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*Albert Ellingwood, Barton Hoag, and Eleanor Davis on summit of Pyramid Peak in Colorado, 1919.
Courtesy of Hoag Family Collection, American Alpine Club Library.*



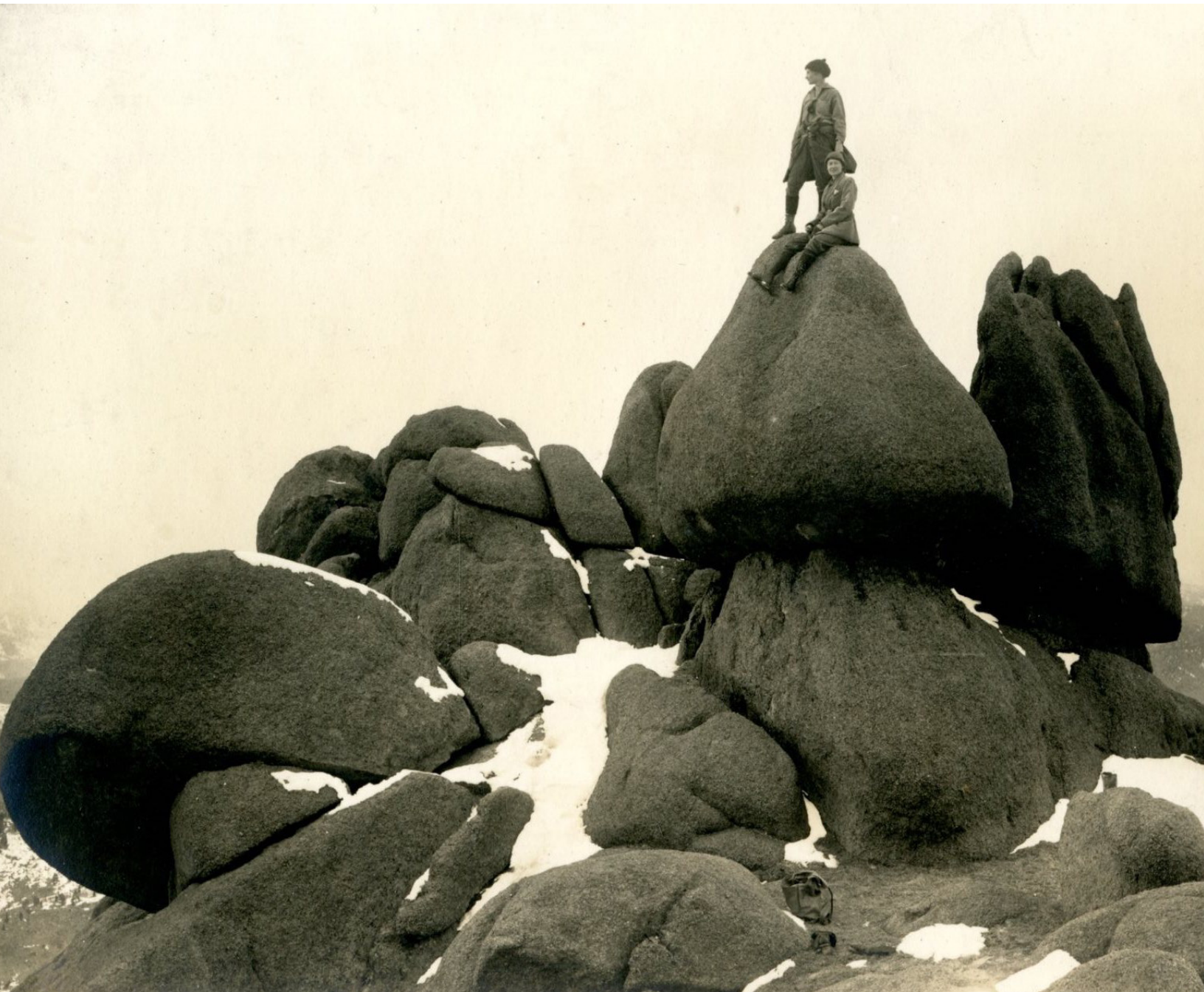
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THE HISTORIC FIRST ASCENT OF ELEANOR DAVIS

BY KIMBERLY GEIL, PHD



Eleanor Bartlett (standing) and Eleanor Davis on Giant Tooth Rocks, Sentinel Peak (part of Pikes Peak), 1921. Courtesy of Bartlett Collection, American Alpine Club Library.

