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An Insight Into the “Berglihütte” in 1908

Grindelwald Mountain Guides – Frozen for the Star Photographer

by Karl Horat



“Ascent to the Jungfrau, Bergli-Hütte, where people spend the night - mountain guides prepare evening meal” noted the photographer Herbert G. Ponting (1870-1935) about this photo.



For the second glass plate negative, the men had to remain in the same position until the photographer had rearranged the mountain poles and ropes in the foreground. But the man on the left (presumably hut warden Hans Kaufmann) was now allowed to cross his legs. (Credit: Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.)



On the postcard from 1911, the interior of the refuge, including the hay sleeping area, was still unchanged. Today the hut is comfortably furnished. (Credit: Postcard Photoglob AG Zurich)

We are in 1908, inside the “Berglihütte”, which had been built by the Grindelwald section of the Swiss Alpine Club almost forty years earlier. Since then, it has been perched like an eagle’s nest on a rocky ridge in the middle of the sea of ice at an altitude of around 3,300 meters.

At the time the historic photo was taken, it was a two-hour walk from Eismeer station, the terminus of the Jungfrau Railway at the time. You can see the train timetable of the time on the wall in the hut in the photo. The double stove with the two separate flue pipes, which only join at overhead height, seems somewhat extravagant. The cast-iron solution probably enabled two groups of mountaineers to cook independently of each other, Maggi soup on the one hand - and perhaps “Hörnli” on the other. As we can see, the pot of tea or coffee could benefit from both hotplates. The hut wardens of the time only kept soup and hot drinks on hand, the rest of the food was the responsibility of the mountaineers. “Before the ascent to the Jungfrau, people spend the night here” noted Herbert G. Ponting about his photo.

*Berglihütte in 1907*

Credit: Wikimedia Commons

Even back then, this photographer was known for always striving for the perfect photo. “To tell a whole story in a single picture” was his aspiration. He composed the mountain guide scene for his stereo camera and then marketed the result as a two-image card package with the H. C. White Co. To view such double images, a special viewing device or stereoscopes were required to achieve the desired three-dimensional effect. But people of the time were happy to accept this in order to be able to immerse themselves in completely new worlds. Ponting also wanted to take the same picture of the Bernese Alps with his Eastman camera and then print copies on paper using the pigment printing process. So the three experienced mountain guides had to remain motionless until the photographer had rearranged the mountain poles and ropes—and pressed the shutter release.

The pictorial result gives us an insight into the world of mountaineering more than a hundred years ago, when alpinism was still in its infancy. But it was already practiced with great enthusiasm and dar-

ing. Although there were no tear-proof ropes or breathable clothing, no emergency cell phone, no microfiber sleeping bags, the enthusiasm for adventures in the open mountain world was great. We can see from the old photos that hobnailed boots and calf pads or gaiters were part of the outfit, and only a cap or hat served as head protection. However, a pipe in the mouth seemed to have been indispensable for the mountain guide image back then. And tobacco and wine were as much a part of the rucksack as dried meat, bread and cheese.

Tourism as an opportunity

In the past, the local mountain population in the Alpine valleys avoided the rock faces and firm of the surrounding mountains. As there was hardly anything to be gained there, they saw no reason to climb up. They had more obvious things to do and had to make sure that they had enough supplies for people and livestock in the valley to survive the harsh winters.

The situation changed in the middle of the 19th century. Wealthy people — often English — began to appear, seeking adventure during their long summer vacations. In many cases, they wanted to be the first to stand on one of the many snow peaks and reap fame and attention for it. They liked to hire locals who knew the area to guide them and carry their loads. Suitable maps were hardly ever available back then. Gem hunters, crystal hunters and shepherd boys suddenly found themselves with lucrative side jobs as tourist guides. Instead of leading sheep, goats and young cattle up steep mountain paths, it suddenly became much more lucrative to guide well-heeled strangers.

Not everyone was suited to being a prudent guide and carelessly undertaken mountain tours caused resentment among foreigners and locals alike. As early as 1856, Canton Bern was the first canton to issue regulations for mountain guides and porters.

The catering and hotel industry, as well as the souvenir and hand-craft trade, also quickly adapted to tourism. The Alpine Club was founded in London in 1857. Switzerland did not want to be outdone, and in 1863 the Swiss Alpine Club was founded in Olten.

