

# Mountain Runners: The Story of the Mt. Baker Marathon



**|| story by John D'Onofrio || photos courtesy The Mountain Runners || (tint ANW) ||**

In most places, summer starts on June 21st. But in northwest Washington, the season has an unofficial kick-off on Memorial Day weekend when the region gathers around the event that has come to be emblematic of summer in the northwest—the one and only Ski to Sea.

2011 mark[ed] the 100th anniversary of the event, But truth be told, today's relay race—epic as it is—bears little resemblance to the original race run in 1911. Looking back, it's almost inconceivable that such an event ever happened. Truth, in this case, is certainly stranger than fiction.

## The Marathon

The original idea was either brilliant or crazy, depending on your point of view.

The year was 1911 and Bellingham was a sleepy town on the northern reaches of the Salish Sea. Aside from the logging industry and the salmon canneries, not much was going on. The Mount Baker Club, a business group at the time, wanted something to draw attention to their corner of northwest Washington. Inspired by Mount Rainier National Park, which had been created in 1899 and had become an instant tourist attraction, club members resolved that if Rainier could draw a steady stream of gawking (and well-moneyed) tourists from back east, then surely nearby Mount Baker could too.

What they needed was a publicity stunt, some kind of epic undertaking—a real attention getter to put Mount Baker on the map.

It had to be compelling. And it had to be big.

And thus was born the Mount Baker Marathon.

The idea was audacious—a race from Bellingham to the summit of Mount Baker and back again. It was exciting and dramatic. And it was dangerous. Just the thing to bring the tourists and their pocket books.

The Mount Baker Marathon was America's first endurance race: 116 miles of mud, sweat and glory. Maybe blood too. No relays, mind you. Every man for himself. It was perfect.

In those days there was heated debate about the “best” route to the summit, first climbed by Edmund Coleman in 1868. One camp swore by what was known as the Glacier trail, starting at the little isolated hamlet of Glacier. Another equally vociferous group extolled the virtues of the Deming trail, which followed the Middle Fork of the Nooksack River up to the high country. It was decided that contestants in the race could choose either route. If they

went via the Glacier trail, they would ride a special train from Bellingham to Glacier and then commence running up the 14-mile trail to the summit. If they opted for the Deming Route, they were transported via Model T to the trailhead at Heisler's ranch on the Middle Fork, 16 miles from the summit. Either route, the elevation gain was 9,700 feet. Ouch.

## **The King of Glacier**

On August 10, 1911, 14 contestants showed up at the starting line (located naturally enough at the office of the Bellingham Chamber of Commerce). The race was scheduled to start at 10 p.m.—the idea being that the racers would ascend the mountain at night, when the snow would be more solid underfoot.

Thousands of spectators lined the streets and perched on rooftops to watch the excitement of the start. The publicity was already paying off, the members of the Mount Baker Club agreed. The starting gun sounded and the racers were off—six of them in automobiles headed for Heisler's ranch, eight on the special train to Glacier. The race was on.

The cars arrived first, slathered in mud, and careened to a stop at the ranch. The Middle Fork runners would get a head start. Although their distance to the summit was two miles longer, it had a somewhat gentler incline—except for the nasty bit when the Easton and Deming glaciers would need to be climbed. In the dark.

The train pulled into Glacier a little later, disgorging the eight hopefuls on the Glacier trail where they'd ascend to the Coleman Glacier. It would be a long night for both groups. By the time the racers reached the glaciers, eight of the contestants had dropped out—the six remaining, some from each group of racers, donned their caulk logging boots for the summit push.

To ensure that each contestant reached the summit, judges were stationed there, waiting to sign the certificate each runner carried. It was a cold night on the ice, and the wind blew like a banshee. The judges were freezing as they

waited.

The first runner to reach the judges was N.B. Randall, closely followed by Harvey Haggard. Both men were Glacier residents and both had come up the Glacier route. Joe Galbraith, who had ascended the Deming trail, was next. By then, the wind had risen and the temperature had dropped further. After two more racers reached the top, the judges abandoned the summit and sought shelter from the wind below.



At some point in the early morning hours, Haggard overtook Randall and reached the waiting train a few hundred feet ahead. According to the rules, this entitled only Haggard to board the train for Bellingham. He was exhausted but convinced that victory was at hand, and availed himself of a massage on the train. A few miles later disaster struck when the train collided with an 1,800-pound bull that had wandered onto the tracks, derailing the train. Naked, dazed, but uninjured, Haggard emerged from the underbrush, donned his clothes, and commandeered a horse and buggy, which whisked him to Maple Falls.

By this point the woozy Haggard had to be lifted out of the buggy and put on a horse, which promptly took off at breakneck speed toward Kendall, where a car was waiting to transport the exhausted racer to Bellingham. It was not Haggard's day. The waiting car spooked the galloping horse, throwing Haggard into the dust. Haggard, literally staggering now, flung himself into the car, grateful that someone else was at the wheel to speed toward Bellingham. He fainted twice along the way.

By the time Harvey Haggard reached Bellingham, Joe Galbraith had already arrived via "Betsy," a Ford Model T, and had been declared the winner with an official time of 12 hours and 28 minutes, beating the nearly delirious Haggard by a mere 32 minutes. Galbraith was awarded the first place prize of a buffalo robe and \$100, but Haggard's tenacity had won-over the crowd, which passed a hat and raised \$50 for the wobbly woodsman. The townspeople of Glacier crowned him "King of Glacier" and organized a gala banquet in his honor. The main course? The dead bull, barbecued.