On August 27, 1923, Eleanor Davis became the first recorded woman to stand atop the Grand Teton. One hundred years later, her groundbreaking climb continues to inspire.

There is controversy about the first party to summit the Grand Teton. Still, most concur that it was Billy Owen, Frank Petersen, John Shive, and Franklin Spalding on August 11, 1898.¹ It was a full 25 years before the next recorded climb of the Grand Teton. On August 25, 1923, three college students from Montana reached the summit.

These Montana climbers crossed paths with a party of eight mountaineers led by Albert Ellingwood, who were also planning to attempt the Grand Teton. Horace Albright, the superintendent of Yellowstone National Park, had invited the eight climbers. Albright wanted to attract more climbers and attention to the Teton peaks in hopes that the mountains would be protected. His wish came true in 1929 with the establishment of Grand Teton National Park.

Among this party was Eleanor Davis, a physical education instructor at Colorado College and vice president of the Colorado Mountain Club. She and Albert, a fellow professor in political science, were regular climbing partners.

Albert was considered one of the strongest climbers in the country, and Eleanor was an outstanding climber in her own right. The two had met at Colorado College in 1914 and started playing tennis and hiking together. Albert, freshly back from Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar, was impressed with Eleanor’s physical prowess and started teaching her the mountaineering techniques he’d learned in Europe. She was a natural, and by the time the invitation to climb in the Tetons arrived, Eleanor and Albert had been climbing together for nearly a decade. Eleanor climbed regularly with the Colorado Mountain Club. She and other women friends, such as Eleanor Bartlett, did expeditions on their own as well.

Copied from original records left on the summit of the Grand Teton

Grand Teton National Park

Peak Grand Teton

Date	Name and Address	Remarks
Aug. 11, '98	Wm. O. Owen, Cheyenne, Wyo.	Expedition sponsored by the Rocky Mountain Club.
	Rev. Franklin S. Spalding, Erie, Pa.	
	John Shive, Elk, Wyo.	
	Frank Petersen, Jackson, Wyo.	Built summit cairn.
Aug. 13, '98	Rev. Franklin S. Spalding, Erie, Pa.	
	John Shive, Elk, Wyo.	
	Frank Petersen, Jackson, Wyo.	
Aug. 25, '23	Quin A. Blackburn, Missoula, Mont.	
	David F. DeLap	" "
	Andy DePirro	" "
Aug. 27, '23	Eleanor Davis, Colorado Springs, Colo.	
	A. R. Ellingwood, Lake Forest, Ill.	
July 25, '24	Paul K. Petzoldt, Twin Falls, Idaho	
	Walter Hannon, Newton, Iowa	
Aug. 13, '24	Jack Crawford, Jackson, Wyo.	
	Essie Dewey, Victor, Idaho.	
	Gibb Scott, Moran, Wyo.	
	Fred Koerner, Jackson, Wyo.	
	Paul K. Petzoldt, Twin Falls, Idaho.	
Aug. 16, '24	Geraldine Lucas, Jackson, Wyo.	
	J. K. Powell,	" "
	Paul K. Petzoldt, Twin Falls, Idaho.	
	Jack Crawford, Jackson, Wyo.	
Aug. 17, '24	A. R. Ellingwood, Lake Forest, Ill.	
	Hermann Buhl, Denver, Colo.	
	Carl A. Blaurack, Denver, Colo.	

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The typed summit register entry by Fritiof Fryxell showing Eleanor and Albert’s 1923 ascent of the Grand Teton. Courtesy of Paul Horton for the Teton Summit Registry.

Upon arrival in the Tetons, Eleanor, Albert, and another party member went to scout the terrain, which Eleanor described in a trip report for the Colorado Mountain Club’s *Trails and Timberline* publication as “straight up.” A higher elevation camp would be required, and they determined that Garnet Canyon, then called Bradley Canon² would be the best location.

Eleanor wrote that “there weren’t any trails other than those made by the elk.” When they finally reached camp, they thought enviously of the day “when a good trail will make this wonderfully beautiful canon more accessible to campers.”³ Anyone who has hiked up Garnet Canyon recently knows that the area is now far more accessible than Eleanor could have imagined in her wildest dreams.

