

Death of My Father, Lloyd William Taylor

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This is a brief account of the death of my father, Lloyd W. Taylor, on Mount St. Helens on August 8, 1948. Father slid over the edge of an ice cliff and died instantly at the bottom.

Father's vital statistics:

LLOYD WILLIAM TAYLOR, born January 4, 1893 Pittsfield, Maine; Bachelor of Science, Grinnell College 1914; married Esther Elenora Bliss December 11, 1917; First Lieutenant, Coastal Artillery Corps 1917-1919, posted in Panama; Ph.D. University of Chicago 1922; Professor and Chairman, Department of Physics Oberlin College 1924-1948; children: Ruth Mildred Taylor (later Ruth Taylor Deery), born April 23, 1923 and Edwin Floriman Taylor, born June 22, 1931; Lloyd Taylor died August 8, 1948 in an accident on Mount St. Helens in Washington State.

Of the immediate family who lived through this accident, I alone now survive to tell the story. A 63-year-old memory is undependable; every sentence should begin, "As I remember, . . ." But memory shapes us all; this account is psychologically accurate.

Page 2 shows Father as I remember him, and page 3 the majestic photograph of Mount St. Helens taken in 1942 by Harold A. Deery, who married my sister Ruth in 1944. (On May 18, 1980 Mount St. Helens erupted catastrophically and is now a smoldering ruin of its former self.) Page 4 shows modern versions of our climbing equipment.

It was still dark on the morning of August 8, 1948 when Harold Deery roused Father and me in our campsite at the foot of Mount St. Helens. We had to reach the top early in order to start down by 10 AM; later in the day sunlight would leave our side of the mountain, turning mushy snow fields to ice.

We three hikers:

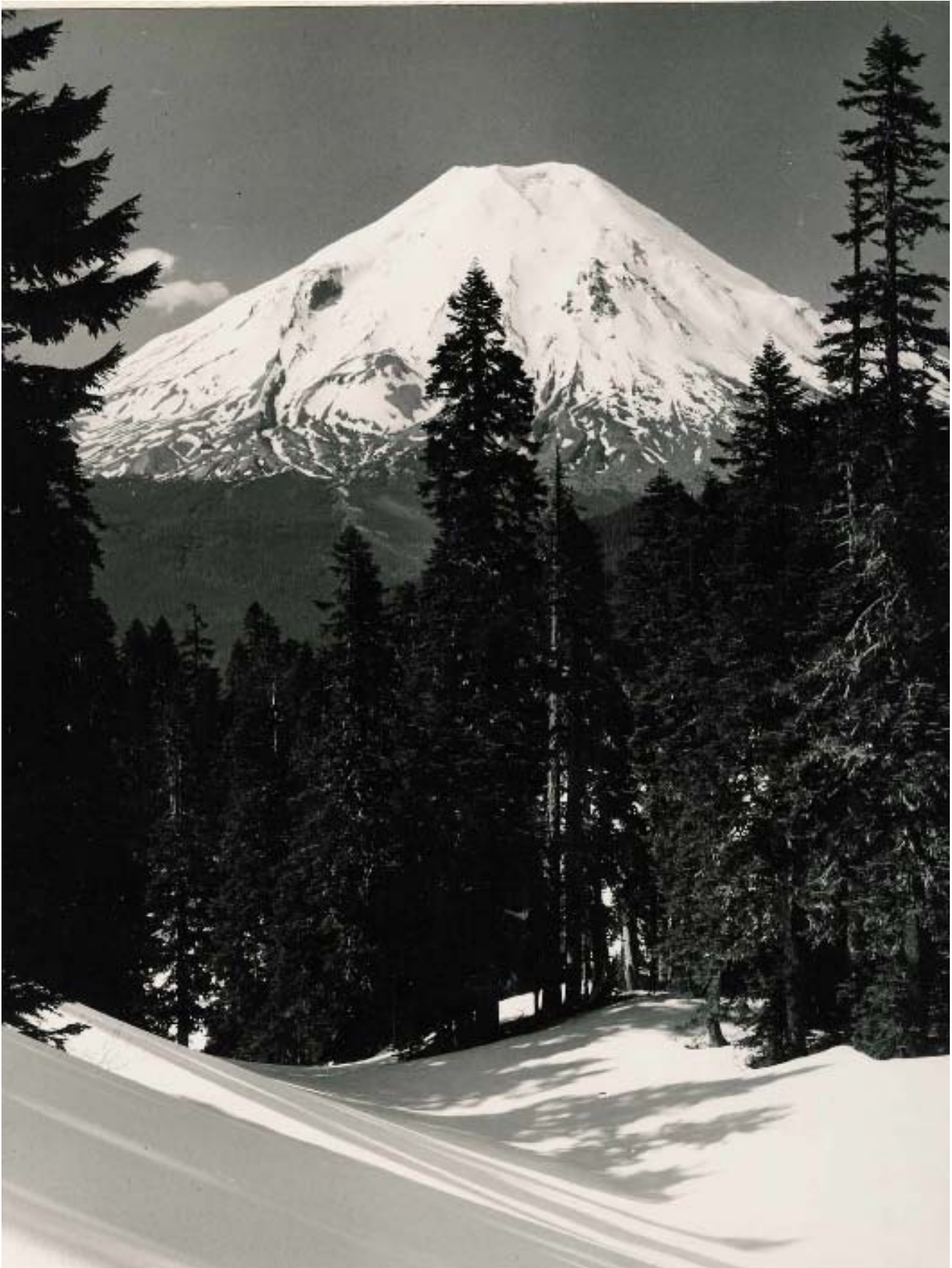
Harold A. Deery, 30 years old, an enthusiastic mountain climber of long experience.

