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Climbers Who Volunteer

*Everest climber and White Mountains
fixture Rick Wilcox reflects*

Story by Erik Eisele

Photo research by Joe Klementovich



Editor's note: This tribute to climber Rick Wilcox offers a glimpse into the lives of volunteer mountain rescuers who live in New Hampshire's North Country. They leave their day jobs and homes at all hours to stage dangerous searches high on mountains. Wilcox, in Mountain Rescue Service, has been at it longer than most, and his low-key approach to the work means that most people who step into his store on Main Street in North Conway have no idea that this cashier in a T-shirt has helped save many people over half of his life. Wilcox has said he believes it's time for a new generation to lead, and term limits have ended his leadership in this active rescue group formed in 1972 by the state, the Appalachian Mountain Club, and climbers. Longtime member Steve Dupuis took over as president in 2017. The author of this piece has worked alongside MRS for years.

C RAMPONS HAD NO FRONT POINTS A HALF-CENTURY AGO, WHEN Rick Wilcox started climbing. They were floppy affairs with ten downward-facing points, great for walking in but with nothing to offer bite on steep terrain. Ice axes were similarly primitive: long and wooden-shafted, with picks that weren't built for waterfall ice. They broke regularly on icy inclines. Climbers had gone up the gullies in Mount Washington's Huntington Ravine in the 1930s, but in the 1960s, these water-carved ravines still stood as the apogee of ice climbing. Mountaineers chopped hundreds of steps. This might take all day.

On rock, sticky rubber climbing shoes would not appear for years. Most rock climbers wore Limmer boots and, as harnesses didn't exist yet, tied twisted-nylon ropes directly around their waists. At Yosemite National Park, the pioneers of modern rock climbing had only recently reached the summits of Half Dome and El Capitan; it was the start of a golden age there. The outdoor industry was in its infancy. Yvon Chouinard had just begun manufacturing pitons as Chouinard Equipment, the outfit that would one day grow into both Patagonia and Black Diamond.

Back then, in the mid-1960s, Rick Wilcox was a high school student in Middleton, Massachusetts, one of four children. His father, the Rev. Dr. Richard F. Wilcox Sr., was the pastor at Middleton Congregational Church, and his mother, Jean Ferguson Wilcox, taught preschool and kindergarten.

Rick Wilcox, left, with George Hurley on a cliff in 1982. COURTESY OF RICK WILCOX

Wilcox spent his high school free time hiking in the Blue Hills Reservation south of Boston, where he discovered the challenge of climbing on Rattlesnake Rocks. He began learning to rock-climb under the tutelage of the local Appalachian Mountain Club chapter, practicing the techniques on Boston crags. Soon he was looking for bigger objectives, like Whitehorse and Cathedral ledges in the White Mountains of New Hampshire.

“I did Whitehorse and Cathedral when I was in high school,” Wilcox said, sitting in the basement of International Mountain Equipment, the iconic North Conway climbing shop he owns that stands only a few minutes’ drive from both cliffs.

These two crags still offer a modern measure of a climber’s mettle. But in the early days of the mid-1960s, Cathedral Ledge held only a handful of routes. And Whitehorse was still a wilderness crag; the road, golf course, housing development, and hotel now carved into the forests at its base wouldn’t show up for years. Wilcox hiked in half an hour to reach a slab route. He hiked for much longer to reach the South Buttress of Whitehorse. Despite its proximity to town, Whitehorse was a big, remote cliff. And Wilcox was there, before climbing routes wound their way up every wall of these two celebrated New England crags. The flurry of activity that would



Leather Limmer boots with crampons lacking front points: Wilcox’s footgear for cliffs in 1967. COURTESY OF RICK WILCOX

one day become North Conway's thriving climbing scene had yet to arrive; the sport had not yet exploded into the mainstream; but a young Wilcox was making some early stirrings. Here were his beginnings: Rattlesnake Rocks, North Conway, Cathedral Ledge.