Two days after the Montana State students had climbed the Grand Teton, on August 27, 1923, the Ellingwood/Davis party headed up from their high camp. They went first to the West Summit of the Grand to scout the route and view the Enclosure: a ring of slabs sacred to and created by Indigenous people. Back at the Upper Saddle, all the others decided not to climb for various reasons, except for Eleanor and Albert.

And climb they did, through what they called the “Wriggle,” a narrow ledge in the cliff with good handholds but extreme exposure. Entering into a series of chimneys above, Albert wrote in his journal that it was a “rather long stretch to the first good holds, so I gave El a shoulder ... she anchored me up.”⁴ This entry and others show that on occasion Eleanor climbed first and was not always following Albert’s lead. Nor was Eleanor being guided by Albert; she was a full partner in the endeavor.

Eleanor and Albert had to detour around considerable snow and ice in the chimneys. Eventually, they scrambled up the last rock ledge to the summit. They were the third party to stand on top and the fourth recorded ascent of the peak, as Billy Owen’s party had climbed the peak twice. Eleanor Davis had just made history as the first woman to climb the Grand Teton.

On the summit block, they saw the scratched names and initials of the parties before them but did not feel the need to leave a permanent marker themselves.

Instead, they signed their names to a register they had brought, leaving it in a Colgate shaving soap tin. They headed down, stopping for a late lunch at the Upper Saddle and reaching their camp in time to make dinner.⁵

To cap off their visit to the Tetons, two days later, on August 29, 1923, Eleanor and Albert completed the first recorded ascent of the South Teton, and Albert did the first ascent of the Middle Teton via what is now the Ellingwood Couloir. Eleanor and the others would have joined him, but a storm came in.

After her climb of the Grand Teton, the American Alpine Club (AAC) invited Eleanor to become a member. This was an unusual invitation as the AAC was almost entirely men. Climbing itself was a very male-dominated sport and large swaths of society did not approve of women pursuing such activities. If the women were to be so bold, they must be dressed appropriately – for societal norms, if not practicality.

When Eleanor was a student, she and a friend planned a multiday hike in the Tarryall Peaks near Colorado Springs. A ranger told them the people in the ranches were friendly and would let them stay. But when they knocked on the door of the first ranch they came to, their appearance scandalized the woman who answered. She said that not only would she refuse to take in women dressed like men, but she was on a party line and would warn all the other ranches of the area about some women dressed in knickerbockers. In the end, Eleanor and her friend slept in a haystack and hiked out the next day. Despite experiences such as this and the fact that other women hikers and climbers of the era often climbed in skirts, Eleanor preferred the much more practical trousers worn by men.⁶

Eleanor encouraged other women to climb, both through the Colorado Mountain Club and at Colorado College, where she started a girls’ climbing team. The highlight for the team every year was a climb of Pikes Peak.⁷

In her early nineties, Eleanor was still walking and riding an exercise bicycle daily: “She can chalk up mileage to put youngsters to shame.”⁸

She was also sleeping outdoors on her patio all summer long. It was a habit she’d picked up in her climbing days when they had the most primitive of gear and usually just strung a tarp between two trees. She only remembered having a tent once on their climbing adventures.

The Tetons

BY ELEANOR S. DAVIS

FOR several years the Tetons have been calling to Albert Ellingwood to come up from Colorado and see what Wyoming had to offer in the way of inaccessible peaks. So it is not surprising that he lent an attentive ear to the Superintendent of the Yellowstone National Park, when he encouraged the assembling of a party to attempt the climb of the Grand Teton last summer.

From far distant places and by different routes, the group chosen gathered at a campsite on Cottonwood Creek, south of Jenny’s Lake in the Jackson Hole country and at the foot of the Grand Teton itself.

At Moran we had secured provisions for two weeks and added a capacious Dutch oven to our equipment. But it was our great good luck to find a temporary bakery set up only a half mile from our camp, which simplified our culinary problem.

When camp was in shape and a scouting trip had been made to get the lay of the land (which is straight up) we gathered around our camp fire to hear read aloud the accounts of the previous climbs of the Grand Teton; that of Langford from the west side, and Owen from the east. As we listened a feeling of awe and veneration grew in us for this great landmark peak, which had called forth the best efforts of the men who had made up those parties.



