



## AAC Publications

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### **Herbert William Conn, 1920-2012**

On February 1, 2012, the climbing and caving world lost a quiet and unassuming pioneer and role model. Herb Conn passed away in the heart of the Black Hills, in the same bed he had shared with Jan, his wife of nearly 68 years.

Herb and Jan Conn are inextricably linked with the pioneering of rock climbing and caving, especially in the Black Hills of South Dakota. However, their beginnings as adventurous souls began in the eastern U.S., when as teenagers they discovered that they enjoyed scrambling up crags, climbing trees, and exploring lonesome places near Herb's parent's cabin in upper New York State.

Herb wrote that he enjoyed "folks who shared our unconventional views of life and what was important." Jan simply said: "We liked to be where nobody else was." This is not to imply that they didn't enjoy the camaraderie of climbing and caving with friends. Their rock climbing lives began in 1942 during World War II. Herb had graduated from the University of Colorado in Boulder with a degree in electrical engineering. Although Herb wasn't drafted, he was declared "Essential Personnel" and was employed in Washington, D.C., by the Department of the Navy. On Sundays, the Conns began accompanying adventurous friends to Carderock. Herb later wrote, "We are everlastingly grateful to Washington climbers for corrupting us, for convincing us that climbing and exploring rocks and caves are more important than steady jobs and raising a family."

In 1947, they were free to pack up their panel truck and drive west, searching for a peaceful, uncrowded place to live and climb. They camped and odd-jobbed along blue highways and gravel roads, visiting many well-known and obscure places with vertical landscapes. All were rejected for reasons of rock quality or "too many people."

On a trip to climb Devils Tower, the couple visited the Needles in the Black Hills. Impressed with the huge potential to climb and explore in relative solitude, they purchased land as close to the spires as possible. They climbed in the mornings, and during the afternoons began laying up stone, fashioning a front wall and roof to a concavity on a small cliff—the Conncave became their home in 1949 and they stayed ever since. With no electricity or running water, they lived a happy life off the grid.

I didn't know any climbers in 1966, when I was just starting out as a rock climber. Someone told me of a guy named Conn, who lived near Custer and was "a mountain climber and had climbed all the Needles." I was still too young to legally drive, so I pestered someone to take me on a quest to meet him. As we arrived at the Conncave, Herb exuberantly loped up to the car, and he and Jan kindly and with much patience answered myriad questions. For a quarter, I purchased one of Herb's pamphlet guides to climbing in the Needles. Herb gave me a sack with a half-dozen registers that had blown off various summits, which hikers had found and somehow returned to him. He suggested I put them back up. It took me years to gain the boldness and skills necessary to return them all.

Over the years I received numerous impeccably typed letters from Herb, which were filled with friendly encouragement. The way Herb lived was a shining example of how I wanted to live my own life. I'll be forever grateful that he was a mentor.

We will miss him. I like to envision Herb near the top of his latest new climb, or having shimmied through a particularly tight squeeze. Perhaps if we listen when our minds are quiet, we may yet hear

Herb's excited voice calling, "It goes!"

## Images



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