



Aerial view of the northeast side of Hilgard Peak and the headwaters of the north branch of Hilgard Creek.

HILGARD PEAK

[11,316 feet]

The highest peak in the Madison Range is also the highest peak in Montana outside the Beartooth Range. Its position within seven miles of the southern tip of the Madisons demonstrates the intensity of normal faulting there. Concurrent to uplift, alpine glaciers vigorously scoured all aspects of the southern range leaving Hilgard Peak as a sharp horn at the heads of Papoose Creek, Hilgard Creek, and the middle fork of Squaw Creek. Although these Pleistocene glaciers have melted entirely from Hilgard's flanks, fantastic moraines show a once active past.



Haphazard moraines extend from the base of Hilgard Peak for over a mile down the north branch of Hilgard Creek south fork to tree line.

Hilgard Peak was probably named either by Ferdinand Hayden or Allen D. Wilson for geologist Professor E. W. Hilgard, who worked with the U.S.G.S. in the mid-to-late 1800s. Wilson used this prominent peak as a triangulation station during his primary triangulation for the Hayden Survey in 1877 and 1878, but did not attempt an ascent. Surveyors of the 1880s including John Renshawe, Edward Douglas, and Frank Tweedy also sighted on Hilgard Peak, but did not make the ascent. The first published map to contain the name, other than Wilson and Douglas' triangulation maps, was the 1923 Gallatin National Forest map.

Not until Memorial Day of 1948 did Dave Wessel ski alone up Hilgard Creek south fork to make the first ascent of the peak via its southeast side from Lake Eglise. Wessel made this round trip in one day! Wessel returned in 1955 to make the second ascent with fellow Montana climbing pioneer Ed Anacker, and again in 1962 and 1973. On July 14, 1956, Anacker came back with Bob Witters and Fred Cartan for an ascent of the east ridge from Avalanche Lake. After resting on the main summit, Witters and Anacker were intrigued by the sheerness of Hilgard's north peak, which is slightly lower and separated from the main peak by a sharp notch. Leaving Cartan behind, they scrambled down into the notch and studied the meager route possibilities. Witters later wrote of his effort to reach the top on the east side of the summit tower:

I spied a jam crack that looked as if it would "go," if we could just get to it. I managed to reach a horizontal down-sloping ledge less than two feet wide, the wall at the back rising vertically, but bending outward a little below my shoulders. This forced my head forward, thus requiring me to look downward – down, down, down. The exposure was really breathtaking. I slowly inched myself along in this awkward position, and about half way along the ledge something just above me on the rock wall knocked my hat off. The sight of the hat sailing off into oblivion had a profound effect on me. I believe the effect was greater after the ordeal was over than as it was happening. Even this many years later, occasionally in bed I remember that scene and break out into a cold sweat.

Noticing Witters' uneasiness, Anacker found an easier route around the west side and met Witters on the top to make the first ascent of the north peak. Witters returned the following year to repeat his ascents of both the north and south summits of Hilgard with Fred "Fritz" Schilling. Growing up in Cheyenne, Wyoming, Witters acquired his adventurous scrambling skills at Vedauwoo. At college in Boulder, Colorado, he honed his skills on the Flatirons. After a stint in military service, Witters enrolled at Montana State College, and began a long climbing and ski mountaineering partner-

gully, which today is known as “Big Couloir.” The team drove to the top of nearby Andesite Mountain on a logging road and camped in an abandoned lookout tower. In the morning, Lev and Callis skied to the base of the route, while the others snowshoed. At the couloir’s right-hand curve, the team attempted to complete their climb directly to the summit, but poor rock forced them back into the couloir to finish the ascent. Tragically, only a few weeks after their ascent, Kanzler, Martin, and Pogreba along with James Anderson and Mark Levitan died in an avalanche on the west face of Mount Cleveland in Glacier National Park.

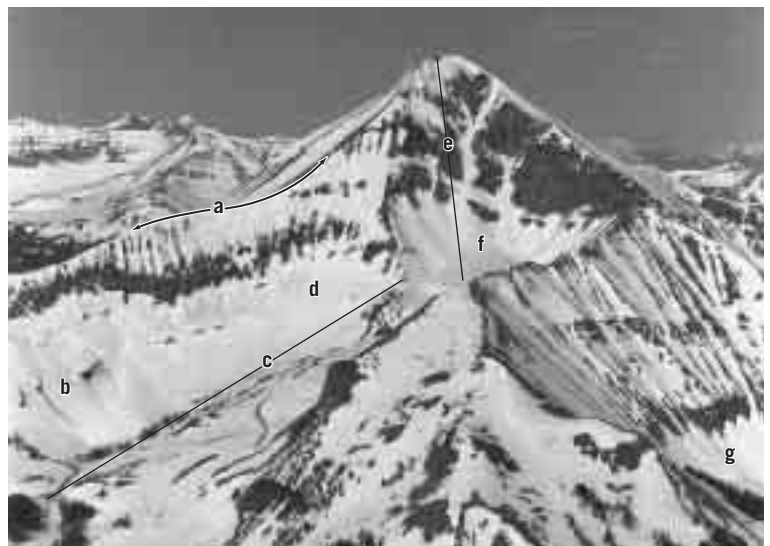
Concurrent to the 1969 ascent of Big Couloir, rumors spread throughout Gallatin Valley of plans for a destination ski resort on Lone Mountain. During the 1960s, significant timber harvests had taken place on “checkerboard” land sections alternately owned by the National Forest and Burlington Northern Railroad Company adjacent to Lone Mountain in Jack Creek and Gallatin west fork. A subsequent series of land exchanges with the Forest Service gradually consolidated portions of the “checkerboard” near Lone Mountain under the control of Burlington Northern. In early 1970, Burlington Northern announced the sale of much of this land to Chrysler Realty, which formed the Big Sky Corporation with visionary ex-NBC newscaster Chet Huntley as chairman.

