

Appalachia

Volume 69
Number 1 *Winter/Spring 2018: Mount
Washington: Summit of Extremes*

Article 14

2021

Alpina

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Recommended Citation

(2021) "Alpina," *Appalachia*: Vol. 69 : No. 1 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia/vol69/iss1/14>

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Alpina

A semiannual review of mountaineering in the greater ranges

Nepal Himalaya

Another winter passed without an ascent of K2 (8,611 m), the last of the fourteen 8,000-m peaks still unclimbed during winter. The coming season may be different. A very strong Polish team, led by Krzysztof Wielicki, 67, has its eye on the prize. The Poles have a long history of extreme climbing in the highest mountains. (See *Freedom Climbers* [Rocky Mountain Books, 2011] by Bernadette McDonald.) During the 1980s, Poles made an astounding seven of the first winter ascents of 8000ers. Even in summer, K2 is quite a challenge: It is considered the hardest of all the 8000-m peaks.

The highest mountains are dangerous for avalanches, punishing winds and temperatures, and how bodies sometimes react to their environment. Health hazards include stroke and especially edema (pulmonary and cerebral), which has claimed many victims. Heart attacks are rarer, but one did afflict Conrad Anker, a leading American climber, in November 2016. He was making his second attempt on **Lunag-Ri** (6,907 m), a fearsome unclimbed granite spire in the Nepal Himalaya. Accompanied by David Lama in 2015, Anker had reached within 300 m of the top. They returned a year later. All was well until Anker, age 53, “felt an acute pain in my chest.” Fortunately, Lama knew what to do, and Anker was helicoptered to a Kathmandu hospital within 12 hours of the attack. A stent was inserted in his heart. (Later Lama continued the attempt solo. He passed the 2015 high point but did not reach the summit.)

It was a busy spring 2017 season on the Nepal side of **Everest** (8,850 m). Following the avalanche and earthquake, there was a lot of pent-up demand. A record 373 fee-paying climbers had been given permits by mid-May. Many succeeded, starting with a fourteen-member group of Gurkhas May 15. They were followed by many others, including six Indian teenagers and Lhakpa Sherpa, whose eighth ascent set a record for women.

Two first female ascents: Uto Inbrahimi, from Albania; Tsang Yin Hung from Hong Kong. Andy Holzer, a blind climber from Austria, summited on May 21, becoming the first blind climber to scale Everest from the north side.

Unfortunately and as often is usual, several climbers—six by May 24, 2017—died. Min Bahadur Sherchan was the oldest to reach the top in 2008, when he was 76. An 80-year-old Japanese superseded him, so Sherchan returned in 2017 to reclaim his title. Sadly, he died at Base Camp, apparently of a heart attack, at age 85. Everest is littered with corpses. It is dangerous and expensive to bring them down. The problem was dramatized by the death of Ravi Kumar, a 27-year-old from India, who was descending from the summit. When his body was spotted high on the mountain, the family desired its return “at any cost.” Estimates were more than \$60,000. His body was retrieved, along with those of two others.

On May 29, 1953, Tenzing Norgay and Edmund Hillary approached the (then probably) still untouched summit. Hillary wrote, “We reached the foot of the most formidable-looking problem on the ridge—a rock step some forty feet high. . . . On its east side was another great cornice, and running up the full forty feet of the step was a narrow crack between the cornice and the rock.” That crack gave the climbers the way to the easy summit ridge beyond. The cornice is no longer there, but the rock step, named for Hillary, remained. Early every spring season Sherpas fix it with ropes so that the crowds can form a line to get up. This spring brought news that the step had disappeared, possibly a casualty of the 2015 earthquake. But soon after, the Nepal government reported that the step was still there, albeit covered with snow. “The misconception may have appeared as a new route has been constructed some meters to the right of the original route.”

Our last issue described a fraudulent claim of ascent. To thwart more of the same, the Nepal authorities are experimenting with mandating the carrying of GPS devices. This would also make life a little easier for rescue parties.

If only Mallory and Irvine had taken them . . .

A growing problem: Oxygen bottles are being stolen from high camps.

A solution to a different problem: A French group, Montages et Partages, has led a 40-day cleaning effort between Base Camp and the South Col. By May 23, five tons of waste had been removed.

