

Appalachia

Volume 71
Number 2 *Summer/Fall 2020: Unusual Pioneers*

Article 16

2020

Alpina

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Recommended Citation

(2020) "Alpina," *Appalachia*: Vol. 71 : No. 2 , Article 16.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia/vol71/iss2/16>

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Alpina

A semiannual review of mountaineering in the greater ranges

The 8,000ers

The major news of 2019 was that Nirmal (Nims) Purja, from Nepal, climbed **all fourteen 8,000-meter peaks** in under seven months. The best previous time was a bit under eight years. Records are made to be broken, but rarely are they smashed like this. Here, from the *Kathmandu Post*, is the summary:

Annapurna, 8,091 meters, Nepal, April 23
Dhaulagiri, 8,167 meters, Nepal, May 12
Kangchenjunga, 8,586 meters, Nepal, May 15
Everest, 8,848 meters, Nepal, May 22
Lhotse, 8,516 meters, Nepal, May 22
Makalu, 8,481 meters, Nepal, May 24
Nanga Parbat, 8,125 meters, Pakistan, July 3
Gasherbrum I, 8,080 meters, Pakistan, July 15
Gasherbrum II, 8,035 meters, Pakistan, July 18
K2, 8,611 meters, Pakistan, July 24
Broad Peak, 8,047 meters, Pakistan, July 26
Cho Oyu 8,201 meters, China/Nepal, September 23
Manaslu, 8,163 meters, Nepal, September 27
Shishapangma, 8,013 meters, China, October 29

He reached the summits of Everest, Lhotse, and Makalu in an astounding three days. (Here and elsewhere he used a helicopter to reach a base camp.) He did have support, which varied from one peak to another, from Mingma David Sherpa, Geljen Sherpa, Lakpa Dendi Sherpa, Gesman Tamang, and Halung Dorchi Sherpa, along with Dawa Sherpa, who acted as a base camp manager. Nims timed himself to tackle the westernmost peaks in summer, as they are less affected by the monsoon. July and May were his most prolific summit months. At times the project was in danger because of lack of funds.

The biggest question came at the end. Shishapangma is the only 8,000er to lie entirely in Tibet. Chinese authorities, declaring the mountain unsafe for

anyone, closed it October 1. After some delay, they opened it just for Nims. His immediately classic photo of the crowds on Everest appears in the previous Alpina.

The Mountains Are Heating Up

Perhaps the only good thing about **climate change** is that it is being felt already, and people are paying attention. The effects are especially observable in the mountains. Routes are crumbling, and ice is melting. When I was in Zermatt, Switzerland in 2003, a large hunk of the normal ascent route of the Matterhorn fell off. Nobody was on it at the time, but many climbers higher up had to be plucked off by helicopter. And when I returned to Chamonix–Mont Blanc, France, in 2014, 54 years after my previous visit, the environment looked sadly different. The famous glacier Mer de Glace (river of ice) had in effect retreated, leaving unsightly rubble and moraine. The average temperature in Chamonix rose by more than 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit during the twentieth century. Ludovic Ravel, a geomorphologist with France’s National Centre for Scientific Research and a specialist in the evolution of alpine environments, said that nearly all of the most popular mountaineering routes in the Mont Blanc area have been affected—and some obliterated—by warming temperatures. “The mighty Aletsch—the largest glacier in the Alps—could completely disappear by the end of this century if nothing is done to rein in climate change,” according to a report from Agence France-Presse on September 19, 2019.

The fearsome north face of the Eiger is safer in winter, when it is frozen, than in summer, when melting lets loose a fusillade of rocks. The *New York Times* reported (on October 13, 2019) that scientists had determined that “2.8 million cubic feet” of ice on the Eiger’s western side “appeared unstable.”

In Africa, the famed Diamond Couloir on Mount Kenya (5,199 meters) has lost much of its ice, which could disappear completely. Something similar is happening on the Tetons’ most famous alpine route, the Black Ice Couloir.

The situation may be more dire in the Himalaya. Glacial melt has produced lakes with moraine borders that could collapse, with disastrous consequences lower down.