An active period of public discussion ensued on how the resort should be developed, if at all. With exemplary methods, Montana State University coordinated an extensive multi-discipline analysis of the resort’s potential impacts. One of the most contentious issues was how the resort would effect the historic migration of elk between the southern and northern Madison Range. This was mitigated with the precondition that no public road be built across the range connecting Jack Creek with Gallatin west fork. Potential construction impacts on the mountain itself were alleviated by digging foundation holes by hand and placing lift towers by helicopter, a rare and expensive occurrence in 1973. Management forbade the



North side of Lone Mountain from Beehive Peak.
a. Nashville Basin
b. Gracelands area
c. Elvis Chutes
d. Coombs-Tanner early-1980s ski route
e. G-String
f. North Summit Snowfield
g. Wasteland
h. Wayne’s World or Wayne’s Wall
i. Lost Lake cirque

disturbance of a rock glacier in Lone Peak Cirque. When a bulldozer was used to “walk” a bullwheel up the mountain, a ground crew was assigned to hike the track scar and flip every rock so that its lichen side was facing up. Another item of discussion was how to best preserve a buffer between development at Big Sky and the Spanish Peaks Wilderness to the north. This was mitigated by good-faith



Aerial view of the north-east aspect of Lone Mountain.
a. southeast ridge
b. South Wall
c. Lone Peak triple chair
d. The Bowl
e. Lone Peak tram
f. Lone Peak Cirque
g. Nashville Basin

plans to keep the area north of the Big Sky road free from development. Eventually, these plans would erode under the pressure of unforeseen growth. Water and sewer systems, built in the 1970s with state-of-the-art technology and exceeding regulatory requirements, were also even-

and Jennifer Lowe were the next to pioneer a new route on the mountain. Having spotted ice streaks from Lone Mountain, the couple tackled the nearly 2,000-foot concave north face by its most natural line in the left center of the face. When in good condition for climbing, this Canadian Rockies-like wall route begins with numerous ice-coated striated cliff bands that offer little protection. It tackles at least one difficult vertical pillar and finishes with steep thin ice in the only couloir that penetrates the vertical 400-foot summit cliff. In *Big Sky Ice*, which rates the route Grade V WI4+, Geoff Heath describes his ascent with Dougal McCarty: "Most of our climb involved short pitches of rock followed by traverses along steep snow bands to the easiest looking way through the next rock barrier. The snow was loose powder, difficult to get around in... The big surprise was that the rock turned out to be of fairly good quality conglomerate."

Now a popular challenge, Kris Erickson solo-climbed the Lowe's north face route in twelve hours round trip in the late 1990s. In the late autumn of 1997, Tom Kalakay and Kirby Spangler established another climb called "The Riddle" (Y.D.S. IV 5.9 WI5+) on the steep wall well right of the Lowe's route. Other ice lines also may have had ascents as well. In March 1999, Hans Saari and Kris Erickson actually skied the Lowe's route, dubbing it "The Sphinxter." Completed in eleven hours round trip, their descent entailed very steep shallow snow over ice, technical maneuvering through cliffs, and two rappels. Most glisse mountaineering

on Sphinx Mountain has occurred on the west face, where tracks are visible every spring. As snow melts throughout the spring, the strip of snow gets narrower.



Ascent: From Highway 287 in Cameron, Montana, turn east onto a dirt road and turn right after 3 miles. Follow this bumpy road through two 90-degree turns, past ranch houses, then turn left to the mouth of Bear canyon. Park near a National Forest ranger station. Hike on a superb trail for approximately 5 miles, bearing left at one junction, to the saddle between The Helmet and Sphinx Mountain. Follow a climbers trail along the ridge toward the mountain and make a traverse across loose scree through a break in the horizontal cliff band that guards the bottom of the face. In early season, follow snow in the main drainage to the summit. If the snow is gone,

Aerial closeup of the north face of Sphinx Mountain, showing the route climbed by Alex and Jenni Lowe in autumn of 1987 and skied by Hans Saari and Kris Erickson in March 1999. Saari and Erickson skied to the bottom of the bowl below the face, then skinned back up to the Helmet saddle.

a. The Helmet



With characteristic cautiousness, Hans Saari (1971-2001) works his way through the upper channel of The Sphinxter.
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Standard route up the west ridge or couloir of Sphinx Mountain.