From these early smallish adventures, he would evolve into a pillar of the New Hampshire climbing community. Wilcox started climbing with the Appalachian Mountain Club, and then he used his University of Massachusetts college loans to finance his first climbing expedition to Alaska.

IN THE 50 YEARS THAT HAVE PASSED, WILCOX HAS BECOME ONE OF THE most recognizable names in New England climbing. His store, IME, is a sort of headquarters for rock climbers, ice climbers, and mountaineers in North Conway, New Hampshire, and across New England. It's one of a handful of places in the Northeast where climbers gather as a tribe. The upstairs is a school, where clients prepare for summer rock ascents and winter adventures, and the basement is a consignment shop, where the frugal mountaineer can find deals on anything from jackets to approach shoes, ice tools to skis.

Wilcox is there most days, working the floor, running the register, helping customers fit into ski boots and backpacks, sprinting up and down the stairs like a kid late for his high school geometry class. At 69, he might seem poised to slow down, but the former secretary of the American Alpine Club and vice president of the American Mountain Guides Association shows little sign of such movement.

His youth was marked by some of the most important ascents in modern northeastern climbing. "My three main climbing partners were John Bragg, John Bouchard, and Henry Barber," he said: three men who became pioneers in the emerging sport of climbing. Each was known for putting up hard new routes on rock, on ice, and in the mountains, from New Hampshire to the Shawangunks of New York to Yosemite Valley, the Alps, and farther afield. Paired with partners like these, Wilcox climbed his way into almost all of the storied ascents of early New Hampshire.

Like Pinnacle Gully on Mount Washington. First climbed in 1930, it was still one of the hardest ice climbs in North America three decades later. Ascents were rare, sometimes only coming once a year, and they would take as long as two days. Climbers would employ the primitive long ice ax to chop steps and fix ropes. By 1970, methods were about to change.

Wilcox was finishing college and working for Eastern Mountain Sports, where he crossed paths with Chouinard, the future Patagonia retailer founder.

The much admired climber, a decade older than Wilcox, visited EMS to pitch new equipment for ascending frozen waterfalls: rigid crampons, ice hammers, and shorter ice axes. He said climbers in Europe were using such equipment to ascend steep routes without cutting steps.

In the 50 years that have passed, Wilcox has become one of the most recognizable names in New England climbing.

“I was intrigued,” Wilcox said, so he bought Chouinard’s new tools. He hiked in to the Harvard Cabin at the base of Huntington Ravine, where he met Jim McCarthy, another storied climber a few decades older. McCarthy was looking for partners. He took one look at Wilcox and his newly purchased Chouinard equipment and approached him. “Son, how would you like to climb Pinnacle Gully tomorrow?” McCarthy asked.

“The reason he came to me was the tools,” Wilcox said. They were the latest equipment, the newest gear in the sport, and the future of ice climbing. The next morning, the team set out to climb. With Wilcox’s Chouinard axes in hand, McCarthy cut not one step, completing the formerly two-day route in a matter of hours. A new era was dawning, and Wilcox found himself on the rope team. That would become his habit. He usually climbed in the supporting role on cliffs.

Two years later, the 18-year-old John Bouchard climbed the plumb line of the East, a dirty split of rock on New Hampshire’s Cannon Cliff that oozes brown and orange ice called the Black Dike. Bouchard made the ascent in a snowstorm, alone, climbing a line that was an unbelievable leap in difficulty compared with Pinnacle Gully.

But few believed such a young and inexperienced climber could complete so difficult an ascent. So the next winter Wilcox joined Bouchard, along with Henry Barber, who would go on to become the best rock climber in the world in the 1970s, to repeat the route. The trio climbed their way to the top, confirming Bouchard’s story of the ascent. Once again, standards of difficulty were changing, and again Wilcox was at the fore.