Mountaineering publications have documented these hazards. *Alpinist* magazine 68 (Winter 2020) features an article about “melting giants.” Its focus is the Meije (3,983 meters), the last major peak in the Alps to be climbed (1877). In early August 2018 two rock pinnacles came crashing down the normal ascent route, seriously injuring two climbers. The experienced

guardian of the Promontoire Refuge has never seen so warm a summer. Situated around 10,000 feet, the refuge had seen only one subfreezing day in the 70 days since its seasonal opening.

In the 2019 *American Alpine Journal* John Harlin III writes sorrowfully about Chamonix: “In a few decades most of the valley glaciers will be gone.”

We don’t know how bad it will get—only that it will get worse.

Himalaya

The photograph below and on the title page of this journal is one of the most dramatic you are likely to see: a lone climber, viewed from above, atop the prowlike summit of a peak in Nepal, with a glacier far below. The photographer was a drone; the climber was David Lama. The mountain was the previously unclimbed **Lunag Ri (6,907 meters)**. The summit was the culmination of a multiyear effort by Lama. Twice before he had been accompanied by the Himalayan veteran Conrad Anker (see *Alpina*, Winter/Spring 2018). This time Lama was alone. He reached the top October 25, 2018, after three days of very difficult climbing. The achievement was awarded a *Piolet d’Or*.

It is impossible to salute this triumph without sadly noting that, as described in the previous *Alpina*, Lama was killed in an avalanche in the Canadian Rockies in April 2019. A great career, and a life, cut short.



A drone captured David Lama on Lunag Ri.

SEAN HAVERSTOCK/RED BULL CONTENT POOL

Alaska

Karl Egloff, a 38-year-old Swiss-Ecuadorian who must move very fast indeed, climbed **Denali (20,310 feet)** in less than twelve hours, round trip, by the West Buttress—the fastest time ever. Egloff has established other speed records on major peaks, including Kilimanjaro (19,341 feet)—under seven hours—and Aconcagua (22,841 feet) in under twelve.

The year 2018 saw two impressive solo ascents: Colin Haley on the formidable North Ridge of Mount Hunter (14,573 feet) and Cole Taylor on the very steep North Pillar of Devil's Thumb (9,077 feet).

In the first part of 2019, Denali, as always, attracted the most attention: 1,230 climbers set out to climb North America's highest peak; 65 percent were successful. In contrast, **Mount Foraker**, at 17,400 feet the fourth highest in North America, had only 21 aspirants.

Are the Mountains Getting More Dangerous?

The spring 2019 season on Everest ended in eleven deaths. This was a year that claimed the lives of six of the foremost climbers in the world—two in the Himalaya (Nanga Parbat), three in Canada (Howse Peak), and one in Mexico, noted later. Condemnation has followed with such proclamations as climbers are selfish and reckless and the sport is much too dangerous and getting more so.

None of this is new. In 1865, during the golden age of mountaineering in the Alps, seven men made the first ascent of the Matterhorn. On the way down, four of them fell to their deaths. At the time, rappelling had not been introduced, so you had to climb down what you had climbed up—often a more perilous task.

The British press was filled with indignation. Charles Dickens wrote, “Reckless Mountaineering is greater folly than gambling.” Mountaineers were not deterred. They extended their efforts to the Caucasus, Andes, and eventually the Himalaya. Casualties ensued. In 1895 the great visionary English climber A.F. Mummery made the first serious attempt on an 8,000-meter peak, Nanga Parbat. He underestimated its challenges, but did make progress on a route now named the Mummery Rib. (This line, still not completed, is where two challengers died last year in a daring winter attempt.) Then Mummery disappeared with two Gurkha companions, while searching for an easier way up.

The first great age of Himalayan climbing began with the British expeditions of 1922 and 1924. Seven men died on the first trip, four on the second. These figures were dwarfed by two German expeditions to Nanga Parbat: ten fatalities in 1934, sixteen more three years later. In all these cases, these were the only expeditions on the peak. The ratio of deaths to climbers is shocking.

Everest has dominated climbing news recently: tons of garbage removed, scams, bodies emerging as temperatures warm, and most of all overcrowding—see the previous Alpina for an iconic view of the throngs on the summit

ridge. There were many more ahead of them and behind. In 2019 the Nepalese government issued 381 permits for foreigners. Adding an equal number of local guides makes over 750 climbers. And then perhaps 200 more on the other standard route from Tibet. About 1,000, all vying for the few good weather days in May.

