

Appalachia

Volume 70
Number 1 *Winter/Spring 2019: Quests That
Wouldn't Let Go*

Article 15

2019

Alpina

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia>



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

(2019) "Alpina," *Appalachia*: Vol. 70 : No. 1 , Article 15.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia/vol70/iss1/15>

This In Every Issue is brought to you for free and open access by Dartmouth Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Appalachia by an authorized editor of Dartmouth Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dartmouthdigitalcommons@groups.dartmouth.edu.

Alpina

A semiannual review of mountaineering in the greater ranges

Everest 2018

Spring 2018 saw an unusual run of good weather in the prime summit season, the last two weeks of May. Everest chronicler Alan Arnette estimates the number of successful summits from both sides of the mountain in 2018 at about 715. If that number turns out to be accurate, it will easily smash the previous record of 667 set in 2013. About 476 of 2018 summits came from the Nepali side of the mountain, while the remaining 239 were made from the north side in Tibet.

The Hillary Step. In 1953 Edmund Hillary described a rock formation high on the summit ridge as perhaps spelling “the difference between success and failure.” He surmounted it with help from an adjacent cornice. The Hillary Step, usually climbed face-on, was a major obstacle to later challengers. In recent crowded years, climbers sometimes waited an hour at this point, despite the provision of fixed ropes. Starting in spring 2017, climbers reported that the step was gone, but the Nepal Mountaineering Association refuted the claim. By mid-2018, the answer seemed clear: It has been destroyed, probably by the 2015 earthquake. The resulting snow slope, by most accounts, makes this section significantly easier.

As usual, several died. One of the saddest losses was the Japanese climber Nobukazu Kuriki, 35. He was making his eighth attempt on the summit. In 2012, on his fourth try, he was caught in a blizzard and lost parts of nine fingers. This time he went missing in the vicinity of camp III and could not be rescued in time. He had said that what he wanted people to say about him was “he suffers so much and he’s still climbing.”

Trash. South Col (about 8,000 m), the last campsite on the most popular route on Everest, has been called the world’s highest junkyard. Its bleak extent is home to empty oxygen containers, torn tents, and human waste. The problem also exists elsewhere on the mountain, as more climbers crowd onto it every year. In 2017 climbers brought down almost 25 tons of trash and 15 tons of human waste. That illustrates the size of the problem.

Some remedial measures have been attempted. On the Tibet side, climbers are fined if they fail to bring down 18 pounds of rubbish. A similar system is in effect on the Nepal approach. But the mountain, completely untouched 100 years ago, is far from clean.

An engineer, Garry Porter, has recently proposed a biogas digester—a large tank that could turn excrement into fertilizer and methane gas that could be used for cooking. This might actually work. Rubbish and glacial melting are two grave impacts of human activity and intrusion.

K2

Another year has passed, and K2 remains the only 8,000-m peak without a winter ascent. A very strong Polish team was thwarted by rockfall, bad weather, and quarreling. They switched routes, from the Cesen to the classic Abruzzi, but they could not surpass about 7,400 m. In late February, without consent of the expedition leader, Denis Urubko made a daring (or reckless) solo attempt that took him to close to 1,000 meters of the summit. Urubko, an exceptionally strong climber who has been described as “a challenge to work with,” received a hostile reception upon return to base camp and quit the expedition soon thereafter.

The expedition did have one startling triumph. Just as members were beginning their ascent, a French woman, Elisabeth Revol, and a Polish man, Tomasz Mackiewicz, got into trouble high on Nanga Parbat, another fearsome 8,000-m peak. Four of the Polish team, Urubko included, were helicoptered some 100 miles northwest to the rescue. They could not reach Mackiewicz, who remained missing, but brought Revol down to safety. Then they returned to K2.

Record Three 8,000-ers in a Single Season

A Nepali woman, 28-year-old Nima Jangmu Sherpa, summited Kangchenjunga on May 23, 2018, establishing a record of summiting three 8,000-m peaks in a single season. She climbed Everest, Lhotse, and Kangchenjunga in 25 days. Everest and Lhotse are neighbors, but Kangchenjunga stands some distance east. She reached its summit only nine days after ascending Everest.

