Sahalie Historical Note # 9: Our Neighbors, Washington Alpine Club

Right across the road from Sahalie Ski Club is a neighbor organization with a history as long and colorful as our own -- actually even more so on both counts. The Washington Alpine Club was formed in 1916 by a remarkable early character in the outdoor Northwest: Anna Louise Strong. Anna Louise arrived in Seattle that year, a 30-year-old Ph.D., author, outdoor enthusiast and radical. She must have been somewhat intimidating -- a whirlwind in the young pioneer city of Seattle. She immediately organized five summer camping expeditions to Mt. Rainier, each with 40 to 50 participants. This group, known as the Cooperative Campers, formed the origins of the Washington Alpine Club.¹

Anna Louise is credited with the first winter ascent of Mt. Hood, and served as a guide (the first female?) on Mt. Rainier. She was elected to the Seattle School Board, joined the Wobblies as a socialist sympathizer, and editorialized in support of the 1919 general strike. She eventually became so radicalized that she moved first to the Soviet Union and then to China, where she hobnobbed with Mao and was buried with state honors in Beijing when she died there in 1970.² ³ Quite the character, indeed! Her later exploits were so off the charts that “her name was an anathema to many [Washington Alpine] Club members.”⁴

The Cooperative Campers persisted after the founding whirlwind moved on. Renamed the Washington Alpine Club in 1927, it branched out into promotion of hiking, climbing, skiing and all-things-backcountry. The club motto at the time was, “To make our mountains accessible and to encourage a love of simply living in the open air.”⁵ Who could argue with that?

It appears that members of the Alpine Club were skiing at Snoqualmie Pass as early as the late 1920s. A number of outings are recorded in the local newspapers. An early ski example: “Members of Washington Alpine Club will go by train to Rockdale, then ski to Silver Peak, back to Seattle by 9:30 Sunday evening…. [T]hough scaling the 5,650-foot peak is not considered particularly hazardous, only members with previous ski experience will make the excursion.”⁶ Teams from Washington Alpine Club are credited with winning the Mountaineers’ 18-mile Patrol Race between Snoqualmie and Stampede passes in at least some of the years it ran

Anna Louise Strong c. 1913 (photo from U.W. Special Collections, #UW340)
between 1930 and 1941. In fact, WAC still is in possession of the trophy since it won the race the last time it ran.

There were many “friendly” ski races between the Alpine and Commonwealth/Sahalie clubs throughout the 1930s, usually run on the Guye Peak rock slide. Some of the early ski mountaineering pioneers such as the Loners brothers, Harry and Ed, who as WAC members were involved in early ski ascents of Mt. Baker and other Cascade peaks, also skied in slalom and downhill races representing Commonwealth Ski Club in the early 1930s.

In 1931 (the same year the Commonwealth Ski Club got started on its new lodge at the Pass), WAC members explored purchase of the checkerboard parcel to the west of Commonwealth/Sahalie. A newspaper note in March of 1931 describes a club outing into Denny Basin which skied “over the proposed cabin site of the club.” WAC’s deed to the railroad land is dated the same day (July 15, 1932) as the one which transferred ownership of the land Sahalie is built on. In 1932, WAC built the rustic lodge which their members call the Guye Cabin. The Seattle Daily Times reported in its October 23, 1932, edition that Washington Alpine “…recently completed a three and one-half story lodge on Snoqualmie Pass.” As with the Commonwealth/Sahalie lodge, Guye Cabin was for many years only accessible by foot from the state road to the south, with a small footbridge over Commonwealth Creek just above its junction with the South Fork Snoqualmie River (which runs through the WAC property from its origins at Source Lake above Alpental). Guye Cabin has been expanded over the years, but is unique at the Pass in being at its core the original structure from 1932; Sahalie’s original lodge, Seattle Ski Club’s original lodge and the Mountaineers’ two lodges at the Pass all burned to the ground at one time or another. Guye Cabin’s capacity is 76 (bunks); its typical weekend use at the time of this writing averages around 30.
An article in the *Seattle Daily Times* in 1933\textsuperscript{12} describes some box cars “a few miles beyond Martin [near the Mountaineers’ Meany Hut, at Stampede Pass], which the Washington Alpine Club uses,” as well as “its grand new lodge” at Snoqualmie Pass.