In early June 2017, Chinese authorities would not issue any climbing permits for the autumn climbing season. This prohibition affected **Shishapangma** (8,013 m), the very popular Cho Oyu (8,201 m), and the northern route from Chinese-controlled Tibet. The ostensible reason was that illegal climb by a Polish mountaineer, who started on the Tibet side and continued into Nepal. There have also been reports of Tibetan flags and photographs of the Dalai

Lama being displayed on the summit. The Chinese government would not like this one bit.

A final celebratory note: On a cold day in March, a California couple, James Sissom and Ashley Schmieder, were married at Everest Base Camp. This appears to be a first. Ashley said, “After much deliberation, we decided a traditional wedding was not the right fit for us.”

When will a wedding take place on the summit?

Patagonia

The winter 2017 season got off to a slow start here because of poor conditions. It remained so through February. Nevertheless, in nineteen days starting January 31, 2017, three Belgian climbers—Sean Villanueva O’Driscoll, Nico Favresse, and Siebe Vanhee—made the first free ascent of El Regalo de Mwoma on the Central Tower of Paine (8,100 m). An account of the first aided ascent in 1992 appears in Simon Yates’s *Against the Wall* (Cape, 1997).

Alaska and Canada

Canada’s highest peak, the formidable Mt Logan (19,551 ft), was the scene of a rescue drama in early May 2017. An Argentinian climber, Natalia Martinez, attempted a traverse but was stranded at about 10,000 ft when two earthquakes hit the mountain. Bad weather made her rescue problematic, but after four days, she was helicoptered out.

In Alaska, the extremely strong team of Renan Ozturk, Alex Honnold, and Freddie Wilkinson returned after four years to the spectacular Ruth Gorge, in Denali National Park. Their objective was a second ascent (the first was in 1988, an epic of more than 65 hours climbing) of Wine Bottle, on the 5,000-ft east face of Mt Dickey (9,545 ft). They hoped to make the ascent without direct aid. But even a team of superb ability can be thwarted. Melting snow dampened the rock and increased crevasse danger. In the end, they settled for two shorter “practice” climbs.

Denali was busy, as usual, in spring 2017. By July 3, nearly 1,200 had registered to climb it, and the success rate was 37 percent. By contrast, only 11 people had registered for Mt Foraker, and none reached the top.

Yosemite

Royal Robbins (see Michael Wejchert's obituary of him below) was certainly a visionary, but when he first climbed El Capitan in 1960, he probably did not imagine that the imposing face would one day feature dozens of routes. Or that one of those routes would be climbed in considerably less than three hours. On November 11 and 12, 2016, Pete Whittaker became the first person to rope solo—all free—El Capitan in less than 24 hours. He finished the difficult Freerider route in 20 hours 6 minutes, making his ascent both the first of its kind and the first solo-free of El Cap in a day.

Two June 2017 ascents have raised the bar higher. First Alex Honnold, famous for such exploits, climbed Freerider solo in less than four hours. Honnold carried no rope, but he did wear clothes.

Three days later, Leah Pappajohn and Jonathan Fleury reversed the practice, completing the original route, The Nose, in exactly 12 hours. Except for shoes and climbing gear, they were entirely naked. They suffered no injuries, only a bit of sunburn.

While unclothed climbing does have precedents, this is probably the longest achievement of its kind. Afterwards Pappajohn made some important observations:

- It is easier to pee from a hanging belay without clothes.
- They reported that naked climbing is “empowering.”
- They concluded, “To do it naked, you have to be able to be completely focused on the climbing in order to not die.”

In Memoriam: Ueli Steck

By far the most resonant death was that of Swiss climber Ueli Steck, who at age 40 was one of the most accomplished mountaineers in the world, and one of the most liked. He climbed the north face of the Eiger solo in under three hours. In 2015, he reached the summit of all 82 of the 13,123-plus-ft peaks in the Alps in 62 days, and he soloed the extremely difficult south face



Ueli Steck. DAMIANO LEVATI/STORYTELLER LABS

of Annapurna (8,091 m) in 36 hours. He came to Everest in 2017 with a characteristically ambitious agenda: He and his partner Tenji Sherpa were to reach the summit by the Hornbein Couloir, unrepeated since its first ascent in 1963. Then they would descend to the South Col and climb Lhotse, a traverse never accomplished. They would have been above 8,000 m for days, without supplementary oxygen. Their plans were delayed when Tenji retreated to base camp with frostbite. Never one to idle, Steck headed up on a windy Sunday, April 30, on Everest's spectacular neighbor Nuptse (7,864 m). We will never know what happened, but he fell some 3,000 feet.