Denali

Everest is not the only mountain with a human waste problem. South America's highest peak, Aconcagua, where mules exacerbate the trouble, is getting new dry toilets. On Alaska's Denali, proposed new regulations would require that all poop produced below camp 4 (at an elevation of about 14,200 feet) be cached in biodegradable bags, taken down to base camp, and flown to Talkeetna. At greater heights, a designated crevasse will be used for disposal. The problem on Denali is dire. In less than 50 years, climbers have deposited at least 145,505 pounds of feces along the West Buttress route, by far the most popular on the mountain. For years, the waste was dumped into crevasses, from which it will likely emerge with the progress of the glacier.

Urban First Ascent

The outer wall of a 25-story office building in St. Paul saw its first ascent—solo, unroped—on June 13, 2018. The climber was a 2-year-old female raccoon. Her slow progress drew nationwide attention. She has moved to the countryside; it is not known whether she will continue her climbing career.

Climbing as Economic Engine

According to outdoorindustry.org, outdoor recreation employs more than 7 million people in the United States. Climbing is doing its share for the economy, with crags and climbing gyms growing in popularity. Near the very active Kentucky climbing area Red River Gorge, one can rent a “luxury yurt.” Chattanooga, Tennessee, has been described as “America’s new climbing capital,” according to the local chamber of commerce. Not all climbers use tents and sleeping bags in Chattanooga: “Climbing visitors generated a total of 2,709 paid hotel/hostel room nights in the 2015–2016 season,” reported the UTC Tourism Center’s “Chattanooga Climbing Impact Report.”

In Memoriam: Jim “The Bird” Bridwell (1944–2018)

Beginning as a high school student in San Jose, California, in the early 1960s, Jim Bridwell swiftly became the leading figure in a new generation of Yosemite climbers. One of the best known of his many achievements there was the first one-day ascent of the original (Nose) route on El Capitan. An iconic

