Hobnailed Boots

May 1, 1999: "Last time I tried a boulder problem in hobnailed boots, I fell off," radioed Conrad Anker as a signal to members of the search party looking for George Mallory on Chomolungma (Everest) that they had attained their goal. Mallory had disappeared seventy-five years earlier. Most of the bodies on the mountain had newer gear. "Hobnailed boots" became code for finding a body from the 1920s. PETER H. HANSEN

Mallory lay face down, with arms outstretched as if trying to stop his slide. On closer inspection, a name tag in his clothing and other personal effects provided definitive identification. A hobnailed boot on Mallory's right foot was positioned at an awkward angle, below a visibly broken leg. His left foot was bare, its boot in fragments.

In 1924, from around 7600 meters, Mallory's teammate Noel Odell had last glimpsed him "going strong" for the 8849-meter summit with Andrew Irvine. Although the discovery of Mallory's body didn't solve the mystery of whether he and Irvine reached the apex, the goggles, matches and other artifacts in Mallory's possession provided physical relics of a bygone era.

Almost a century after Mallory's death, hobnailed boots have become obsolete, but they connect Mallory and those who follow in his footsteps with much longer histories. In Roman sites from Scotland to Jordan, archaeologists have found remains of hobnailed boots including footprints preserved in mortar from the *caligae* of military legions. Nails lie scattered at the feet of buried skeletons (after the boots themselves disintegrated).

For hundreds of years, hobnailed boots were also worn by miners, agricultural laborers, and workers of all kinds, including enslaved people in the United States. Boots signified social differences in Israel Zangwill's 1899 British short story collection, *Ghetto Tragedies*: "The pavements of the East End [a working-class part of London] resounded with their hobnailed boots, and even in many a West End drawing-room their patent-leather shoes creaked."

By the 1500s, mountain residents and travelers were strapping on crampon-like spiked metal plates to cross glaciers in the Alps, but hobnailed boots remained more accessible and as effective for most purposes. During the late 1700s, when visiting upper- and middle-class climbers began attempting the highest Alpine peaks, they used the same nailed boots as their guides. While lightweight, the boots provided secure footing in steps cut with ice axes, allowing climbers to move quickly up summits covered in rock or ice. Yet the metal nails could also conduct the cold, and the leather could get soaking wet if insufficiently greased or waxed to create a moisture barrier. By the 1920s, climbers brought multiple pairs on Everest attempts and wore as many as three or four layers of socks to forestall frostbite.

The tread on automobile tires inspired new forms of traction for boots during the 1930s. Pirelli, Dunlop and Goodyear manufactured rubber soles that eventually replaced nailed leather, while elite climbers reverted to crampons for steep glaciers, ice and mixed terrain. Nonetheless, the huge supply of hobnailed boots at army surplus stores after both world wars continued to offer readily available and affordable footwear for many mountaineers into the 1950s.

In recent decades, as climbers have developed specialized techniques and equipment for increasingly technical routes, climbing footwear has tended to be designed for highly specific uses—instead of the kind of all-purpose functionality that hobnailed boots once offered. But reenactors have returned to Everest, the Matterhorn, and other peaks using gear from the eras of Whymper or Mallory. In 2007 Conrad Anker and Leo Houlding tested hobnailed boots and replicas of Mallory and Irvine's clothing on Everest for a film, *The Wildest Dream.* They found their toes got cold as they approached the North Col, and they switched to today's gear to free climb the more technical Second Step.

Detective novels before the 1920s frequently turned on interpreting the distinctive footprints made by different nail patterns on soles. Though Mallory's tracks were lost in the snow, his boots still put us into contact with the complex legacies behind a recreational pursuit. You need gloves to touch Mallory's other artifacts now at the Royal Geographical Society, but the curators say that the leather likes to be handled: contact helps preserve it. Histories are like that, too. When you put your finger on it, this history, like the leather above the ankle on Mallory's hobnailed boot, remains supple.

Photo: Modern replica of George Mallory's 1924 mountaineering boots. Courtesy Viberg footwear