And he would be there again, this time on Cathedral Ledge with John Bragg. The route called “Repentance” was a well-known rock climb, but Bragg had been watching it as it grew choked with ice. He wanted to climb it, and for the ascent, he partnered with Wilcox.

“John did all the leading,” Wilcox said. “I was the belayer and the guy with the camera.”

Together, they ascended terrain that would have been impossible just a few years earlier, pitch after pitch of vertical ice. The route still gives experienced climbers pause.

In a handful of years, the Black Dike had taken the place of Pinnacle Gully as a contender for the hardest route in North America and was then supplanted by Repentance. After 30 years of stagnation, climbing difficulty was making a meteoric rise. And to each ascent, Wilcox’s name would be permanently affixed.

Wilcox’s work for EMS started in Wellesley, Massachusetts. The company asked if he’d open a new store in North Conway, New Hampshire, near Whitehorse and Cathedral ledges. That landed him where he is today. From 1971 to 1976, EMS was in the spot on Main Street where IME now operates. The store, EMS’s fourth, filled one story. As manager, Wilcox worked the register and the floor, fitted customers for boots and packs, sold skis and sleeping bags—just as he does in his own store today. He served as the president of the EMS Climbing School, which brought the burgeoning worldwide sport to the nearby cliffs.



Rick Wilcox modeling wool bib knickers in an old IME catalog. JOE KLEMENTOVICH

IT'S AROUND THEN THE RESCUES BEGAN. THE FIRST BIG ONE WAS on Katahdin.

"I remember it vividly," Wilcox said. In February 1974, six members of an AMC climbing party were trapped high in a gully on Pamola Peak. They had been ice climbing, had failed to make the summit, and wound up spending the night on a ledge a few hundred feet from the top. It was 30 degrees below 0 Fahrenheit and blowing to 100 MPH, not a time to be out past dark and exposed.

Who could help them? The park rangers weren't trained for such conditions or for climbing. Ice ascents were a new thing, and no one knew what to do in an emergency. Someone at Baxter State Park came up with an idea to call the climbers in North Conway.

"There were five of us," Wilcox said, all local climbers and guides. "At first everything went well." The park flew the impromptu rescue team from the airport in North Conway directly to Millinocket, Maine, a short drive from Katahdin, and they made their way to Chimney Pond.

That's when the confusion began. The ragtag rescue group met a cool reception from the rangers on scene, who were expecting a professional rescue team with uniforms and badges, not a pack of "hippie climbers." That, paired with the darkness and weather, left Wilcox and the rescue crew bivvying in the snow. "There was no way we were going up at night."

The next morning, four of the AMC climbers made it off Pamola Peak on their own, but two remained stranded high up. The North Conway rescue team climbed to the summit in the daylight and rappelled down to the ledge, where they found the two remaining climbers in dire straits. One would later lose his legs, Wilcox said. The other, Thomas Ketty, died.

That, Wilcox said, was the start of what he would become best known for: the Mountain Rescue Service. MRS became synonymous with Wilcox's name—even more so than his 64 climbing expeditions, his 36 trips to Nepal, or his successful 1991 Mount Everest expedition. MRS is a specialized team made of climbers, mountaineers, and guides who volunteer their skills in technical terrain and extreme environments. Its members have been rescuing lost, injured, and stranded climbers for more than 40 years, and for almost all of that time, Wilcox has served as its leader.

"It's climbers taking care of climbers," he said. "It's not one person. There's a core group, and I'm not the only guy with 40 years under my belt."

MRS team members are on call 24 hours a day, any time of year. MRS can respond to anything from a multiday or nighttime winter search to technical rope rescues to ski resort lift evacuations. Since its founding, MRS members have gone on roughly 500 rescues (“including nine times we’ve rescued members of the rescue team,” Wilcox said), some of which turned into dramatic events that made national news headlines. MRS goes into terrain unapproachable by most people, and lives have been saved as a result.

