

Recall of the Wild

Phyllis Hart: A Guide for Us All By Polly Knowlton Cockett

It was the Stairs!

Phyllis Hart was 92 years old the last time she climbed the Calgary Tower in 2007. She went up only once, as her cardiologist had said, “Phyllis, don’t push it.” At first she thought the Calgary Tower had a spiral staircase, so she didn’t want to climb it because she didn’t want to hold anyone up. When she found out the stairs weren’t continuous, but had landings every 15 steps where she and several others could rest while those faster passed by, she started climbing it for the Alberta Wilderness Association’s annual Earth Day event. She was in her 70s or 80s then, and climbed it two times each year, and one year did it five times. It was a great way to keep her arthritis in check – 15 steps at a time. Meeting people in the stairwell during the climb became a joy too, especially as she became known as the oldest climber. She always was happy to say hello to fellow Tower climbers. As a former mountain climber, Phyllis was not daunted by such trifling heights as the Tower’s mere 802 steps.

It was Remembrance Day when I went to visit Phyllis for the conversation that led to this article. She was proudly wearing a red poppy and began talking about her own experiences during the war when she became a telegraph operator. After the war, the hotels in the Rockies reopened and in 1946 Phyllis went to Lake Louise as a telegraph agent for the Canadian Pacific Railway. It was there where she learned to climb with the Swiss Guides who also were hired by the CPR to take guests up the mountains.

Born in Stettler, Phyllis grew up nearby in Gadsby where her father ran a drug store and where she attended Grades 1-12. Then long walks were a routine part of life. She walked about a mile to school – twice a day – as she would go home for lunch. Then there were more walks after school to violin and piano lessons. Phyllis loved learning music when she was young and she continues to greatly



Phyllis Hart, September 1, 1997, at 82 ½ years young at the summit of Mt. Temple. Phyllis was thrilled to have Murray Toft as her guide that day. His patience and wonderful support helped make this an excellent day to enjoy wild Alberta.

PHOTO: M. TOFT

appreciate and enjoy it. For several years, Phyllis worked as a schoolteacher, first just outside of Cochrane, and then for a couple of years down at Milk River – lots of good walking there along the river! By then Phyllis used exercise to keep her developing arthritis at bay. But standing for long stretches of time bothered her when she was a teacher. So what could she do for a different job? During the war she went down to Medicine Hat and took the opportunity to become a teletype operator, as this technology was replacing the Morse code operators.

Later she became the first teletype operator in Lake Louise, where she had visited as a tourist but was completely unfamiliar with the mountains. Phyllis was very proactive about managing her chronic arthritis. For three years she walked daily along the lakeshore, gradually going a little further, and a little further. The Guides noticed her habitually walking by herself and invited her to join them. She wasn’t the least bit sure she could get up the mountains but one Sunday morning she was ready at 7 a.m., and up she went, ropes and everything, and down again – not even stiff. The Guides would ask her to go along with them again and again, exclaiming,

“Phyllis, you must be part Swiss!”

Phyllis attributes her lack of stiffness to her accommodations at Lake Louise. At first she was housed in the staff quarters with the hotel employees. But after a few years, the staff grew so large there was no longer room for her or the other CPR employees. So they put her up in the hotel on the 6th floor and she had strict instructions not to use the elevator – only hotel guests had that privilege! So she used the stairway, up and down and up and down, developing the strong thighs that would eventually take her up myriad mountains with the Swiss Guides.

Can you come out tomorrow, Phil?

Phyllis enjoyed these outings very much indeed. The Guides would drop by the telegraph office, asking her to go along for the next day’s climb. Sometimes they were joined by three or four other climbers; sometimes just Phyllis went, especially if it was a harder hike, as every person on a rope meant another half hour to the top. Usually they made it to the top, but they always went down in plenty of time before a storm struck – whether they had summited or not. Phyllis had complete confidence



Phyllis Hart, an inspiration and role model for so many, at her home, November 2010 at 95 years.

PHOTO: K. MIHALCHEON

in the Guides when it came to safety. "They're the most valuable insurance that anyone could have."

Often they'd get up at 4:30 a.m., but were always back before 4:00 p.m. with just enough time for Phyllis to bathe and change and get to the telegraph office in time for her afternoon shift which ended at midnight. She and her fellow workers cooperated on the shift work whenever Phyllis was out on the mountains. She loved the naturalness of the mountains and wilderness areas and encouraged others to help keep it that way. Phyllis taught herself the names of the native plants and kept a book at work. She became known for her expertise and when guests came in, wondering what plants they had seen, they were directed to "that girl at the telegraph office."

Lake O'Hara was one of Phyllis' favourite areas for hiking. The paths were kept in good order and were always good to go. "There's such lovely scenery there and good climbing. We used to hike the 7.5 miles in and out or go in over Abbot Pass from Lake Louise." Over the years, they got a van to take them in and bring them out, but they still had to walk the 7.5 miles. Then they had to hitchhike on the #1 Highway to Lake Louise in time for supper.

The last time Phyllis was at the top of Mount Temple was at the age of 82, with Murray Toft as her guide. They knew they had to start down by 2:30 p.m. in order to get back before dark. At 11,000' by noon they pressed on, and by 1:45 they were finally standing on the top. There was a cold wind blowing as Phyllis looked around at all the mountains, naming every one of them, and reciting which Guide she had gone to each with. Some other climbers, huddled nearby on the glacier, heard Phyllis talking, and were most impressed that she knew these famous Guides – revered names they had only read in books. One of the best parts of Phyllis' life was when she was able to climb with the Swiss Guides. "They're the best!" And so, I would suggest, is she. ▲

Gear

Snowshoeing: Walking in a Winter Wonderland.

By Jennifer Douglas

Once you've given it a go, it's really easy to see why snowshoeing is a fast growing sport in North America. If you've yet to try it out I strongly encourage you to do so as soon as possible – it's such fun! I no longer dread the end of the hiking season, but look forward to the snow flying. There is nothing quite so magical as a winter woodland walk or so breathtakingly beautiful as the snow-covered Rocky Mountains glittering in the sunlight.

Getting started

The best thing about snowshoeing is that you don't need training courses to learn how to do it. If you can walk, you can strap on a pair of snowshoes and

away you go. Obviously, you need a pair of snowshoes. The price range for a good pair is between \$150 and \$300. Look for shoes that have a binding you can do up with mitts on, that have good traction and that are the right size for you. Store staff should be able to help you with this.

Unless you plan to do lots of steep, hilly walks, basic ones are adequate for most people. If you want to tackle steep hills look for shoes with a heel bar. This will enable you to go up more easily, comfortably and quickly. They cost a bit more, but it's well worth it.

If you'd like to try before you buy you can rent them at either the Calgary or Edmonton branches of Mountain Equipment Co-op (403-269-2420 for the Calgary store; 780-488-6614 for Edmonton), or from the University of Calgary outdoor program (403-220-5038). A list of outdoor rental possibilities in Banff, Canmore, Jasper and Kananaskis may be found at http://www.out-there.com/canada_outdoor_gear_rentals.htm#Alberta



If you stop hiking in the winter, you miss out on months of beautiful wilderness opportunities. Get a pair of snowshoes, and get out there!

PHOTO: N. DOUGLAS