

They left base camp at about 11 p.m., allowing them to reach the summit by sunrise. Park officials for the mountain encourage that timing, Thompson said, because it allows hikers to see the sun rise over neighboring Mawenzi, the air is more clear at that time for a better view, and hiking in the dark makes the psychological part easier because a hiker cannot see how far away the top is.

"The idea is if you can see it, you'd get more psychologically bummed," Thompson said.

In addition, despite the zero-degree temperatures, during the day enough of the snow melts to make a hike more slippery and difficult.

Only two people from his group of five turned back, unable to ignore their illness.

One was his niece's husband, Michael. Michael and his wife, Christina, live in Smyrna, Ga. Christina thought her husband was going to catch up after a rest. She later found out he had decided not to go on. Instead of giving up, she continued on the journey to the top alone.

Thompson said that is amazing. He reached Gilman's Point, marked by a sign, which is at the rim of the volcanic opening. To reach the uppermost point, though, hikers must walk around the rim by Uhurs Peak.

"I'm breathing like it's my last," Thompson said. "In a way, you're trying to push yourself to your personal limit. When I got as far as Gilman's Point, I felt I couldn't push myself any farther than that. I do not think I would've made it up if I hadn't gone with my daughter."

He considered ending his journey. But Briana wanted to continue. She said she didn't say anything special to her dad, only that she was going to continue.

"He wouldn't let me make it to the top and not him," she said. "So I knew if I just kept going, he'd follow behind."

And he made it, something he is grateful for today.

"If you get up there when the sun rises, you can see a deep orange glow and then you see a deep violet," he said. "The thing that surprised me the most is when I got to the top, it wasn't a badge of accomplishment for anybody but me."

They stayed at the top for 15 minutes, taking pictures of themselves with an American flag before heading back down using the Marangu route. The trip down may be easier than the trip up, but it still hurts, Thompson said, describing the slippery walk over gravel straight downward as a "stair-stepper in reverse."

"When you go back down, it's just horrible," he said.

On their walk back they ran into Christina, 29, who also had made the trip, but without the psychological backup. After her husband and another climber descended with the guide, Christina decided to go on alone, thinking she would catch up with her uncle and Briana. Every time she stopped, she said, she felt as if she was losing momentum, so she just had to keep going.

"The only way to join up with Briana and Jim was to finish," she said. "What kept me going was the thought that

I was going to catch up with them."

When she got to Gilman's Point, she realized there was no way she could catch up. But that didn't stop her.

"I did not come all this way to not get to the top," she said. "I just kept putting one foot in front of the other. There was no question in my mind that I was going to get there."

And she did, too.

"I really felt invincible when I came back down," she said. "I wanted to challenge myself and see what I was capable of. As a general rule, we underestimate what we are capable of."

For those who can do it, the hike costs \$400 per person, which gets you a guide, an assistant guide and porters to carry most of your stuff. Even with the porters, each hiker must carry about 20 pounds of equipment. However, most of the stuff can stay behind at Kibo Hut as you complete the trip. The hike to the summit and back can be done in one day.

To train for the hike, Thompson said he and Briana didn't do much. They mostly took walks, did steps for leg strength and took a handful of jogs to ensure he had no chest pain while winded.

The hike has killed a few people who do not heed the posted notices. Those with heart or lung difficulties are advised not to take the climb. But for others, it's one of the easiest of the seven world summits — the highest peaks on each of the seven continents.

"I'm just an ordinary Joe," Thompson said. "You just sort of hike up the mountain."

Christina said it's more than that, however, noting that only the three of the five in their group made it to the top.

"It's got to be in the genes," she said.

The exit trail is much easier than the original route, but it again took the group through six climate zones, from arctic to desert alpine, then alpine, heather, rainforest and finally back to the flat Savannah. After the hike, Thompson and his group took a safari trip before returning to the United States.