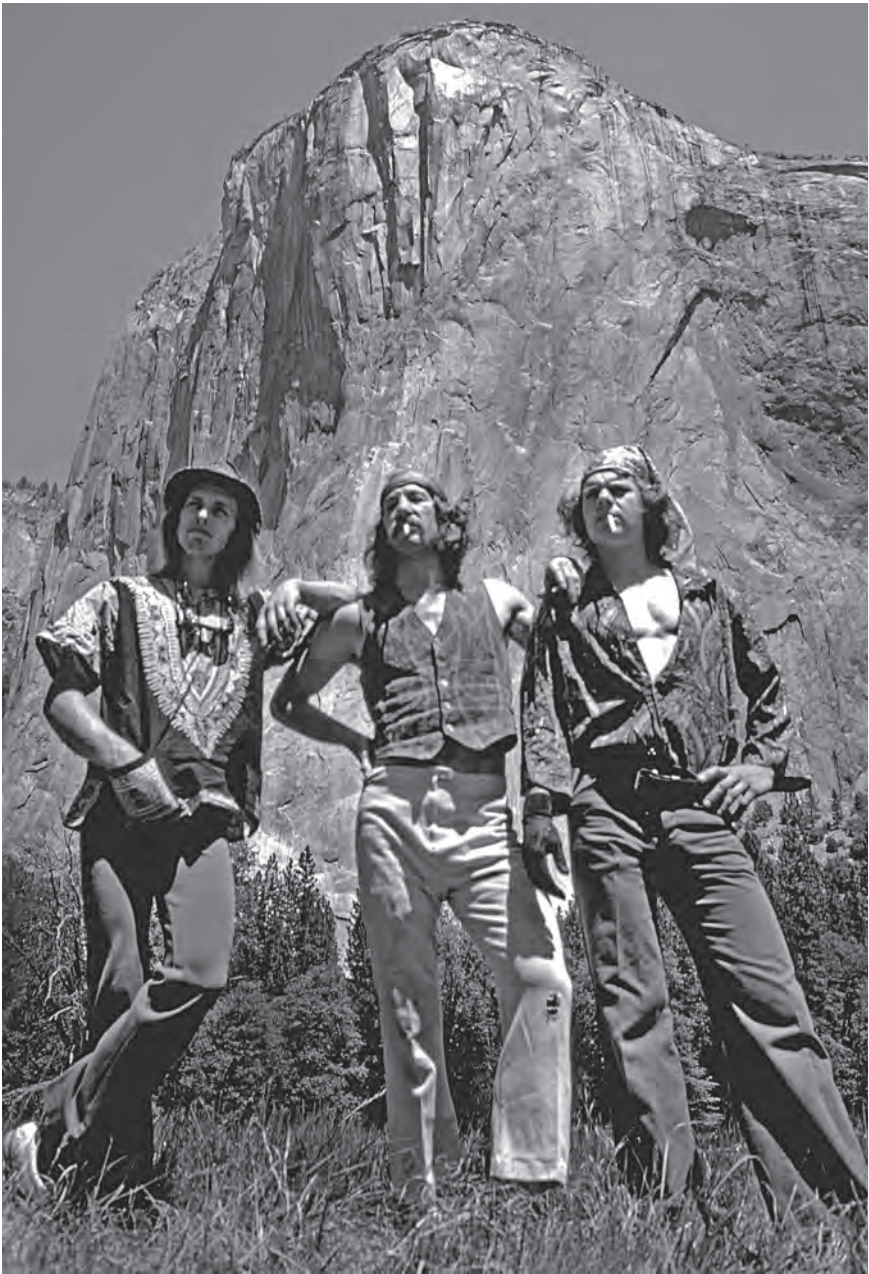


Jim Bridwell celebrates after climbing the Compressor Route on Cerro Torre in 1979 with Steve Brewer. Arguably, this was the route's first ascent, as Cesare Maestri never stepped foot on Cerro Torre's summit. STEVE BREWER

photograph (see page 124) shows Bridwell and co-conspirators John Long and Billy Westbay after their triumph. Their attitude is hippie-rebellious. A cigarette dips from Bridwell's lips. Perhaps his greatest contributions to Yosemite—and climbing in general—were his pioneering free ascents: no direct aid, in places few had thought possible.

Although Bridwell will be forever associated with Yosemite, he made some daring alpine ascents, including the east face of Alaska's Moose's Tooth (10,335 ft) with Mugs Stump and the third ascent, with Steve Brewer, of Patagonia's fearsome Cerro Torre (10,262 ft).

Jim lived hard. He was openly fond of tobacco, alcohol, and controlled substances. He had his share of climbing accidents, among them a long ground fall on rappel that effectively ended his climbing career in 2008. He died of complications of hepatitis C. His son, Layton, wrote, "More likely than not it came from the tattoo he received from his cross-navigation of Borneo."



Here is the iconic image of (left to right) Billy Westbay, Jim Bridwell, and John Long after they made the first-ever one-day ascent of the Nose on El Capitan, Yosemite, in 1975. MIKE WHITE

For all his toughness, Bridwell could be gentle and generous. His fondness for birds is reflected in his nickname. In his later years he was a tutor to many younger climbers.

Yosemite

In the last Alpina I noted a speed record for El Capitan. I mentioned that records are made to be broken, and this one already has been. In early June the premier team of Tommy Caldwell and Alex Honnold topped out in 1 hour, 58 minutes, and 7 seconds. This cracks the 2-hour mark and beats the former record by more than 20 minutes.

El Cap, unclimbed until 1958, now swarms with climbers. But it remains a dangerous place. In May, Hans Florine, former speed record holder, fell some 20 feet and badly injured both legs. At last report, he faced a long recovery. Shortly thereafter, two very experienced climbers, Tim Klein and Jason Wells, fell to their deaths on the Free Blast route, cause unknown. Klein had climbed El Cap, by various routes, 106 times.

Leif-Norman Patterson: A Remembrance

Winter 1958 was unusually snowy in the White Mountains. Many of the ice gullies in Mount Washington's Huntington Ravine had almost no ice. Conditions prompted my Harvard classmate Mike Wortis to propose camping halfway up Pinnacle Gully. (Some Harvard elders thought we were crazy.) We needed a third—hard—man. Thus Leif-Norman Patterson.

Leif was born in Indiana, of Norwegian descent. When I knew him, he was on his way to a doctorate in mathematics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; he finished it in 1962. He was undeterred by snow and cold. So, in late March, Leif, Mike, and I climbed the first two pitches of Pinnacle Gully. Only the first one was its normal icy self. We hauled up a mountain tent, food, and a stove. It was easy to carve a snow platform for our tent. Just in case, we tied the tent to a piton. But we were well protected by the gigantic rock overhang on the left side of the gully. The night was very comfortable.

The next day George Millikan joined us in the Alpine Garden to construct an igloo for the next night. It was comfortable too, except for the occasional ceiling drip. Later Mike wrote a brief article, "Practical Igloo Building."



Leif-Norman Patterson throws water on a stove fire in the Wind River Range in 1958.