The eleven deaths number the same as in the two British trips of the 1920s, but the often-cited fatalities-to-summits ratio is far different. For last spring, it was approximately 2.2 percent. You cannot make the calculation before the first ascent in 1953 because you cannot divide by zero. Until the 1970s, the major Himalayan peaks rarely saw more than one attempt in a season. Casualty figures, still high, had to be measured against the relatively small number of challengers. Currently not only Everest but other 8,000-meter peaks such as Cho Oyu and even the very difficult K2 entertain numerous commercial expeditions, with clients of varying training and ability.

At the cutting edge, climbers will probe such remote areas as the polar regions and eastern Tibet. But *remote* is a relative term. In 1922 the British had to trek for more than a month to reach Everest Base Camp. A road goes there now. Communication has become immensely easier. Take your satellite phone. Rescues, though often hazardous, are often feasible in distant places. Helicopters can fly very high and have plucked climbers from the most improbable ledges. And the equipment! A famous photo shows George Mallory and Edward Norton high on Everest in 1922. They might be out for a scramble on an easy alpine peak. Their ice axes are long and cumbersome, their boots leather, their jackets mostly wool, and their hats look designed for the tropics. Today one wears vapor barrier boots, a complete down outfit, and a helmet.

Despite the explosion of mountain activity, casualty figures have remained surprisingly stable. The American Alpine Club's tally of fatalities in North American climbing has fluctuated little. The highest number was in 1976.

What has been done can be surpassed. Mountaineers will always be pushing standards higher. In March 2019, Jim Reynolds, a young American, free soloed to the top of Mount Fitz Roy (11,020 feet), in Patagonia, by a route somewhat easier but much longer than Alex Honnold's on El Capitan. More remarkably, Reynolds climbed down the entire route (you can walk off the top of El Cap). Similarly, it was not until 1964 that the last of the world's 8,000-meter peaks was climbed. In 1986 Reinhold Messner became the first to ascend all of them. As noted, Nirmal Purja recently climbed them in a single year.

Such ventures are indeed risky. Climbing is dangerous. It always has been.

In Memoriam

Bob Swift, age 89, died October 25, 2019. He was prominent in the golden age of Yosemite climbing, often teaming with the pioneer Allen Steck. He was also a member of many foreign ventures, including one to the Karakoram, which resulted in the only first ascent by an American team of an 8,000-meter peak, Gasherbrum 1 (8,080 meters), also known as Hidden Peak.

Wayne Merry, Swift's Yosemite contemporary, died five days after Swift. He was 88. Although most famed for his role in the first ascent of El Capitan in 1958, he made other notable Yosemite Valley ascents and in the 1970s helped establish Yosemite Search and Rescue and the Yosemite Mountaineering School. One of the critical and troubling episodes in Merry's life came when he was a ranger in Denali National Park. In that capacity he played a major but frustrating role in the efforts to save seven climbers stranded by a storm in July 1967. In the mountain's worst tragedy, all of them died. Merry struggled against bureaucracy to mount an overflight that was too late.

Brad Gobright died last November in an accident in northern Mexico's El Potrero Chico, a national park. He was 31. His death adds to the list of talented young climbers lost last year. He had made many difficult rock ascents in Yosemite, Eldorado Canyon, Squamish, and elsewhere. Many of these climbs were unroped solos. By a sad irony, his death came while rappelling with a partner, Aidan Jacobson, who survived with injuries. Gobright had slipped off the end of his rappel line.

Immediately after the accident, Alex Honnold wrote on Instagram, "I suppose there's something to be said about being safe out there and the inherent risks in climbing but I don't really care about that right now. I'm just sad for Brad and his family." Many months have now passed, and it is appropriate to note that this was an accident that need never have happened. If these climbers had only tied knots in the ends of their ropes (they were rappelling simultaneously) they would not have fallen.

A Canine Correction

Apologies to the late Ralph Waterman (see previous Alpina). He was indeed a member of the Appalachian Mountain Club, until it was revealed that he was a dog.

—Steven Jervis

Sources include the Kathmandu Post, Alan Arnette's blog alanarnette.com/blog/, and the New York Times. Thanks to Assistant Alpina Editor Michael Levy.