



Jasper-Yellowhead  
Museum & Archives

## Happy 100th Birthday Alpine Club of Canada: A.O. Wheeler: Founding member of the Alpine Club of Canada.

For over five thousand years, mountains have captured the imaginations of adventurers around the world. After an Italian poet reached the summit of Mont

Ventoux in 1336, he became known as the 'father of alpinism' and proved that Mother Earth's skyscrapers were indeed conquerable. Those whose talents included the ability to climb such treacherous rock faces and quickly adapt to high altitudes were sought after by tourists to take them to the summits of mountains around the world. Thus was the birth of the professional alpine guide. In 1857, London established an Alpine Club and before long, the trend swept across Europe and the Atlantic Ocean to North America.

The American Alpine Club was established in 1902 by Professor Charles E. Fay. Fay, a former member of the Appalachian Mountain Club, approached Canadian land surveyor, Arthur Oliver Wheeler, to help form a North American Alpine club that would be comprised of Canadian and American climbers. Wheeler, in search of interested parties, published letters in newspapers across the nation soliciting support. Wheeler's pleas did not go unheard and Elizabeth Parker of Winnipeg felt compelled to respond:

*I understand there is a movement on foot for the formation of a Canadian Alpine club in affiliation with the American club. I... would protest against Alpine organization on any such basis. We are, and always shall be, profoundly grateful, as we ought to be, to the American club for its strenuous and splendid gratuitous service to Canada and her mountains. And we shall give the praise and welcome it to further mountain tours. But we owe it to our young nationhood in simple self-respect, to begin an organized system of mountaineering on an independent basis. (Elizabeth Parker, *The Alpine Club*. The Manitoba Free Press. 31 Mar 1906)*

Wheeler, surprised to learn that the impassioned response was from a member of the gentle sex, encouraged Parker to write a series of articles to help rally support for an autonomous alpine club of Canada. Parker asked Canadians, should Canadians stand aside and allow Americans to conquer our mountains first?

It did not take long for Wheeler and Parker to gain support for their endeavor. Surprisingly, it was not just mountain climbers, who were enthused, but geologists, botanists, railway executives, outfitters, and trail guides. With the help of Elizabeth Parker, M.P. Bridgland (surveyor), Sir William Whyte (2nd vice president of the Canadian Pacific Railway), Byron Harmon (photographer) and other alpine enthusiasts, the Alpine Club of Canada was established in 1906 and Wheeler was named its first president.

In 1911, Wheeler led an expedition into Mount Robson Provincial Park that was primarily funded by the Dominion government of Canada, the Alberta and British Columbia provincial governments, and the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway. The Dominion and provincial governments were interested in hiring Wheeler to complete a topographical survey that would establish a provincial boundary line, between Alberta and British Columbia and map the uncharted area and the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway was interested in scouting out ideal locations for their grand resort hotel, Chateau Robson. Wheeler was also acting on behalf of the Alpine Club and brought together some of his fellow Alpine Club members to help gather scientific data on the area.

Wheeler assembled a group of well-respected climbers, guides, outfitters and even a photographer. Included in the group were Jasper's own Donald 'Curly' Phillips and James Shand - Harvey. Other participants included, Conrad Kain (climber and guide), Byron Harmon (official photographer), and Rev. George Kinney. Also invited along on the expedition were several scientists from the prestigious Smithsonian Institution: Dr. Charles Walcott Sr. (Smithsonian Secretary and future husband of Mary Vaux of Banff, Alberta), and his son, Charles Walcott Jr., Ned Hollister (assistant curator of mammals), J.H. Riley (aid in the division of birds), and H.H. Blagden.

The Smithsonian scientists were interested in collecting and recording examples of mammals, birds, plants, and even insects that were native to the rugged alpine territory. The specimens collected would be displayed in the institute as part of the National Museum series (Annual Report Smithsonian Institution, 1911). They collected four Rocky Mountain sheep specimens from the Maligne Lake area. Ned Hollister published a short essay, *Four New Mammals from the Canadian Rockies*, about them.

Two of the sheep were mounted and displayed at the institute until 1941.

In 1913, the Canadian Alpine Club returned to Mount Robson for the club's annual camp and to make another attempt to climb Mount Robson. In the meantime, Wheeler continued to work on the boundary survey, every summer, until 1925 and remained a member of the Alpine Club executive until 1926. Wheeler, although he formally retired as a surveyor, continued to be involved with mountaineering and mapping projects of interest to him. Wheeler died in 1945, but his contributions to the Alpine club of Canada endure to this day.