From 1976 until October 2016, one climber was in charge: Rick Wilcox. An era has ended.

FOR MANY DECADES, THE STATE OF NEW HAMPSHIRE HAD COORDINATED mountain rescues with the help of groups like AMC, which has a long history of providing trained rescue personnel on emergency calls. MRS formed in 1972 at the request of AMC’s Search and Rescue Committee, which sought a specialized team of local rescuers who could handle the rising number of accidents on cliffs and in bad weather. More people were venturing onto vertical terrain, ice-covered cliffs, and above treeline in winter. Climbers had the expertise to deal with such inevitabilities.

Climbers, however, were—and still are—a notoriously independent bunch. In the 1970s, they were particularly aloof because technical climbing was a new sport practiced by only a few. But the entities that started MRS found a way to engage them in rescues. The U.S. Forest Service, New Hampshire Fish and Game, New Hampshire State Parks and AMC joined together and incorporated as the nonprofit Mountain Rescue Service. Then they took a bizarre step: The heads of this new organization called the climbers to a meeting. “They said, ‘We’re Mountain Rescue, and you’re the team,’” Wilcox said. “They just didn’t trust climbers, a bunch of dope smokers sleeping in their cars.”

Trust them or not, they knew they needed them. Four years after MRS started, Wilcox was elected president, and served in that role until he stepped down at the end of 2016. Term limits exhausted the amount of times he could be reelected. But Wilcox also said he recognized that it was time to step aside and let new generations get involved. His leadership style was low-key. “The president is a cheerleader,” he said. “He’s not really above anyone.” But anyone who has overheard Wilcox giving mountain advice or coordinating a rescue can’t deny that he was confident and in command.



Rick Wilcox at International Mountain Equipment, better known as IME, his climbing school and gear store in North Conway, New Hampshire. JOE KLEMENTOVICH

It started this way: Conservation officers would call Wilcox when they needed special assistance. “I would start with a phone list and just call guys,” he said. And the climbers answered. “There was always somebody to respond. We proved ourselves to do a good job.”

Over time, the organization evolved. The state and federal officials left the board, and MRS became a climber-led, climber-governed operation that worked alongside the U.S. Forest Service and New Hampshire Fish and Game. MRS routinely responded to calls to pluck hikers and climbers out of dire conditions. MRS team members were on Cannon Cliff; Cathedral Ledge; Mounts Washington, Lafayette, Lincoln, and the Presidential Range; and throughout the White Mountains.

Under its soft leadership, MRS grew. It includes an A Team and a backup team, team leaders, elections, and regular trainings. It sponsors climbers and guides, men and women from competing businesses who all come together

at 2 A.M. to grab backpacks and trudge through the snow in search of lost or hurt brethren. “It’s a wonderful team,” Wilcox said.

Not every rescue goes smoothly. Sometimes things end tragically, and not just for the victims. In 1982, the 29-year-old MRS team member Albert Dow, a friend of Wilcox’s, died in an avalanche while searching for two climbers missing on Mount Washington. No MRS member has suffered a similar fate. But this is risky work. Many times conditions that cause a rescue are tenuous for rescuers too, and team leaders are left to make difficult decisions about how much risk is appropriate to accept in any effort to offer assistance.*

“Sometime you can find them, and sometimes you can’t,” Wilcox said. “Every incident has a story to it. It’s like climbing a mountain you don’t know.”

Wilcox helped lead the revolution in climbing technology, the one that led to the popularity of the mountains and the need for MRS, but today he casts a wary eye on the ways technology interferes with outdoor recreation. Cell phones, GPS units, and personal locator beacons have become standard equipment in the backcountry, and they can change the rescue game, he said. Sometimes that change is helpful, as when cell phone signals give an exact location in a search, but other times all those electronics don’t change a thing. He pointed to Kate Matrosova, who froze to death above treeline in 2015 in the Northern Presidentials. (See “Too Cold: The Death of Kate Matrosova,” by Sandy Stott, *Winter/Spring* 2016.) Matrosova had a cell phone, a satellite phone, and a personal locator beacon, but all those electronics could not prevent her death. What she lacked was bivouac gear to survive in extreme conditions.

