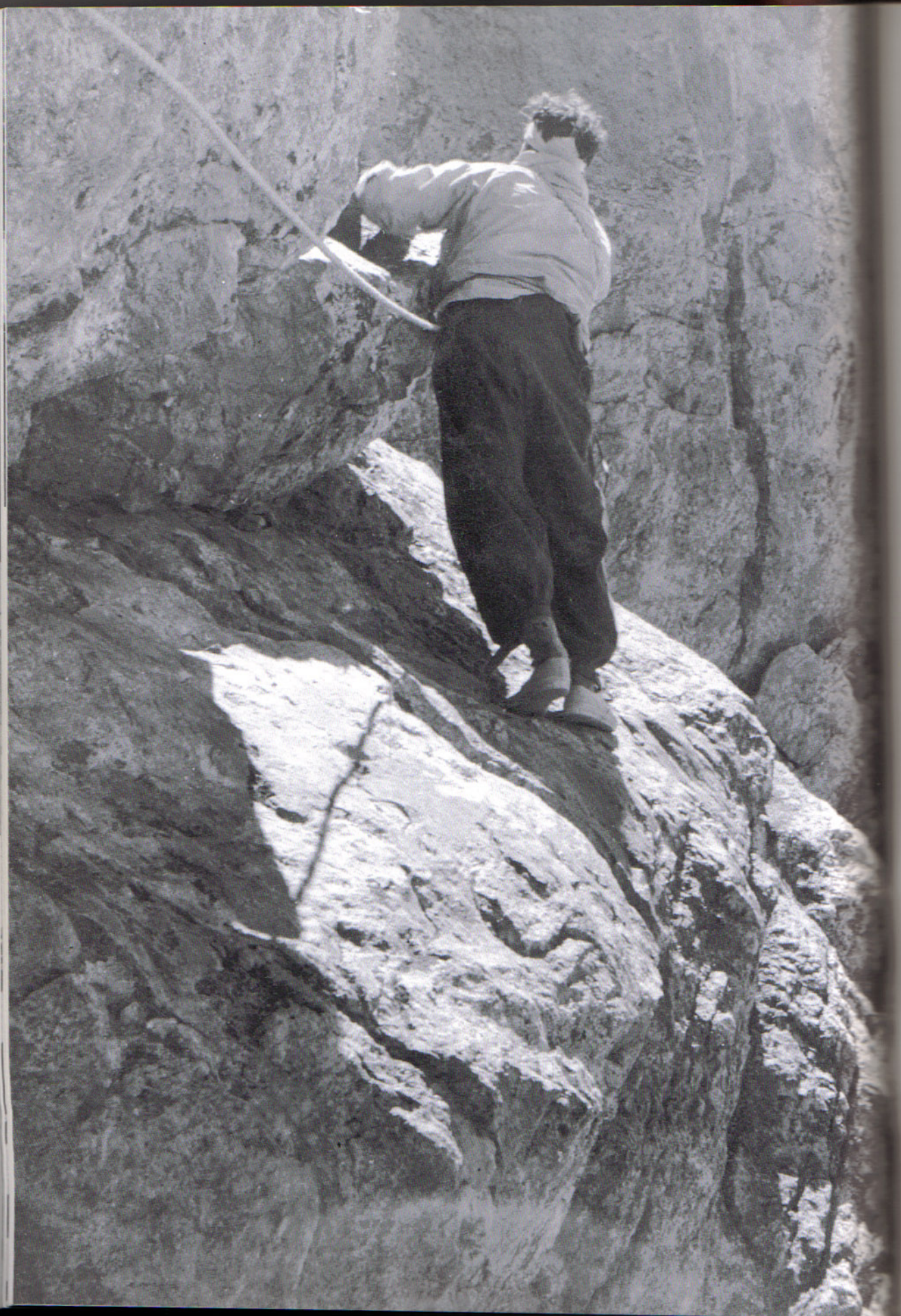

CHAPTER 7

# Playing Immortal

As the best of North America's climbers grew more comfortable on steep terrain, they began to tackle routes of sustained and impressive verticality—some even compared to the extreme routes of Europe. Much of the progress in this pre-World War II period can be traced to the training that Americans started to do in earnest on small, accessible crags. The familiarity with steep ground grew to the point that North Americans began to aim for world-class objectives, most notably Mt. Waddington, new facets on the Grand Teton and ultimately K2.

Henry Hall aptly referred to Mt. Waddington as "surely one of the most remarkable culminating points of any mountain range in the world." Here was a fang as big and steep as the Grand Teton, yet usually pasted with rime and ice. By the mid-1930s, the challenge of its summit tower attracted many of North America's finest climbers.

The 1934 season held a lot of promise for climbing Waddington, as, in addition to the Munday-Hall-Fuhrer attempt (see Chapter 6), three other teams came to the mountain. A team from Winnipeg punched through an epic approach and became the first to make their way up the Tiedemann Glacier. They started up the snow-covered rock on the north face of Waddington's summit tower, but were turned back by bad weather and difficult climbing. A team from the British Columbia Mountain Club came, hoping that their extensive practice on steep crags and using pitons would make the difference. Neal Carter and Alec Dalgleish headed this team—Dalgleish, at 27, was the club's rock wizard.