By all reports, the briskets were delicious.

## **Out of Control**

The inaugural Mount Baker Marathon had been a resounding success, attracting thousands of spectators and generating great publicity for Bellingham and the Mount Baker area. The business boosters at the Mount Baker Club and the chamber were ecstatic, convinced that they had found the key to promoting the area. Plans began for the 1912 race and many improvements were envisioned. The winner would receive \$500—a king's ransom in 1912—and telephone lines would be strung along the route to enable the spectators in Bellingham to "follow" the progress of the runners.

By race day 1912, Bellingham was abuzz with activity. Tens of thousands had gathered. There were Navy ships anchored in Bellingham Bay and the circus came to town. Even Governor Marion E. Hay was on hand to lend the event gravitas. Then at the last minute, using the telephone lines, judges on the

mountain called down with the news that a horrific storm was raging on Mount Baker. Blizzard conditions had dumped several feet of new snow on the summit. The judges were adamant that attempting to run up the mountain in such conditions would be suicide.



There was no choice but to postpone the race. The storm pummeled the mountain for three days before it finally let up. When the starting gun finally sounded, a week late, the field had been reduced from sixteen to nine.

Paul Westerlund, a seasoned marathon runner from San Francisco who had come to Bellingham for the grand new challenge (and the hefty prize purse), reached the summit first but he was in a bad way. He'd gotten lost in the swirling mists below the Roman Wall and had fallen, breaking a rib. His clothes were literally frozen to his body.

Unsteadily, he headed down the mountain and was soon overtaken by Haggard and two others. In the end it was Haggard who crossed the finish line first to the cheers of the expectant crowd. He'd bettered Galbraith's 1911 time by more than two and a half hours, and the marathon, everyone agreed,

had once again been a rousing success.

The next year the weather was again miserable on the mountain, and the judges on the Deming trail called to race officials in Bellingham to tell them to postpone the race. Much to their surprise on their way down the mountain, they encountered Westerlund and two other runners coming up the trail. The race officials had decided that the race would go on despite the warnings. The astonished judges told the racers not to attempt the summit in the perilous conditions but to turn around at the saddle beneath the Roman Wall, which they did. Unfortunately no one told the runners coming up the Glacier route, and soon four of them found themselves on the summit with no judges to be seen, visibility near zero, and a fierce and bitter wind blowing. The race had plummeted into chaos. And then it got worse.

Descending the glacier in the fog, Victor Galbraith (Joe's cousin) broke through the fresh snow and fell 40 feet into a crevasse, saved from death only by a small ledge. Five hours later he was miraculously found by a search party led by his cousin Joe. He was hauled out of the crevasse and taken down the mountain on a stretcher, very lucky to be alive.

Another runner, Peter George from Boston, also fell into a crevasse. Fortunately, he was able to crawl out and escaped with just some lacerations.

The race ended in incriminations and confusion: Westerlund (who had gone only to the saddle) and Johnny Magnusson (who had reached the summit) were declared co-winners. But no one was happy. And Galbraith's near tragedy was the last straw. Even the most gung-ho civic boosters had to admit that it was only a matter of time until someone died on the mountain.

Instead, the Mount Baker Marathon was put to rest.



Rescue party returning with Victor Galbraith  
from the snow fields of Mt. Baker where he  
nearly lost his life by falling in a 40 ft.  
blind crevasse

## **Resurrection**

It would be 60 years before the spirit of the Mount Baker Marathon would be resurrected, and more years to evolve into the event as we know it today, Ski to Sea, 100 years later. Whether in the early 20th century or early 21st century, the race embodies high drama, great scenery, supportive crowds and, of course, superlative athleticism, now with the eight participants per team and seven race legs (cross-country skiing, downhill skiing or snowboarding, running, road biking, canoeing, mountain biking, and sea kayaking). But this year [2011], in honor of the auspicious 100th anniversary of the 1911 race, the distance is planned for a full 100 miles, with racers coming from all regions of the state, nation, continent, and even athletes from Bellingham's seven Sister Cities.

Mel Monkelis, of Whatcom Events (the community non-profit that now stages the event) puts it succinctly: "The Race is us, and we are the race."



## **THE MOUNTAIN RUNNERS**

Documentary director Todd Warger and photographer David Lowrance had just released a film about Bellingham’s historic shipyards (*Shipyards*, 2009) to great acclaim when the notion of creating a documentary about the Mount Baker Marathon first presented itself.

The task was daunting: they would need a running, vintage steam locomotive, aerial shots of antique cars racing along county dirt roads, alpine climbing, support and assistance on the summit of Mount Baker, vintage police uniforms—the list went on and on.

“Logistically, it was overwhelming,” Warger says. But, inspired by the heroic daring-do of the participants of the first Mount Baker Marathon, Warger and Lowrance persevered. One by one, things began to fall into place. Planes,

trains, wardrobe and cars were donated. Actors and camera crews volunteered.

The film took shape—the story told in docudrama style with dramatic reenactments, vintage images (most never seen), interviews with descendants and local historians, and reflections by speed climbers Steve House and Chad Kellogg, ultra-runners Krissy Moehl and Doug McKeever, and seven continent marathon runner and author (Second Wind), Cami Ostman.

Among the actors is William B. Davis, the famous “smoking man” from The X-Files tv show, who portrays Mount Baker club president Henry Engberg, who, in 1912, had famously insisted that the race carry on despite the perilous conditions.

**For more information, visit [www.themountainrunners.com](http://www.themountainrunners.com).**

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