It is heartbreaking to read an interview Steck gave three weeks before he died:

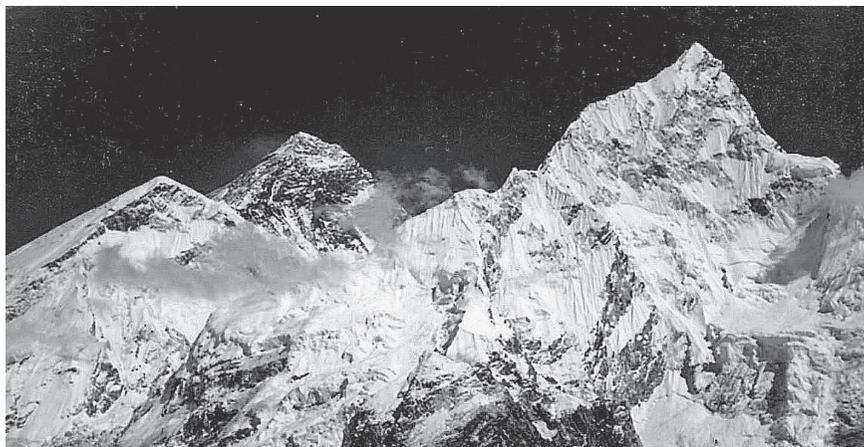
This is the beauty of our sport; we're out there and it's not only about the physical test, we're out there experiencing the mountains, living in the mountains. . . . This is a really, really big part of alpinism.

Maybe I'll get to the top of Everest and realize that the Hornbein Couloir was way too hard and that I'm exhausted. But even then I'll be really happy because nobody has ever repeated the Hornbein Original route. So this would already be a really, really good adventure. . . .

And even if you don't reach the summit, I don't consider this as a failure. Failure for me is if you don't go out and try in the first place.

—Steven Jervis
Alpina Editor

Sources: Kathmandu Post, Rock and Ice, *the New York Times*, Men's Journal, News from Nepal, and various blogs.



Nuptse, where Steck died, and the larger Everest. STEVEN JERVIS

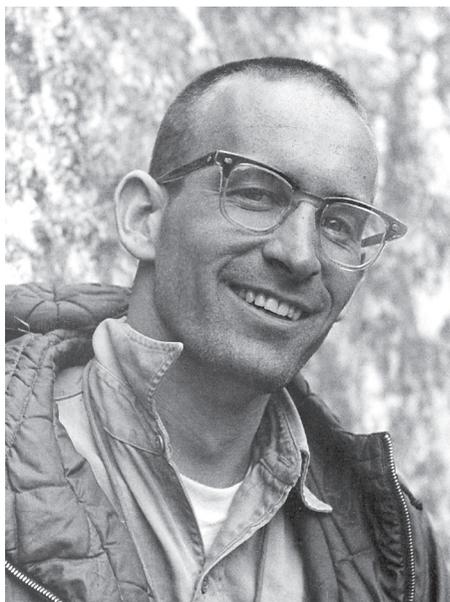
In Memoriam: Royal Robbins

To say that Royal Robbins invented and saved modern climbing in one fell swoop might be a stretch, but not much of one. With his death on March 14, 2017, at 82, after a prolonged illness, some of the elegance has been whisked away from the sport. In the golden age of American climbing, a few names could be bandied around as the most influential: Yvon Chouinard, Tom Frost, Chuck Pratt, Layton Kor, Doug Robinson. But undoubtedly, Robbins emerges: the name on the tip of everyone's tongue.

Robbins had an ego, though it seemed less the arrogance of an athlete and more the conviction of a zealot: a human who would make no compromises and literally risk life and limb to leave—with as little trace of his passage as possible—his mark on the steep granite walls of Yosemite. Outwardly, with his looming, perfect posture and black glasses, he projected a hawk-like intensity across the bohemian dalliances of Yosemite in the late 1950s and early 1960s. But inwardly, Robbins was a man searching for transcendence. He loved the poetry of Emerson. He yearned to escape a difficult childhood by forging his way up blank granite slabs, by exploring California's untouched passageways of rock, by applying an ethos to climbing that preserved it for future generations.

Robbins was born in Point Pleasant, West Virginia, in 1935. His father, Royal Shannon Robbins, abandoned his mother and the toddler he'd given his name to. Royal's mother married a machinist, and the family moved to Los Angeles. Robbins's stepfather drank often. He beat Royal and his mother.

