



AAC Publications

Barbara Washburn, 1914–2014

At the age of 24, a Smith College graduate, Barbara Polk was happily employed as the secretary of the Harvard biology department. But in the spring of 1939, Clarkie, the mailman, convinced her to audition for a job opening at the New England Museum of Natural History, whose leadership had just been taken over by an ambitious young mountaineer named Bradford Washburn.

Barbara was so sure she didn't want the job that she had her boyfriend double-park outside the venerable building in Boston's Back Bay. "I will make short shrift of this guy," she told him. As Barbara later recalled, "I didn't want to work in a dusty old museum, and I definitely didn't want to work for a crazy mountain climber!"

Brad was instantly smitten. And Barbara was surprised to find that the crazy mountain climber didn't look anything like "the pictures of explorers I had seen in picture books, pictures of men like Lewis and Clark." Her stint as Brad's secretary was short-lived. The two were married on April 27, 1940. Three months later, with a trio of male teammates, Barbara and Brad stood on the summit of Mt. Bertha, a 10,200-foot snow and ice peak near Alaska's Glacier Bay, having forged the mountain's first ascent—this despite the fact that Barbara's sole previous climb was a summer stroll up Mt. Chocorua in New Hampshire. She found out in a Juneau hospital after the expedition that she was pregnant.

On September 25, 2014, Barbara Washburn died in her home in Lexington, Massachusetts, less than two months short of her 100th birthday. With her passing, America lost one of its truly great adventurers and pioneer climbers.

In 1941, Brad set his sights on an objective considerably tougher than Mt. Bertha—13,832-foot Mt. Hayes in the Alaska Range. The same drive and vision that led Brad to transform the moribund Museum of Natural History into the world-class Boston Museum of Science, and to revolutionize Alaskan mountaineering, made him a hard man to say no to. So when Brad insisted that Barbara come along on the Hayes expedition, she said yes, even though it meant leaving a newborn daughter behind.

The only previous attempt on Hayes had been led by Brad's close friend Charlie Houston in 1937. High on the north ridge, that strong team had been stopped cold by a serpentine, corniced knife-edge. In 1941, after weeks of effort interrupted by prolonged storms, Brad's team faced the same ridge, clearly the crux of the route. And at that moment, Brad, Ben Ferris, Sterling Hendricks, and Bill Shand put Barbara in the lead. Their rationale was that, as the lightest member of the team, if she slipped or broke off a cornice and took a horrendous fall, she would be the climber the others would have the best chance of safely belaying.

As Barbara wrote many years later, "I tried to appear calm and confident, but I was really trembling with fear as I climbed ahead.... But I did not slip and none of the cornices gave way, and everyone followed safely behind me." What was probably the hardest bit of technical climbing Brad ever performed in his long Alaskan career was a ridge traverse led by his wife.

After a wartime separation during which Brad served as a consultant on cold-weather gear for the troops, he led his second expedition to Mt. McKinley in 1947. Barbara was along again, despite her misgivings about leaving behind a family that by then consisted of three young children. On June 6,

outperforming most of her male teammates, she became the first woman to stand on the highest point in North America. (The second female ascent of McKinley would not come for another two decades.)

Barbara and Brad were married for 67 years. They were ideal companions and partners in the field, not only in Alaska but also in such monumental projects as mapping the Grand Canyon (697 helicopter landings on obscure buttes and ledges in the 1970s). Late in life, Barbara started writing down sketches of her adventures, in a typescript intended only to serve as a legacy for her children. But Alaska journalist Lew Freedman borrowed the only copy of the typescript, read it overnight, and persuaded her to publish it as a memoir. *The Accidental Adventurer* (Epicenter Press, 2001) is a classic and a delight, every page of which breathes the modesty and yet gumption of this extraordinary woman and explorer.

I knew Barbara for 50 years. The behind-the-scenes stories she told me about her life with Brad, and the hijinks and foibles of their companions on various expeditions, easily could have filled another charming memoir. In 2008 I persuaded her to tell her life's story to the Harvard Travellers Club, an occasion she dreaded for months beforehand. Her talk, however, had the audience alternately gasping and in stitches, and many of us thought it was the best presentation the club had hosted in years.

Beginning in 1964, and continuing for two decades, Barbara taught kids with dyslexia and other reading disorders at Shady Hill School in Cambridge. Some of the most gratifying rewards in her life came when those tutees returned as adults to thank her for steering them along paths of professional success.

Barbara won many honors, including the Centennial Award from the National Geographic Society and an honorary doctorate in science from the University of Alaska. In the face of such acclaim, she remained eternally humble, even self-effacing. In 1997, when the National Park Service celebrated the 50th anniversary of her ascent of Denali, she characteristically addressed an audience in Talkeetna thus: "I reminded people that it wasn't really my ambition to be the first woman to climb Mt. McKinley. It just happened: I was an accidental mountaineer."

David Roberts

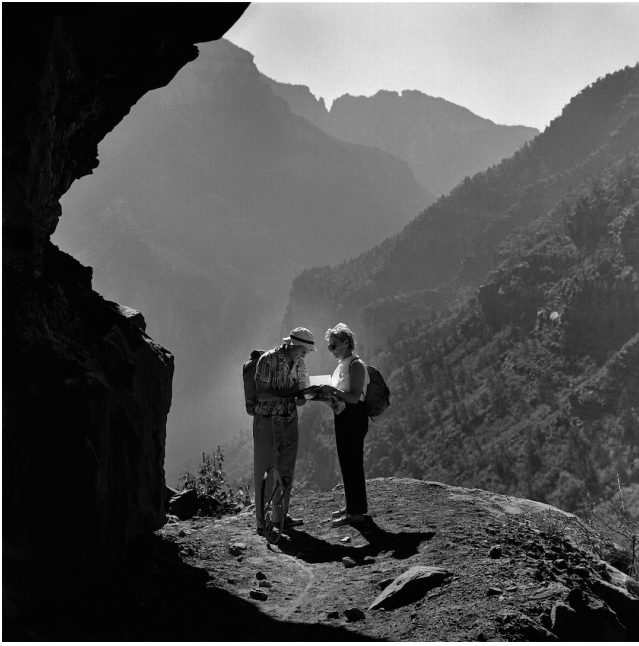
Images



Barbara Washburn on the summit of Mt. Bertha in Alaska in 1940.



Barbara Washburn descending Mt. Bertha after the first ascent in 1940.



Bradford and Barbara Washburn mapping the North Kaibab Trail in the Grand Canyon.

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