

Appalachia

Volume 73
Number 2 *Summer/Fall 2022: The Ubiquitous
Cell Phone*

Article 17

2022

In Memoriam

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



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

(2022) "In Memoriam," *Appalachia*: Vol. 73: No. 2, Article 17.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia/vol73/iss2/17>

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.

In Memoriam

David Roberts

David Roberts, who elevated adventure journalism more than any American writer, died on August 20, 2021, after a long battle with throat cancer and emphysema. He was 78.

Born in Denver, Colorado, in 1943, Roberts first found climbing as a teenager living in Boulder. Tragedy—a theme he would explore throughout his writing career—followed soon after these initial forays. In 1961, while Roberts and a grade-school friend named Gabe Lee ascended the first Flatiron above Boulder, their rope became snagged. Both climbers untied and Lee climbed down, unroped, to free it. As he soloed back up to Roberts, the rope dangling in sloppy coils around his body, Lee tripped and began tumbling down the gently sloping slab. Roberts watched as Lee bounced to his death. Though the accident did not temper Roberts's drive for climbing, it haunted him his entire life and served as the opening scene in one of his most famous essays, "Moments of Doubt," about the risks and rewards of climbing.

As an undergraduate at Harvard University in the early 1960s, Roberts completed a string of daring ascents in the Alaska Range with a coterie of other students from the Harvard Mountaineering Club. Few were as dogged as Roberts, whose track record can be compared only to that of Bradford Washburn, serving then as a mentor for the young Harvard alpinists.

The most enduring of Roberts's routes—the Harvard Route, tracing the serrated, flawless natural architecture of Mount Huntington's west face—culminated in another tragedy when Ed Bernd, the youngest of the four climbers, clipped into his rappel wrong and fell to the glacier as Roberts watched. The exact details of the accident, remembered only through the haze of exhaustion and seen only in the gloaming twilight of the Alaska Range in summer, will never be known.

Roberts's book about the climb and accident at first failed to find a publisher, though now *The Mountain of My Fear* (Souvenir, 1969) is rarely omitted from lists of mountaineering's greatest reads. The poet W. H. Auden wrote to the young alpinist saying, "Your book is one of the finest of its genre I have ever come across."

After another frenzied decade exploring the Alaskan wilderness, Roberts turned his attention to writing full-time. In all, he penned 32 books and countless

articles. Fueled by infinite curiosity and the considerable firsthand experiences of his early climbs, his pieces on such subjects as Reinhold Messner plumbed the emotional depths of adventure. These stories compelled because ultimately, Roberts wrote about humans: his articles chiseling away towering, legendary



David Roberts climbing the south ridge of the Angel in Alaska's Revelation Mountains, in 1967. MATT HALE

figures until they became recognizable. Though his stories just so happened to have desolate polar outposts or 7,000-meter-high camps as their set pieces, their protagonists became flawed, knowable ones when treated by his deft pen.

Roberts brandished a challenging, confrontational side (you could call it snobbery, and many did) that I always found endearing, though it caused dinner guests to groan into wine glasses and climbing partners to crawl up tent walls. He could flip through the annals of his brain to mine an obscure Brooklyn Dodgers stat or Shackleton diary entry or stanza from Frost or Dickinson. I'd compare Roberts to Wikipedia, but this would have rankled him. After all, Wikipedia is often wrong.

In 2015 on a trip to Alaska, Roberts felt a tickle in his throat that turned out to be stage IV throat cancer. His doctors gave him less than a year to live; this stretched to six. Roberts hated comparisons between climbing and cancer, but I hope he might forgive me just one. He greeted each day with the grim resoluteness of a high-altitude climber, tasked with plodding toward an impossible summit but determined to try, nonetheless. This quest, to squeeze each living moment of its last drop, led him and his wife, Sharon, on climbing trips and visits to rare ancestral Pueblo ruins and vineyards in the south of France. In those six final years, he wrote three books and lived lifetimes—trudging uphill despite it all.

When Roberts succumbed to emphysema on August 20, 2021, he had completed what would be his final work, a study of forgotten polar hero Gino Watkins called *Into the Great Emptiness* (Norton), due to be published in spring 2022. Sharon once told me David couldn't travel or explore until he had completed a draft of his latest book. Having reached this apex, secure in the knowledge that a manuscript awaited editing upon his return, he would turn his mind to the trip at hand, happily wondering what lay around the next corner in some desert canyon or the next page in some forgotten polar diary. With that in mind, I hope he is out there somewhere: needling uncertainty, asking the hard questions; an adventurous soul never ceasing, in one way or another, to explore.

—Michael Wejchert

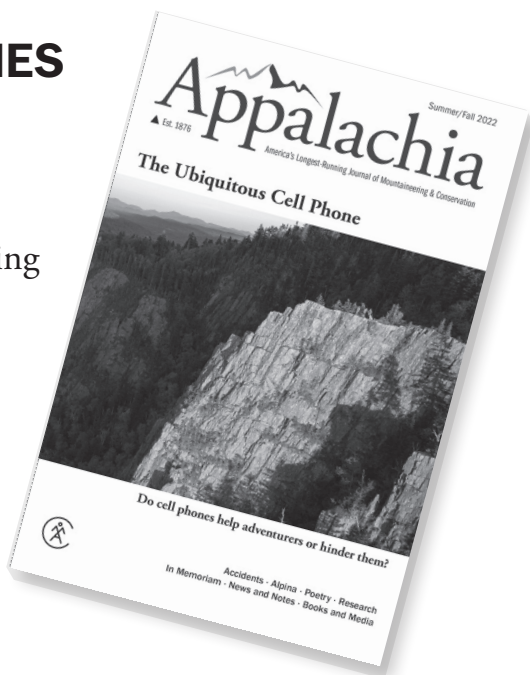
MICHAEL WEJCHERT is a climber and writer based in North Conway, New Hampshire, and a member of the Appalachia Committee. He and David Roberts co-authored the foreword to the anthology *No Limits But the Sky* (Appalachian Mountain Club Books, 2014).

"I started reading Appalachia for the accident reports, but I kept reading for the great features."—Mohamed Ellozy, subscriber

SUPPORT THE STORIES YOU LOVE!

Start or renew your *Appalachia* subscription today, and keep reading America's longest-running journal of mountaineering and conservation.

Visit **outdoors.org/appalachia** for a special offer: 36% off the journal's cover price. That's three years of *Appalachia* (6 issues) for only \$42. Or choose a one-year subscription (2 issues) for \$18—18% off the cover price.



Inside every issue, you'll find:

- inspired writing on mountain exploration, adventurers, ecology, and conservation
- up-to-date news and notes on international expeditions
- analysis of recent Northeastern mountaineering accidents
- book reviews, poetry, and much more

Subscribe today at **outdoors.org/appalachia** or call 800-372-1758.



Subscription prices valid as of June 2022. Prices and offers subject to change without notice. For the most up-to-date information, visit outdoors.org.