The Washington Alpine property at the Pass extends up the ridge to the north of its cabin and on the far side of the South Fork Snoqualmie, the ridge that forms the eastern flank of Denny Mountain. The pro patrollers at Alpental refer to this area as “WAC bluff” when they set off avalanche explosives at that end of the ski area.

Night skiing came before lifts. WAC’s Guy Cabin ski course was to be “flooded with light” in the coming winter, announced an article in November, 1940.\textsuperscript{13} Alpine developed a rope tow on the lower slope of the bluff right after WWII; the November 17, 1946 *Seattle Daily Times* notes that, “The ski lift under construction on the club’s property at Snoqualmie Pass is nearing completion and should be ready when winter snows blanket the pass.”\textsuperscript{14} Members of the two clubs at least periodically would share each other’s tows and ski hills. Current Sahalie members who grew up at the club recall using the “incredibly steep” Alpine rope tow, and the record shows that Alpine members used to come across the valley to buy tow tickets at Sahalie for 50 cents a day in the late 1950s. Jeanne Gue enlisted one of the old Alpine members, John Roalkvam, to be ski instructor on the Sahalie hill in the early 1960s; John eventually joined Sahalie, too, as a member, and his kids names show up in Carnival race lists in the late ‘60s.

In 1948, the Washington Alpine Club joined forces with the Mountaineers and the National Ski Patrol to form the Mountain Rescue Council, a year-round wilderness search and rescue organization. It was the first of its kind in the U.S.\textsuperscript{15}

There has been tension between the clubs over the years, more so it seems since the road was built to the new Alpental development in the mid 1960s. The original parking area that Alpental agreed to keep plowed for Sahalie was on the Alpine side of the road, so inevitably Alpine members started to use it, too, with occasional flare-ups about who had rightful access. Even today, these parking misunderstandings continue to flare.

Washington Alpine is a wide-ranging outdoor club well regarded especially for its expert classes related to climbing, telemark skiing, wilderness first aide, backcountry camping and other outdoor topics. Its focus is on mountaineering and backcountry travel, more so than on lift-serviced skiing. It does much beyond Snoqualmie Pass, yet has its “jewel” in the Guye Cabin next to Sahalie.\textsuperscript{16}

- Dave Galvin, January 2011

[updated 1/31/2011]
[As with any of these historical notes, if you have comments, corrections, additions or stories to tell, we’d love to hear them. Get in touch.]

New Alpine Club Historian

She's Really Fit for Post

By SALLY GENE DIAZON

Margaret McKenzie is the Territorial Historian of the Washington Alpine Club — an appropriate post.

Admiration? You bet.

She's the only active charter member of the mountain group, which Founder will be established in 1890.

Armed Til 1917

Mrs. McKenzie doesn't lack for places (of which there are many) or more like a woman with a love for the mountains.

"I don't want to be a cook," she says.

"Housewife!"

She still takes short distances, though, the practical hillside at the Lake District to the University District, and back, and nine blocks until and two hours on the car route. "I don't have a car and it's too much trouble to go by bus."

WELL, YOU see the idea.

Mrs. McKenzie is far from the proper image of the mountain climber. She's been moving all of her life.

She began her career in 1890, a few years after the territory was admitted to the Union.

At 8:30 Saturday night, she arrived at Mount Rainier from New York.

On Saturday night, she arrived at Mount Rainier from New York.

The next morning, the party set out for the summit. Mrs. McKenzie, who is 5 feet 6 inches tall, found it easy to climb.

"I'm used to it," she says.

"I've been climbing for years."}

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4 Alloway, same link.
8 WAC ended up purchasing a total of 49.2 acres in one large quarter-quarter section plus two small lots just west of the valley floor.
10 “Building For Winter (photo),” Seattle Daily Times, October 17, 1932, p. 11.