

A CENTURY OF
ANTICS, EPICS, & ESCAPADES:

THE VARSITY OUTDOOR CLUB 1917-2017





Discovery in the summer mountains

Whenever the mountains were free of snow and ice (and sometimes when they weren't), VOCers enthusiastically explored the mountains in southern BC on foot, from the local mountains to the Caribos, the southern Selkirks, the Purcells, and the Rocky Mountains. Near Vancouver, the Lions were a favourite destination in the early years of the decade. In 1950 alone, three trips were made to the Lions – the third trip to retrieve a camera lost on the second trip some three weeks earlier. Also in 1950, Roy Hooley, Jim Kilburn, and Ian Kirk completed a first ascent of Mt. Cheakamus; two months later that same summer, Roy joined Al Hall, Flemming McConnell, and Bill Smitheringale for an ascent of Mt. Mamquam via a new route. Later in the decade, summits such as Cheam Peak, Crown Mountain, and Sky Pilot were increasingly common. Trips across the border to the US were also popular, including to Mt. Rainier, Mt. Baker, and Mt. Shuksan.

Meanwhile, in the city, VOCers established a Summer Rock School in the North Vancouver Quarry to introduce new members to climbing skills. Members practiced “*rappelling, finger laybacks, pressure holds, belaying, tying knots, and trying to climb an overhang that we had seen John Dudra of the ACC climb in a film produced by CBC Television.*”



Top left: At the Garibaldi train station.
L to R: John Riveit, Vera Engles, Dawn Thomson, Shirley Lockhart, Mary Lett, Al Hall, Norm Pickes. Garibaldi Spring Camp, 1950. VOC Archives. Photo by Ron Leslie.

Bottom left: Leaving civilisation, Garibaldi Spring Camp, 1950. VOC Archives. Photo by Ron Leslie.

Then as now, VOCers struggled to provide transportation for everyone who wanted to come on such trips: in June 1950 a water taxi booked for eight people to Brunswick Mountain found 25 people waiting on the dock. But as car ownership became increasingly common among club members, these difficulties were somewhat alleviated. Highway 99 was extended up Howe Sound to Britannia Beach and then to Squamish in the late 1950s, and the VOC gained quick, convenient access to mountains that had previously been accessible only by water or rail. For larger trips, it was common for the club to charter a bus as well as to organize carpools.

Garibaldi Park was a popular destination for VOCers in both spring and fall. The park was much more remote in the 1950s than it is today, and access was difficult. To reach the park in the first half of the decade, VOCers took a Union steamship from

Vancouver to Squamish; from here, they had two options. To access the Garibaldi N  v   Traverse and the Diamond Head region, they caught a ride from Ottar Brandvold, the proprietor of the Diamond Head Lodge, in a Jeep, school bus, or snow cat on a road up to Elfin Lakes. To reach Rubble Creek and the Garibaldi Lake region, VOCers boarded a Pacific Great Eastern (PGE) train from Squamish to the now-decommissioned Garibaldi Station, by the Cheakamus River, and then continued on foot up the Barrier. Access was simplified in August 1956 when the PGE extended the rail line from Squamish to North Vancouver, connecting VOCers to Garibaldi Station without need for a boat.

In addition to mountaineering endeavors like crossing the Garibaldi N  v   in summer or climbing Mt. Garibaldi or the Black Tusk, VOCers in Garibaldi Park never forgot to have fun!



L to R: Abe, Pat Duffy, and Larry Kennedy repairing the busted motor (replacing the tappet springs) while exiting off Mt. Assiniboine, west side of Spray Lake, Labour Day trip 1954. Pat Duffy collection.



On the last day of a trip to the park in September 1957, Stu Fall and Karl Ricker “*began the day with a water fight, which eventually included everybody, standing knee deep in the lake, hurling buckets of water at each other with complete absence of vision. Some people ended up in the lake itself with the verdict being: Brrr! Nearly everybody took a sprint up the Tusk to dry out.*”

Left: The troops in front of Paddy's Palace, the Garibaldi Lodge. Garibaldi Ski trip, May 1956. VOC Archives.

CHAPTER SIX: 1980s





Two Huts for the Price of Three

Huts were a highlight of the 1980s, made possible by the compensation the VOC eventually received for the sale of the Whistler Cabin. This was the decade of the Brew Hut saga, a drawn-out contest between a mountain hut and the incredibly deep alpine snowpack, as well as the construction of Harrison Hut further north. VOCers in the 1980s were also heavily involved in the production of new skiing, climbing, and hiking guidebooks for the Coast Mountains, one of which was produced entirely in-house by the club. At the same time, VOCers pioneered major icefield traverses and established a significant number of new alpine climbing routes in the Coast Mountains and North Cascades. There were potlucks and parties in Vancouver, while at the peaks and crags near the city, traditional club trips introduced new members to the joys of the outdoors. Life in the VOC continued at its best.

January 1980: ringing in the new decade at McGillivray Pass

The days that followed the last Christmas of the 1970s were devoted to a prolonged stay at the McGillivray Pass Cabin, an annual excursion that was becoming an integral VOC tradition. In the years to come the cabin saw more than its share of full turkey dinners, and soaking wet – but high spirited – VOCers.

The McGillivray trip that began on a cloudy day late in December 1979 was an “*energetic, action-packed extravaganza filled with surprises and sudden twists*” that left its participants “*bewildered and unsettled or, at least, amused.*” The trip’s first big twist was a small stray rock, which pierced a car’s gas tank on the long drive into Bralorne via the Fraser Canyon and Lillooet. The gushing gas leak stranded the car’s passengers overnight on the steep shores of

Carpenter Lake. A tow truck, repair shop, and hitchhiking experiment resulted, and this delayed the group’s departure from the trailhead to 2 pm the next day. Not an ideal start time during the shortest of midwinter days – especially not while carrying oodles of produce and a turkey.