STEVEN JERVIS

That summer I organized an informal trip to Wyoming's Wind River mountains. We started with nine members, including Leif. We ended up with only 3.5 climbers (that is, four, but one climber could stay only half the time). Among the early dropouts was Leif's fiancée. Leif wrote me: "She will not be coming because she and I do not get along too well." We 3.5 made a few moderate climbs. Then Leif, Bob Page, and I set out for Gannett Peak, highest in the state. We took a poorly defined route and were rather slow at it. We were caught in an afternoon thunderstorm that set our ice axes buzzing. We did reach the top that day, but not the bottom. A cold bivouac ensued. Leif was particularly restless; we could barely dissuade him from going down in the dark. He could be pretty stubborn at times.

On the pack-out several weeks later, my pack frame fell apart and had to be retied with parachute cord. Leif and Bob claimed that their loads were heavier than mine and insisted on weighing them back in civilization. They were right.

We headed north to the Tetons. We undertook one of my coveted routes, the North Ridge of the Grand Teton. It starts from the top of the Grandstand, a large shoulder of mixed terrain. These days Grand Teton is often approached from the south, but we had no hint of that. Instead we started from a camp

on the Teton Glacier. If you tackle the Grandstand toward the right, the going is fairly easy, but rocks do fall off the north side of the Grand. You can avoid them by staying next to the face, but the climbing is harder. Whatever we did, it took a long time. From the top of the Grandstand, the ridge looked stormy and hostile. We retreated, only to find our tent ravaged by a bear. We did climb the Grand Teton, however, by the classic Exum Ridge. It was a warm, sunny day; by wordless agreement, we unroped after the first few moves.

We based ourselves in Jenny Lake campground. Late one evening Leif looked out the tent door to investigate a strange munching sound. “We have company,” he said. A very big brown bear was helping itself to the dried apples we had unwisely set out on the picnic table to hydrate. We kept quiet, as did the bear. When finished eating, it shuffled off.

At that time, Leif seemed, like most of us, a man of moderate ambition. I did not anticipate his transformation into a major alpinist. Within ten years he had reached the top of rarely visited Mt Logan (19,551 ft), the highest point in Canada, and had made the first winter ascent of the formidable Mt Robson (12,972 ft). With characteristic understatement, Leif wrote that it “does not seem to be a heavy snow mountain, and temperatures in higher areas normally range from 0 to -20 F. Innocent snow flurries occur frequently. Storms apparently do not ordinarily last more than two or three days, but they may bring simultaneously very high winds, heavy snowfall, and intense cold (-40)”. He also summited some of the hardest peaks in the Andes.

One of his most significant climbs was Denali, in 1972. With five companions, Leif made a three-and-a-half-day ascent of the south face of this cold and stormy mountain. The climb was accomplished without tents; all equipment was on the backs of the climbers. This was an early instance of the lightweight “alpine style” trips that later, rapidly, gained popularity.

Denali led to Leif’s most ambitious undertaking: K2, at 8,611 m the second highest mountain in the world; in 1975 it had remained unclimbed since the first ascent in 1954. The 1975 American expedition selected a very difficult route on the northwest ridge; this route had discouraged the Italians in 1909 and the Americans in 1938 and was not climbed until 1991. The 1975 group did not get very far; it was stopped on steep ground more than 6,000 feet short of the summit. You can read about it in Galen Rowell’s *In the Throne Room of the Mountain Gods* (Sierra Club Books, 1977), one of the first books to detail the internal dissension that afflicts numerous big expeditions. Many members, including Rowell, come off rather badly. Not Leif. He “combined an inward Scandinavian stubbornness with great inward modesty.” Somehow

he managed to avoid entanglement in the antagonisms of what he called “such a messed-up trip.”

Americans returned to K2 in 1978. By then it had seen a second ascent by a Japanese group whose siege tactics Leif would have deplored: some 50 climbers and 1,500 porters. The Americans climbed a gorgeous new route, the northeast ridge. But Leif did not get to go on the trip. He had settled in British Columbia, with a wife with whom he evidently did get along and their two children. In December 1976, he and his 12-year-old son died in an avalanche in the Canadian Rockies.

In the Throne Room of the Mountain Gods was published shortly after Leif’s death. It is dedicated to him: “the best of us.”

—Steven Jervis
Alpina Editor

Thanks to Michael Levy for securing permission to publish the photos of Jim Bridwell. Sources: Alan Arnette’s blog at alanarnette.com; Agence France-Presse; Kathmandu Post; Washington Post.