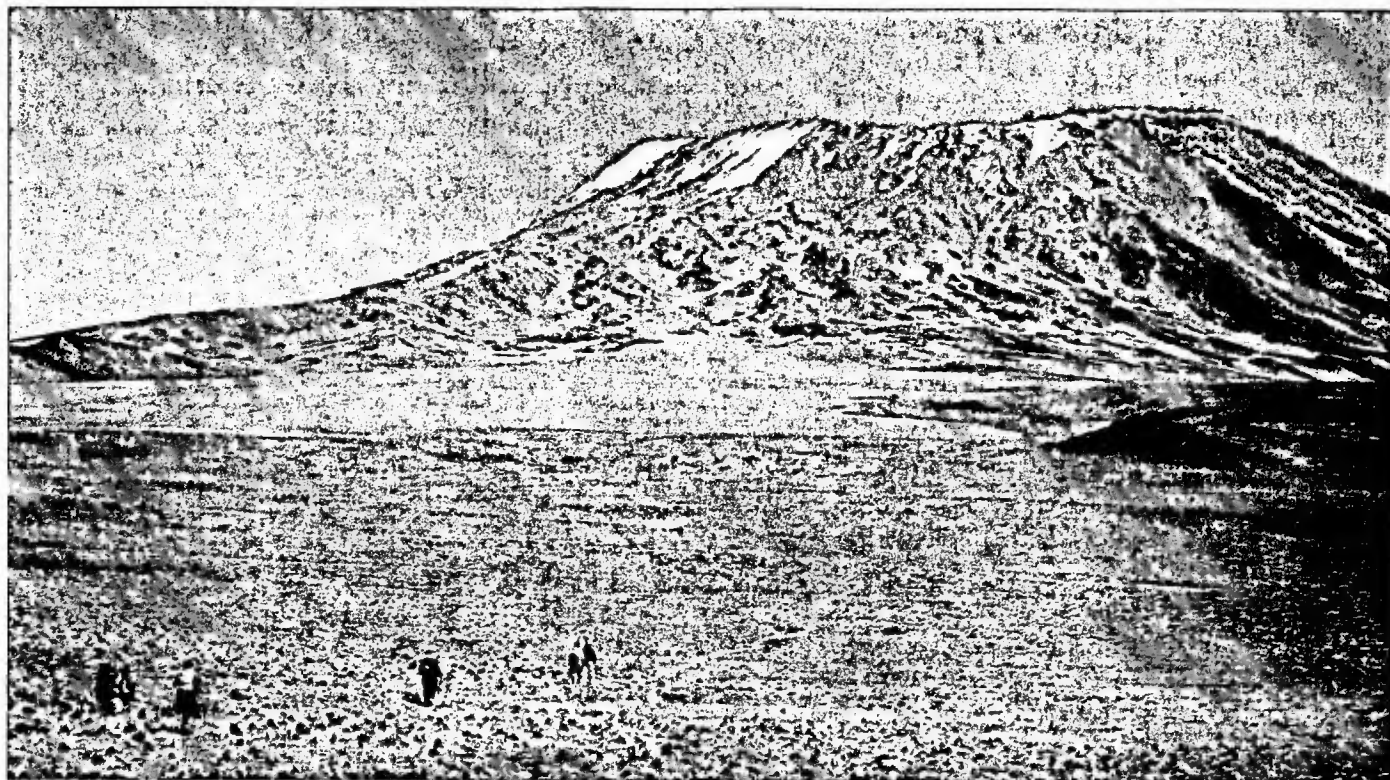
Thompson's wife, Anna, stayed behind during the trip, and although she was worried the whole time, she knew he needed to go.

"I'm proud of him," she said. "As long as I've known him, he's wanted to do this. He needed to do it."

And Thompson is glad, too.

"It was very satisfying," he said. "Like quenching your soul."

Climbing toward a dream



Jim Thompson's party hikes during their trip to Mt. Kilimanjaro in Tanzania last month.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JIM THOMPSON

Local doctor reaches goal of hiking mountain before 50

By JENNIFER WIG

Daily Herald Staff Writer

Jim Thompson was nearly there.

But 600 feet from his destination, the top of Mount Kilimanjaro in Africa, Thompson, 49, didn't think he could take another step.

"For me, it pushed me as far as I could go," he said. "I had just enough to get to the top and that was about it."

Thanks to his daughter, Briana, 19, he did. And he reached the summit of the mountain at about 7 a.m. (12 a.m. central time) June 23, achieving his goal of climbing the mountain before age 50.

Thompson, of St. Charles, began planning the trip more than a year ago. It's one of those ideas that's been knocking around his brain for a long time, and he finally decided to do it. Briana can be credited with that, too, for she gave him a book on the mountain as a Christmas present last year. In a way, she was trying to hint that she wanted to go along.

"I love adventure and I love travel," Briana said. "I've always wanted to go to Africa."

The mountain, an extinct volcano, is the highest in

climbable without the aid of ropes or oxygen, and it does not rank on the list of the world's highest peaks. But the physical journey is still tiring because the peak is a vertical mile from the Savannah plains at the base. Yet Thompson, a doctor at Central DuPage Hospital, said that reaching the 19,343-foot peak is more about mental determination than physical strength. Briana agreed, saying although it was easier for her than anyone else, the idea is always in the back of your mind that you won't finish.

"But I thought, 'we've come this far, we might as well make it,'" she said.

They and several others left June 16 for the three-week trip, stopping first in Amsterdam. They began the hike on June 19 after a one-day rest. The hike took the group up the northern side of the mountain, on what's known as the Rongai route, from the border of Kenya. Although not the prettiest route (Machame) or the most common (Marangu), Thompson said they took this route with the knowledge that it was the most remote. They exited using the southern side, a trail common for tourists because of its ease.

Thompson said he chose this route because fewer than 2 percent of those who make the hike use this trail.

"If I'm going to Africa to do something unusual," he said, "I might as well make it as unusual as I can."

The trail took them from the border to a neighboring mountain, Mawenzi, which is 16,892 feet high.

Mt. Kilimanjaro facts

Elevation (feet): 19,340

Location: Tanzania

Best climbing months: December, January, February, March, June, July, August

First year climbed: 1889

Climb description: "The approach and climb provides spectacular diversity, from scrub-lands thick with African wildlife to lush forests to flowering alpine tundra. All this finally gives way to snow and rock above 15,000 feet."

A comparison: Mt. Everest is 29,035 feet to the top, and Mt. McKinley in Alaska is 20,320.

Source: peakware.com

peaks, they paused at base camp, Kibo Hut, to stow their gear and rest. At 11 p.m. they began the ascent to the top.

Until then, it's simply a strenuous hike, Thompson said. But when people reach 15,000 feet, the oxygen supply is much thinner. Many do not make it, suffering from illness. Although most people vomit during this part of the trip, severe headaches and hallucinations should not be ignored. The only cure is to descend.