To escape, Royal committed small crimes and jumped freight trains with other miscreant teens. Climbing, back then, was not something one simply tried as a matter of happenstance. Cities did not have gyms dotted with bright, plastic holds. With minimal equipment, climbing was still a dark art. Climbers tied in by knotting the rope around their waists. They used few, if



Royal Robbins in his late 20s. TOM FROST/WIKI-MEDIA COMMONS

any, pitons. Whoever went first endured deadly consequences for a mistake. Broken ribs—the result of a knotted rope tied around one’s waist—were a best-case scenario for a fall. At the time, Robbins had no idea he would pioneer new, safer, and more graceful techniques for ascent.

At age 14, in the 1940s, he took a Boy Scout trip to the High Sierra, and his life changed. When the trip ended, Robbins wanted more, and he joined the Rock Climbing Section of the Sierra Club. Soon, he was scampering up rock faces in Tahquitz, in Southern California. He dropped out of high school, preferring to educate himself. He later became enamored of the transcendentalists, and of Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*. Most readers tend to hold Ahab at arms’ length, but Robbins embraced the character fully. The 2,000-foot north face of Half-Dome had become, in his mind, a white whale of sorts. By 1957, this obsession consumed him.

Climbers relied on two main forms of protection in the 1950s. Commonly, pitons were used: Though they varied in size, from thin strips of iron to five-inch metal wedges, a climber hammered them into a crack, clipped a nylon ladder (called an etrier or aider) into the piton, and stood in the etrier to hammer the next piton. Obviously, this method only worked when a crack appeared to drive pitons into.

The other anchor was an expansion bolt: A climber hammered into the bare rock with a masonry bit until a hole appeared, placed a bolt with an eyelet hanger into it, and clipped his or her etrier to that.

At first, bolts were used only when necessary. It’s a slippery slope: Climbers can hammer in endless bolts on previously blank walls. When Robbins and his cohorts stumbled upon Yosemite in the 1950s, very few climbs had been done, and the easiest fell first. The northwest face of Half Dome remained the prize everyone lusted after.

Robbins made a few attempts. On one, with Jerry Gallwas, Don Wilson, and Warren Harding, the team ascended a mere 500 feet over five days. When he finally completed the climb in 1957, with Mike Sherrick and Gallwas, it was with a newly designed piton and the conviction of a man willing to make a leap of faith. The climb was, to borrow the nomenclature of the era, a space shot.

As new routes began to streak up the walls of Yosemite, the next great prize to fall was the Nose on El Capitan: the massive buttress of granite that juts up, like a giant nose, 3,000 feet from El Capitan meadow. Harding spied the line—considered out of the question to most climbers—and launched

up it, using an anything-goes ethos. The team descended to the valley for breaks, leaving ropes in place. After two years, Harding finally topped out El Cap. Harding's climb, and the ones to follow, were nothing short of breathtaking achievements, but they seemed anathema to Robbins, who crusaded that style and cleanliness were paramount. To prove his point, he repeated Harding's Nose in 1960 with Tom Frost, Chuck Pratt, and Joe Fitschen, taking seven days, bottom to top, without leaving the wall. (Harding's team had taken 45 days over two years to finish the climb.) Robbins' repeat of the Nose is as talked about as its first ascent.

Doubtless, the rivalry between Harding and Robbins helped spur the "clean climbing" revolution. It takes a special breed of person to question and modify methods that had been held sacrosanct. During a 1966 trip to the Lake District of England with his wife Liz, Robbins found the climbers there were using "nuts" slotted in cracks to protect themselves from falling. He returned to Yosemite, vigorously preaching "clean climbing" to his hammer-wielding cohorts. Nuts did not scar the rock, and the climbers started using as few bolts as possible on climbs, wishing, as Robbins had, to leave little trace of their passage. Climbing exists in its modern form because Robbins had the courage to question his own generation's methods.

Arthritis demanded Robbins cut his climbing career short. He instead took to kayaking, pioneering first descents in much the same way he'd forged new routes up the nation's steepest rock walls. He and Liz started the successful clothing company Royal Robbins, applying the same ethos to clothing as they did climbing. He is survived by Liz and their children, Damon and Tamara.

Climbing may be embodied by flashy movies and big-name sponsors today, but I, and many others, prefer the old black and white shots of Robbins, framed perfectly against the bright sky and unyielding granite of Yosemite, simple as can be.

—*Michael Wejchert*