They decided to follow the advice of the Mundays and Hall and probe the potentially drier rock abutments on Waddington's true south face, above the Corridor Glacier. A few hundred feet up, Dalgleish led out of a couloir, placed a piton, and came to an impasse. He decided to retreat but then fell. The piton held, but the fall swung him into a wall, and then the rope broke over an edge. He fell all the way down the couloir, and his mates found him dead at the base. The loss of their rising star stunned the Vancouver climbing community, and his mentor, Tom Fyles, virtually never climbed again.

The Rock Climbing Section of the Sierra Club had by now gained confidence that their climbing and belaying skills could get them up almost any piece of steep rock. Some of their best, including Jules Eichorn,

Jack Durrance leading on the Grand Teton's *Exum Ridge*. PHOTO BY HANK COULTER, COURTESY MARGARET COULTER.

Elizabeth Woolsey, Bill House, Alan Willcox and Fritz Wiessner in New England before their trip to Mt. Waddington. PHOTO COURTESY ANDY WIESSNER.

David Brower and Bestor Robinson, tried the southwest face of Waddington in 1935, and a team including Robinson, Dick Leonard and Raffi Bedayan came in '36. Both parties focused on the face's rocky central buttresses, but these were too steep and tall to climb in a day, and the sustained difficulty made it impractical to carry bivouac equipment. Neither party succeeded. By its southern faces, Waddington was a problem as severe as any yet solved in the Alps, but raked by heavier and more frequent storms. Moreover, to get to Waddington required an expeditionary approach march with few or no porters, and of course the peak lay far beyond any rescue help.

### Fritz Wiessner

Three climbers from the East Coast, Elizabeth Woolsey, Bill House and Alan Willcox, felt that if anyone could succeed on Waddington it would be their friend Fritz Wiessner. Wiessner had emigrated from Germany in 1929, and he climbed the New England crags with grace and power the likes of which America had never seen. His father had introduced him to climbing in Austria at a tender age, and Fritz grew up as a pioneer in one of the world's most severe climbing arenas, the sandstone and limestone towers of Saxony. There, climbers disdained pitons completely, and, to a degree unseen elsewhere, Wiessner helped advance the ethic that a climber must depend on free climbing

Fritz Wiessner leading on the summit tower of Mt. Waddington. PHOTO BY BILL HOUSE, COURTESY ANDY WIESSNER.

the features of the rock. In the early 1920s he and his peers climbed barefoot and pitonless on ground that now is rated 5.9 and harder, protecting 100-foot pitches with only a bolt or two and an occasional wedged knot of cord. In 1920, Wiessner proved himself one of the world's best rock mountaineers by putting up long, steep Dolomite routes on the Fleischbank and the Forchetta. When he showed up at the crags in New England, he led routes that the locals couldn't imagine, much less repeat.

Among Wiessner's early partners in America, only Yale Forestry graduate Bill House had the iron nerve and sharp determination that approached the German climber's. House had experience in Switzerland as well. As the 1936 season approached, Wiessner was in Europe preparing to try the first ascent of the vaunted Walker Spur of the Grandes Jorasses. When

THE CONQUERORS OF MOUNT MYSTERY: MR. FRITZ WIESSNER (RIGHT), THE LEADER, AND MR. WILLIAM P. HOUSE, WHO SUCCESSFULLY ASCENDED THE SOUTH PEAK, WHERE THE CLIMB WAS SO DIFFICULT THAT ONLY TWO COULD ATTACK IT AT A TIME.

Mr. Fritz Wiessner, who took the lead in this historic ascent, is a German-American chemist, of New York. He is thirty-six and has twenty years of climbing experience. He was a member of the German-American Nanga-Parbat Expedition in 1932. Mr. William P. House, of Pittsburgh, is also a well-known climber. He is a student at Yale University, and is twenty-three.

Bill House and Fritz Wiessner, down after their first ascent of Mt. Waddington. PHOTO APPEARED IN THE *LONDON DAILY NEWS*, COURTESY ANDY WIESSNER.

Willcox and Woolsey telegrammed and promised he would not regret a trip to Waddington, House's partnership won him over and Wiessner took a ship back to America.

When the foursome arrived below the southwest face of Waddington, Wiessner and House first tried to climb couloirs that the Sierrans had figured were too exposed to rockfall. They headed up the prominent couloir west of the summit, but steep rock glazed with ice forced them down—this was the 16th failed attempt on the peak.

On July 21, Wiessner and House tried a different route, leaving their high camp at 2:45 a.m. on a moonless night. This time they started up a couloir east of the summit. Near dawn, Wiessner dispatched a short pitch of steep ice by chopping steps and holds. Then the pair climbed a rising traverse leftward across hanging snowfields to reach steep rock within a few hundred feet of the top. Wiessner donned rope-soled rock shoes, and, as he always insisted, held on to the lead. As the difficulty was near his limits, he hammered in pitons regularly. House, burdened with the crampons, axes and extra boots, often needed help from the rope above. Their route led into a steep chimney,