Lloyd W. Taylor, 55 years old. Our family did not own a car; every workday Father walked the half mile from our house on Forest Street to and from his office in the Wright Laboratory of Physics at Oberlin College. I never saw him take any other regular exercise. He had no experience or technical knowledge of mountain climbing.

Edwin F. Taylor, 17 years old. I had climbed the Franconia and Presidential Ranges at a summer camp in New Hampshire. During previous summer visits to Washington State, I hiked with Harold and my sister Ruth, including a climb on Mt. Olympus in the Olympic Peninsula. Mt. Olympus was my only previous experience hiking over snow.



Lloyd W. Taylor in his office at Wright Laboratory of Physics, Oberlin College, less than a year before his death. [Photo restoration by Thomas Dahill]



Photograph of Mount St. Helens taken by Harold A. Deery
in 1942, six years before the accident.



Modern strap-on crampons. Ours were simpler, with an open steel frame and vertical steel spikes



Modern hobnail boots. Father wore regular boots to which steel hobnails had been added around the edges. Hobnails project a fraction of an inch.



Father may have carried an ice axe.

Father, Harold, and I arrived in good time at the summit, a bowl-shaped, snow-filled caldera from the mountain's volcanic past. I was disappointed because there was no peak from which to enjoy the view in all directions.

We started down. Harold and I wore crampons: steel frames strapped to our boots with long projecting spikes. Father's boots had steel hobnails around the edges.

Why didn't Father wear crampons? This question has perplexed me for more than sixty years. (Harold Deery and I were friendly until his death in 2003, but he and I never exchanged a word about the accident.) A possible explanation occurs to me now: Father did not own hiking boots; the ones he wore were borrowed. Perhaps the only available pair of boots that fit him had steel hobnails. You cannot wear crampons with steel hobnails, because the projecting hobnails grind against the crampons' strapped-on steel frame. I have a vague memory that Harold gave Father an ice axe to compensate for the hobnails; if so, Father did not know how to use it. Life or death can hinge on trivia.

Gaping fissures interrupted the smooth snow fields. Later Harold told an official that he had never seen the snow cover on Mount St. Helens so broken up as it was that morning.

As we descended I twice asked Harold's permission to take off my crampons and *glissade*, which means to slide on your shoes: to ski without skis. Twice he refused.

Half an hour later, as we traversed a steep snow field, I heard a shout from above and to the right. Father glissaded past, crouched but sliding on his shoes, and reached the edge of a fissure about 100 feet farther down the slope. He disappeared up to his shoulders; in my last sight of him he faced upward toward us, with his elbows holding onto the edge and a concentrated frown on his face. Then he dropped from view.

As Harold and I ran down and left to skirt the edge of the fissure, I had a fantasy: Our extended family sat around a roaring rough-stone fireplace in a hunting lodge. "Boy, I sure thought you were a gonner!" I exclaimed. Father and the others laughed in a loving and convivial manner at the unreality of my fear.

Harold and I worked the long way around and down past the edge of the fissure. It was not a V-shaped crevasse, but an ice cliff 35 feet high, at its foot a shallow depression about six feet deep and 20 feet wide, full of ice hillocks. Father lay over one of these on his back.

Harold exclaimed, "This is terrible!"

Father certainly died instantly---his death certificate says that his chest was crushed. But that possibility did not enter our heads; our urgent goal was to get help. I sat on the adjoining ice hillock and held Father's head in my lap. Harold disappeared over the lower edge of the depression on his way down the mountain to get help.

Of the following hours I remember little. Later experience helps me to understand my merciful emotional withdrawal.

In *War and Peace*, Leo Tolstoy's central character, the Russian Pierre Bezukhov, who has been captured by the French, is on a forced march as they retreat from Moscow.

"He learned that suffering and freedom have their limits and that those limits are very near together . . . when he had put on tight dancing shoes he had suffered just as he did now when he walked with bare feet that were covered with sores---his footgear having long since fallen to pieces." (Volume 4, Part III, Chapter XII)

Such physical and emotional numbness---combined with denial---anesthetized me as I sat for hours on the ice hillock with Father's head in my lap.

As dusk began to settle, I heard shouts, to which I responded. A group of men appeared over the downhill edge of the depression where Harold had earlier departed. One of them was clearly in charge; later I heard Harold say to this man that the rescue effort did not get organized until he arrived at the base camp.

The man in charge pressed two fingers against Father's neck.

"Deader 'n Hell. Was he a friend of yours?"

"He was my father."

"Sorry kid, I didn't know he was your father."

Asked if I was able to walk down the mountain, I replied that I was cramped and cold. They put me, shoes and all, into a sleeping bag for a while and said it would be difficult to bring Father's body down with night falling. I agreed that we should leave him, and we started down. We descended; night came.

As we neared the parking lot, I told the group to stay back and alone approached the car where Mother sat in front. Harold, lying on the back seat, sat up. He had been exhausted by his earlier rapid descent and probably felt his additional round trip with the rescuers would slow them down.

"Mother," I said, "Father is dead."

Mother threw her head back and gasped, put a handkerchief to her mouth, then turned to Harold: "I thought you said he spoke to you . . ."

"No, Mother," I interrupted, "He never spoke; he never moved."

Mother moved over so I could sit beside her and quickly agreed that our decision to leave Father's body on the mountain overnight was the correct one. (His body was brought down a day or two later.)

I rode alone in the waiting ambulance, sitting in front next to the driver. As we started, he turned on the flashing lights "so nobody will bother us." The siren remained silent; he drove at legal speeds. For the remainder of the trip we did not speak.

The ambulance took me "for observation" to the hospital that serves Kelso, WA, where Ruth and Harold lived. Evidently I had no physical injuries. Over my mild protest that I was sufficiently exhausted to sleep, the doctor gave me a whacking-strong sleeping pill.