



AAC Publications

Joe Firey, 1918 – 2013

Joe Firey was one of the most endearing, enduring, and accomplished mountaineers in the Pacific Northwest. An active hiker, climber, and skier for nearly 70 years, he pioneered exploratory mountaineering and ski touring in the Northwest, especially in the Washington Cascades and Coast Mountains of British Columbia. He began his mountaineering adventures as a teen living in Seattle during the Great Depression, when he had to fashion his own crampons and other gear. The tone for his future expeditions was set in 1936, when Joe and a friend completed a two-week ascent of Mt. Olympus starting from the Brinnon ferry dock on Hood Canal, a round trip “hike” of 120 miles.

Joe earned a BSME (mechanical engineering) degree from the University of Washington in 1940, and an MSME from the University of Wisconsin in 1941. Except for interruption by military service during WWII, Joe worked at Chevron Research in Richmond, California, until 1954. During this period Joe climbed with Joan Wilshire, who shared his passion for mountaineering. Joe and Joan married in 1950, and together they raised their children, Carla, Alan, and Nina, while still actively climbing in areas near and far. In 1954, Joe was appointed professor of mechanical engineering at the University of Washington, where he remained until his retirement in 1981. Joe holds 56 patents stemming from his engineering research on the combustion of solid fuels.

Joe loved being out in the mountains, either on foot or on skis, especially with Joan and other climbing and skiing friends and later with Carla, Alan, and Carla’s husband, Jim (James M.) McCarthy. By the mid-1970s, the names of Joe and Joan Firey and their good friends, John and Irene Meulemans, could be found in the summit registers of practically every prominent peak in the Cascades. Although most of their Cascade climbs took place on weekends and holidays, Joe and Joan were superb organizers and planners. Over the years they made 51 climbing trips and 37 ski touring trips lasting a week or more. Joe was fond of long, technical backpacking routes, often involving bushwhacking and alpine travel linked to form grand traverses. Their Isolation Traverse has become a notable spring ski tour. Most of these trips were in the North Cascades or BC Coast Mountains.

On these trips, Joe made first ascents of at least 16 peaks plus 17 new routes in the North Cascades, and first ascents of at least 27 peaks plus 19 new routes in the Coast Mountains, in addition to ascents of many “normal” routes. Joe and Joan completed the first traverse from East Fury to West Fury (and back) in the northern Pickets, and later became the first to climb every major summit of the southern Pickets. In the British Columbia, Joe made the first (1963) and second (1988) ascents of both Sciron and Crystal Spire by different routes, and is one of only a few climbers to have scaled Waddington, Combatant, Tiedemann, Monarch, and Queen Bess (the last at age 65). Other trips took them to the Wallawas, Wind River Range, Canadian Rockies, North and South Selkirks, Rogers Pass peaks, Bugaboos, and Purcells, as well as the Clarkachamna Peaks and North Baird Glacier Peaks in Alaska. Sadly, Joan died of malignant myeloid leukemia in 1980 (AAJ 1981). Joe continued to undertake expeditions until 2000.

Joe was brilliant at finding feasible routes over alpine terrain in remote places. His 1972 five-day route from Waddington-Combatant Col to Foster’s Ranch on Mosley Creek, via Pocket Valley and Bifrost Pass, is a memorable example. His climbing successes also depended on his fortitude in climbing occasional loose and/or unstable rock, and his willingness to bivouac on the peaks, if necessary. Joe’s cheerful equanimity never wavered, no matter how thick the mosquitos, how wild the weather, how daunting the objective, or how desperate the circumstances. He always slept well, even

when bivouacked in a blizzard high on Combatant. His consideration and humor

fostered a sense of shared adventure and camaraderie among his companions. Over the years Joe and his various parties came to be known as the Firey Group. Joe was an endless source of puns, both good and bad, but funny either way. He was exceptionally intelligent, with a marvelous memory, which he retained until the very end of his life. He was an engaging conversationalist on many topics, especially the mountains.

The Firey Group excelled in the art of camping in comfort and style, especially on glaciers and snow. In summer, even during bad weather, they melted snow using inflated kiddie pools with dark bottoms instead of stoves. Daily Happy Hour at 5 p.m. gained notoriety among folk in the larger climbing and ski touring communities. Although there were occasional harrowing moments, such as when high winds blew tents apart or people dropped into hidden crevasses, or falling rock or ice dinged a member of the party, they responded quickly and appropriately, and no lasting damage was ever suffered. The Firey Group trips were profoundly addictive for many of us, who kept coming back for more. Some of Joe's oldest friends, John and Irene Meulemans, Frank deSaussure, Gary Rose, and Wes Grande, climbed or skied with him over spans of several decades.

Out of necessity, Joe and Joan made many items of gear, from alpenstocks and hand-forged crampons to early nylon tents with rain flies, which were better suited to coastal mountain weather than the cotton tents popular at the time. Although Joe adopted some of the more modern (ca. 1970) equipment, such as a wood-handled Chouinard ice hammer, tubular ice screws, chocks, and cams, no one can recall ever seeing Joe in rock shoes, for he always climbed in his big leather mountain boots. He typically wore woolen shirts and trousers with synthetic-insulation jackets and a waterproof parka on top. From the early 1970s onward, his packs and jackets were designed and fabricated by Carla, who led the revolution in design of climbing packs and Polarguard jackets in the early 1970s.

Joe's extraordinary competence and achievement in engineering and mountaineering commanded respect from all who knew him, yet he was a lovable character. He would brighten the day of any who encountered him. We are extremely grateful to Joe for our many memorable experiences in his and Joan's company, and also that of Frank deSaussure, Dave Knudson, Mike Martin, Chuck Loughney, and other now departed members of the Firey Group. Some of the most exhilarating and happiest moments of our lives occurred on those expeditions. Acquaintance with Joe and his family has greatly enriched the lives of many of his mountain companions. That remains an important part of his legacy.

Lowell Skoog has produced a beautiful and detailed account of the lives and mountaineering activities of Joe and his family entitled "The Indefatigable Fireys." As of 2015 it can be found at www.alpenglow.org/nwmj/08/081_Firey1.html.

Peter Renz, Jon Wellner, and Mickey Schurr

Images





Article Details

Author	Peter Renz, Jon Wellner, Mickey Schurr
Publication	AAJ
Volume	57
Issue	89
Page	0
Copyright Date	2015
Article Type	In memoriam