and elk could be saved."

On December 6, 1890, O'Neil gave a public lecture about the expedition in Portland. He concluded his presentation by again recommending that a national park be established.

Although the mountains had no geysers, they had, he felt, "every other requisite for a national park," and they were the last home of the elk.

Lieutenant O'Neil, who went on to become a brigadier general, lived to see his wish come true. On June 29, 1938, four weeks prior to his death, Congress created Olympic National Park, nearly a half century after he had proposed it.

Joseph P. O'Neil's place in the history of the Olympics is assured. Without doubt, he did more than anyone else to make the Olympics known, to sweep away the ignorance that prevailed regarding the country. His 1885 reconnaissance provided a preview of what the region was like; the 1890 expedition completed the task. The latter, in particular, did a great deal of work scouting, mapping, exploring and collecting scientific data and specimens. Perhaps its greatest accomplishment, however, was the building of a pack mule trail across the mountains. Although this trail was not the forerunner of a highway, it did become a major route of entry, and hikers today often relive the expedition's adventures as they follow the explorers' footsteps through the Olympics.

Sidebar: The Press Expedition

Because it was the first organized exploring party to cross the Olympics (the so-called "Watkinson Expedition" in 1878 was a private outing that crossed the edge of the mountains), the Press Expedition received much attention from the media, especially its sponsoring newspaper, the Seattle Press. The nineteenth century "hype" was heightened by reason of the fact that the party made the trek during the winter and spring months.

The Press Expedition was inspired by the call of Elisha P. Ferry, governor-elect of the new State of Washington, that someone unveil the mystery surrounding the Olympics. In order to steal a march on other would-be explorers, the Press Party entered the Olympics at the onset of winter but the men paid dearly for their audacity. From December 1889 until late May 1890, the explorers literally bullied their way through the wilderness, following the Elwha and Goldie rivers to Low Divide, then attacking the tangled rain forests of the Quinault valley. When the expedition started out, it consisted of six men, four dogs and two mules. Six months later, when the party reappeared, there were five men (one having called it quits early in the game), three dogs and no mules. The lost animals were the only casualties sustained. Although the Press Expedition received most of the glory, the thorough, detailed examination of the Olympics was accomplished shortly afterward, during the summer of 1890, by Lieutenant O'Neil's second expedition.

Robert L. Wood is author of several books on the Olympics, among them, Men, Mules, and Mountains: The O'Neil Expeditions.

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