

Mountain Recreation and Exploration

Information sheet B4

With the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1885, mountaineers from all over the world gained access to the Rocky and Selkirk Mountains for the first time. Because the mountains were largely unexplored and the peaks were unclimbed, these mountaineers were excited about the prospects of new discoveries. They instantly set out to make first ascents. However, some of these early climbers lacked experience, and one fell to his death in 1896.

Concern surrounding this first climbing death in the Rocky Mountains, led to the employment of expert climbing guides from Switzerland to assist climbers and tourists on potentially dangerous mountains. The Swiss Guides gained their skills through extensive training in the Swiss Alps. The Canadian Pacific Railway engaged Swiss guides at their mountain hotels to safely escort clients to surrounding mountain summits and ensure their safe return. The Swiss Guides with sound advice and amiable assistance, helped clients safely conquer mountain peaks.

Mountaineers decked out for climbing dressed very differently than we do today. The Swiss Guide shown in the photograph to the left, wore a tweed jacket, alpine hat, necktie, nailed boots and knickers with long woolen socks. Guides wore ropes around their shoulders for climbing, carried long ice axes and often smoked a pipe. Initially, women climbers wore skirts and even long coats while climbing but soon adopted more practical clothing.

Advanced mountaineers would take extended trips into the mountains. Their expeditions would require much preparation and gear. To carry all the food and equipment they needed, mountaineers would hire trail guides and packhorses for their journeys. Some of Harmon's famous Columbia Icefield Expedition photographs show pack trains crossing glaciers.