It was evident that a higher camp must be made, and if we were not to lose elevation on the climb, it must be in Bradley Canon. There are no trails other than those made by elk, and the woods are enchanting. It would be a delight to lose oneself in them and we very nearly did. Having reached the canon some distance above Bradley Lake, it was our task to work upstream to the highest campsite in the timber. It was a long pull with our heavy packs and we were glad to deposit them at last. We spoke a bit enviously of that day, surely not far distant, when a good trail will make this wonderfully beautiful canon more accessible to campers.

It was exhilarating to be at last on the eve of the climb and in the heart of these mountains whose high places were calling us. The Middle Teton stands at the head of the canon, a long black fault marking it from top to bottom. Though cut off from our view by the steep canon walls, we knew that the Grand Teton was above us on the right and the South Peak on the left. A picture gives no adequate idea of the charm of that high, but sheltered camp. When you travel that way you will see the black of our camp-fire smoke on the big rock near the rushing stream and know it for yourself.

The next morning, the twenty-seventh of August, we made an early start, and

An article called “The Tetons” written by Eleanor Davis for *Trail & Timberline*, August 1924. Courtesy of American Alpine Club Library.

Robert Ormes, who climbed with her more than once, described her as “a little wren of a type, very tough and strong and not disturbed by altitude and a damn good climber and nervy.”⁹

Eleanor wasn’t a tall woman, only about 5’2” – which explains why Albert gave her a shoulder on their climb of the Grand Teton – but she was strong and fast.

Eleanor once said that she was never scared while climbing, as she always “had a good head,” nor was she bothered by heights.¹⁰ Her strongly developed kinesthetic sense served her well both in the mountains and in her career in physical education. She died at the age of 107.¹¹

Later climbers noted her as outstanding in the sport. Fred Beckey said that Albert and Eleanor were “likely the most experienced American climbers of this era” in his book *100 Favorite North American Climbs*. In *Fifty Classic Climbs of North America*, Allen Steck and Steve Roper wrote “Eleanor Davis was undoubtedly the most experienced American female climber.”

Nevertheless, her accomplishments have mostly gone unnoticed. Albert has multiple peaks and routes named after him, but Eleanor has none. While there have been calls for this to be rectified, so far, no peaks have been named in her honor. Maybe someday!

About Kimberly Geil

Kimberly Geil, PhD, lives seasonally in Grand Teton National Park where she works in the office of Exum Mountain Guides, the third generation of her family to work for the climbing school. She is the Exum historian, preserving the stories of guides and clients through extensive oral interviews, a future book about early Exum history, and the online Exum History Project, which can be found at ExumHistory.com.

References

[1] Jackson, Reynold G. “Chapter 16: Park of the Matterhorns,” Grand Teton Historic Resource Study, https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online_books/grte2/hrs16a.htm Accessed 20 August 2023.

[2] Canon is an archaic spelling of canyon.

[3] Davis, Eleanor S. “The Tetons,” *Trail & Timberline*, August 1924, pp. 9-10. American Alpine Club Library.

[4] Ellingwood, Albert. Transcribed diary, entry from Aug 27, 1923, p. 4, Albert Ellingwood Collection, American Alpine Club Library.



“Manless” Ascent of the Grand

It was not uncommon for people to assume that a woman climbing in the early 20th century was being hauled up by the men. In 1939, the first “manless” ascent of the Grand Teton, led by local Margaret Smith Craighead with Margaret Bedell, Ann Sharples, and Mary Whittemore, left early to ensure they were the first party to reach the summit . That way, no one could accuse them of having needed a man’s help.¹

[1] Loomis, Molly. “Women on the Tetons.” *Jackson Hole Magazine*, October 24, 2015.

[5] Ibid, p. 5, Albert Ellingwood Collection, American Alpine Club Library.

[6] Robertson, Janet. *The Magnificent Mountain Women: Adventures in the Colorado Rockies*. University of Nebraska Press, 2003, p. 35.

[7] DuVal, Linda. “Nonagenerian Gets Back to Country,” *Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph*, August 22, 1978.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Robertson, Janet. *The Magnificent Mountain Women: Adventures in the Colorado Rockies*. University of Nebraska Press, 2003, p. 32.

[10] Ibid, p. 32.

[11] *Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph*, Eleanor Davis Ehrman obituary, April 6, 1993.



The mist makes Dave Green and Margaret Smith [Craghead] look like ghosts in the snow couloir above the snowfield on Mt. Helen, Wind River Range, 1941. Courtesy of Frank Cavenagh Collection, American Alpine Club Library.