“Nothing but good judgment would have saved her,” Wilcox said. MRS rescuers tried to reach her, but they were turned back by subzero temperatures

* Dow’s tragic death sparked tense discussion about the risks volunteer rescuers take. The two climbers he was trying to save survived. (The day after Dow’s accident, AMC Pinkham Notch employee Cam Bradshaw found their tracks while she was out snowshoeing. Their limbs were frozen, but they were taken to hospitals.) Reporting in the *New York Times* on March 2, 1982, Dudley Clendinen wrote that a rescuer’s death “has stirred a debate about regulation and responsibility in the wilderness, about who should be held liable for the cost and hazard of rescue efforts, the state or those rescued. In letters to newspapers, many residents have expressed the feeling that the burden should be on those who choose to accept the challenge of the mountain.” Less than two months after Dow died, the New Hampshire legislature voted to extend workman’s compensation insurance to volunteers like Dow, giving his family a \$1,200 death benefit. All rescue volunteers have since been covered under the auspices of the state’s lead rescue agency, New Hampshire Fish and Game.

and 100-plus MPH winds. (The next day, as teams of rescue groups searched the mountain, Matt Bowman of Androscoggin Valley Search and Rescue found Matrosova's body.)

Cell phones serve as standard backcountry equipment now, which could mean that many climbers rely too heavily on them. "As we get more advanced technology, there gets to be more finger-pointing," Wilcox said. But climbers should understand the risks they take each time they go into the mountains, and if they fall into danger, it's those choices, not technology, that is to blame.

But Wilcox is generally reserved with criticism of those who wind up in need of a rescue: "The climbers understand the risks. Putting yourself on the mountain puts you at risk. It's part of climbing. We are risk takers ourselves." Part of the allure of the backcountry is the freedom to take risks, even though there can be consequences. Wilcox knows about consequences. He has a long list of friends whose lives were claimed by climbing.



Members of Mountain Rescue Service at work on Boott Spur, below Mount Washington, in 2001. JOE LENTINI

But the mountains have given him his life. And he shows no signs he will be forsaking their company anytime soon. He has three more Nepal expeditions and a Mount Kilimanjaro trip planned, all before the close of 2018.

In between trips, he'll be doing what he has been doing for decades: working the retail floor at IME, selling climbing gear, fitting people for rock shoes, explaining backpacks and harnesses, still brimming with more energy than most 30-year-olds. Always friendly and talkative, Wilcox is ever ready to chat about upcoming trips or the latest climbing news. "It doesn't occur to me to not go to work."

And he might not be the sitting president of MRS anymore, but the team's elder statesman will still answer the phone for a 2 A.M. callout. "Nobody wants to admit they're getting old," he said. "I'm a little more careful now"—long litter carries, for example. "You want young blood on those."

And MRS has young blood. Called to Whitehorse recently, a handful of team members plucked two climbers off the cliff and delivered them to 50 waiting fire and emergency personnel at the cliff base in less than two hours. Two of the team members were under 30. "I just took so much pride in those young guys," Wilcox said.

New Hampshire Fish and Game and the U.S. Forest Service have been infiltrated by climbers today, as have the state parks. No longer are these agencies sitting on one side of the table with climbers on the other; the climbing community is now the rescue community. There is no longer an "us" or a "them."

That, perhaps, is the best lesson Wilcox has to offer: Whether you're in the mountains to save lives or trying to reach their top, no one does it alone.

ERIK EISELE is a New Hampshire climber, a professional guide, and a freelance journalist. JOE KLEMENTOVICH, a photographer from North Conway, New Hampshire, took original photos, tracked down archival shots, and worked with Eisele on the story.