The “Regierungsstatthalteramt“ (district administration) Inter-laken soon issued certified mountain guides with a mountain guide license and gave them a leather-bound “guide book” in which customers could write their comments. The quality of these comments in the guide book was checked annually by the authorities. Anyone with more than three bad entries in a year had their license revoked. The entries contained details of each ascent: the routes, the mountain names, the time, the weather, the quality of the guide. Did he have some knowledge of English, a friendly tone, was he a good cook in the refuge? The mountain guides who sat on a bench in Grindelwald for the purpose of customer acquisition were happy to have the booklet inspected as a reference by arriving potential customers.

Prospective guides had to pass an exam. The theoretical part covered the geography of the mountains and the dangers of snow, ice, glaciers and rock. They also had to learn how to avoid accidents and



*Gottfried Strasser
known as the “Glacier Pastor”*
Credit: Wikimedia Commons

what to do in the event of one. The practical part concerned first aid as well as treatment and transportation in the event of an injury. Knowledge of routes, ascent times, the location of summits and passes, the use of a compass and maps as well as the use of ropes and knots were tested. And the aspirant had to demonstrate his skills with an ice axe by hammering steps into the ice of the glacier.

On the initiative of the Grindelwald pastor at the time, Gottfried Strasser, the Grindelwald Mountain Guide Association was founded in the Hotel Bear at the

beginning of February 1898. No fewer than 43 mountain guides of all ages attended. The motto preceding the statutes evoked the qualities of local leadership: “Loyalty, caution, courage and strength.” Fritz Amatter, Fritz Steuri and Ueli Almer were prominent mountain guides in Grindelwald at the time.

Ponting’s later photos from the Antarctic were a sensation

“Before going on the polar expedition with Captain Scott, my life had been rather uneventful,” Ponting wrote in the introduction to his book *The Great White South* about his time in the Antarctic in 1911. That was something of an understatement. Born into a banking family in Salisbury, England in 1870, the adventurous young man realized that banking was not for him. Fascinated by Wild West stories, he had his father buy him a trip to California. After trying his hand at owning an orchard and prospecting for gold, he turned his long-standing hobby of photography into his next profession. He submitted his pictures to competitions and won prizes. He was the first photojournalist to document the Russo-Japanese War in Japan for three years. He then traveled to the Philippines, Burma, Korea and China for photo reports. Mass magazines were now able to print such reports and they were well paid. In 1908, he visited Switzerland, France and Spain to exhibit his photos of Japan, which until then had been largely unknown. The few surviving photos of our Alps were taken during this visit.

Herbert G. Ponting was then chosen as the expedition photographer for Robert Scott’s British Antarctic expedition. Two polar explorers, the Englishman Robert Falcon Scott and the Norwegian Roald Amundsen, both set off on polar expeditions and engaged in a race to the geographic South Pole in the Antarctic. This became a worldwide media hype. Robert Scott’s trail to the South Pole began on November 1, 1911, but his decision to start the trip with Siberian ponies and snowmobiles was to prove disastrous; they soon made no further progress in the inhospitable ice desert. When the Scott team finally reached the Pole, they realized that Amundsen had been there five



Herbert G. Ponting in Antarctica

Credit: Wikimedia Commons

weeks earlier. The men did not survive the return march to Cape Evans due to extreme cold, exhaustion and hunger.

Photographer Ponting and eight other men had left Antarctica in February 1912 on board the sailing ship *Terra Nova* after 14 months at the Cape Evans camp on Ross Island and returned to England. The expedition photographer had a real treasure on board: 1,700 photos, some of them spectacular, which he had taken. The technical difficulties of taking photographs in the Antarctic were enormous due to the extreme cold and until then there had been no technical solution. But

Herbert Ponting found ways to take pictures even at 40 degrees below zero. He built a small darkroom in one of the huts at Cape Evans and documented life in the Antarctic with orcas, seals, leopard seals, penguins and birds. He captured species that were previously unknown.

He also created a visual diary of everyday expedition life. He was always striving for the perfect photo and often put himself or expedition members in risky situations, for example by building hoists to hoist himself and his equipment over the edge of the ship in order to take the shot he had in mind from this position. The expedition members were asked to pose for photos. And for the men, posing in the cold and in uncomfortable positions soon became known as “pon-ting.” Back in civilization, the Antarctic photographer was only able to enjoy the worldwide demand for his work for just over a year. After the outbreak of the First World War, the media were only interested in the events of the war. It was not until years later that his unique, masterful documentation received the attention it deserved.

About the Author:

Karl Horat is an agricultural journalist and author of *Glarner Stüg-gli* (2023) about people in and around Glarus, Switzerland who make the most of what nature offers. He lives in Küssnacht, Canton Schwyz.