Darkness fell, and David Robertson settled into a numb and indifferent rhythm of slogging, “*plowing through the rocky streams that slithered across the trail at regular intervals without bothering to remove my skis.*” As the crew plodded along in the night, a sudden scream shattered the silence: “*The sign! We’re only halfway there!*” To poor David, these words were a “*knife, stabbing deep, and killing the last flickering hopes within.*” In the end they bivouacked just past the sign, settled for a dinner of hot chocolate and crackers, and left the rest of the journey for the morning.

Left: Harrison Hut construction in September 1983. Photo by Jay Page.

The Tantalus Traverse, ever beckoning from across the valley as VOCers drive the highway from Squamish to Whistler, is a popular summer objective for intrepid club members. Since the trailhead for the south end of the traverse is on the wrong side of the Squamish River, VOCers are always searching for a new way to cross, either by boat or on an airy pair of cables that span the river. In 2016, Matteo Agnoloni and Kevin Burton discovered yet another bad method for the Tyrolean crossing:

“SCHWWAACKK! All of a sudden, both of the cable car wires were vibrating violently. I looked up to see Kevin dangling upside down below both cables. [...] He had almost managed to reach for the upper cable and pull himself back up, but the weight of his overnight pack with 4+ days’ worth of food was weighing him down too much. [...] Two people in a canoe came down the river. I cannot even begin to describe the look on their faces when they saw Kevin dangling upside down. [...] Somehow, by the grace of all that is good, Kevin managed to sling a piece of his pack and clip it to the upper cable. He was free. [...] I looked at my watch. Kevin had been dangling upside down for at least 30 minutes. He gathered his composure and completed the crossing at pretty much exactly the three hour mark.” [VOCJ59, p. 19]

Top: Kevin Burton traversing an exposed ridge en route to Tantalus and Dione, July 2016. Photo by Matteo Agnoloni.

Bottom: A VOC rope team climbs Mt. Baker’s Roman Wall at sunrise, September 2014. Photo by Matt Kennedy.



The Veenstra Traverse

The first trip to be advertised as a “Veenstra Traverse” was a traverse of Powder Mountain in 2010, although one could argue that the original was in 2007, after my second year in the VOC. The first idea was to just climb Mt. Price via the regular route, as a beginner-friendly trip. Scott Nelson suggested we traverse in from Brohm Ridge, to make it more interesting, and it was more interesting.

It developed into a “moderate-friendly” trip where Line (now my wife) and I would lead annual hiking traverses around the Coast Mountains. The general idea was to introduce people to fast-and-light off-trail travel by pulling off a somewhat-but-not-too-difficult traverse in a weekend. Generally, the traverses were “non-standard,” in that I’d just pick two trailheads joined by alpine terrain, and figure things out from there. I had never done any of the trips ahead of time, with the exception of two that I’d (sort of) done as ski trips, although I (of course?) spent a lot of time agonising about the details and scrapped a few ideas when I wasn’t sure they would “go.”

I think it became a tradition, continuing to the latest Owl-Tenquille traverse in 2016, although I’m not sure how long you need to do something before it becomes one. Some of the names I came up with “stuck,” and I now hear other people refer to the route by that name, which I think is fun. Sometimes it was difficult to predict, from the distance / elevation alone, how hard the trip would be (or how hard the participants would be, which can be variable with up to 33 participants). Probably the hardest one was the 2008 circumnavigation of Garibaldi Lake (41 km, 3200 m elevation gain), yet we finished well before dark. This was not always the case – the 2010 traverse of Powder Mountain featured an 18 hour day on Sunday.



Top: VOCers scrambling up Mt Barbour, on the Owl-Tenquille Veenstra Traverse, August 2016. Photo by Geneviève Savard.

Right: Bootpacking up above camp on Sunday morning. Valentine Gates Veenstra Traverse, July 2011.

Photo by Andrew Cavers.

Bottom: Wet bushwack on the Zum Peak Fiasco Traverse, July 2015. Photo by Christian Veenstra.



Written by Christian Veenstra



Welcome to the Varsity Outdoor Club! Since 1917, the lively members of this student-led organisation have explored the wild places of Southwest British Columbia and beyond for skiing, climbing, hiking, and more whimsical outdoor pursuits. Along the way, the club and its members became major contributors to local and international outdoor communities, led ambitious expeditions, ascended countless unclimbed peaks, pioneered classic ski traverses, and built a dozen alpine huts in the Sea to Sky region.

To celebrate our centennial anniversary, we bring you “*A Century of Antics, Epics & Escapades: The Varsity Outdoor Club 1917-2017*” – a book about our beloved club and its quirky traditions which have endured a century, and thrive to this day. Between these covers, you will find captivating tales of adventure from our archives and beautifully restored photographs from the club’s rich history. Immerse yourself in great journeys of exploration, follow the paths of first ascents, encounter songs and poems inspired by wild times in wild places, and laugh at club trips which didn’t turn out quite as planned. Come explore with us!

\$60.00

Front cover: Looking back upon Vancouver and the Georgia Strait while skiing the Howe Sound Crest Trail, January 2017. Photo by Caroline Jung.

Back Cover: Anders Ourom cleaning the first pitch of University Wall on the 10th anniversary of the first ascent. 1976. Photo by Jay Page.

