



## AAC Publications

---

### **Allen Frame Hill, 1962 – 2016**

**Allen Frame Hill, a prominent Colorado climber, filmmaker, and climbing historian, passed away March 24 at age 53.** A longtime Denver resident, Hill was beloved by many people from several communities, including Colorado College (and the Colorado Springs climbing community), Cheley Colorado Camps, and the city of Denver. He is deeply missed by the many friends he met on his climbing and filmmaking adventures, as well as family members in Colorado and beyond.

Although the cause of his death was not known at the time of this writing, he suffered from a severe, undiagnosed neurological disorder that made many simple functions—like climbing a few steps or even walking—difficult and painful.

Allen was born on April 24, 1962, in Oklahoma City. In 1967 the Hill family moved to Thousand Oaks, California, then in 1972 to Colorado, where Allen was raised and educated. He graduated from Arapahoe High School in 1980. For many summers in the late 1970s and early '80s, he attended Cheley Colorado Camps in Estes Park. For Allen, this meant chances to hike, camp, and backpack in Rocky Mountain National Park. “That’s where his love of the mountains was fostered,” said his brother David. “He began rock climbing while in high school.”

Allen attended Colorado College, where he became a part of that tight-knit 1980s climbing community. He graduated in 1987 with a B.A. in political science. In college, he developed a fascination for Eastern European countries, their politics, and their histories. “(He) was totally fascinated by communism,” said John Catto, a fellow Colorado College grad who climbed with Allen in the mid-1980s.

Climbing adventures both during and after college took Allen all over Colorado and the southwestern United States, but he always returned to his beloved South Platte, southwest of Denver, where he climbed as hard as anyone else. He did the first ascents of several 5.12s there. Catto climbed with Allen in a variety of areas and noted, “He was brilliant at face climbing. Really good footwork. Not real strong, but really brilliant at face climbing.”

Allen studied filmmaking in New York and afterward got freelance work as a cameraman on a variety of television shows, including *National Geographic Adventure* and *The Jeff Corwin Experience*. In the early 1990s, he started researching a film he wanted to do about a group of Czech mountaineers who were part of the resistance against Nazi Germany, and he began making regular trips to Czechoslovakia. Around the same time, Catto stumbled upon a photo in an old *Mountain* magazine showing a spire-jumper in Adrspach National Park in northwestern Bohemia in the Czech Republic. The jumpers there launch themselves from one spire to another using ropes for safety. The jumps are graded by difficulty—stepping from one spire to the top of another was the easiest “jump.”

Allen was hooked, and he and Catto began working on a documentary film, eventually called *Jump!*, about the climbers-turned-spire-jumpers. The film was produced and directed by Hill and Catto (they shared both titles) and was edited by David Emrich. *Jump!* won numerous awards at film festivals around the world, starting with the International Mountaineering Film Festival at Teplice nad Metují (a town near the Adrspach rocks), where it won both grand prize and audience prize.

At the time of his death, Allen was producing a documentary film about the Club Vagabond in Leysin,

Switzerland. “The Vag,” as it was commonly called (today it’s officially the Vagabond Lodge), had a hotel, bar, restaurant, laundry facilities, storage areas and just about every amenity a young traveler could ever need—including, at times, employment. It became a sort of cultural melting pot for climbers, skiers, travelers, and adventurers of all sort due to its proximity to the International Mountaineering School (ISM), which is also located in Leysin. John Harlin II established ISM in the early 1960s, and from its inception the school relied on internationally famous mountaineers to draw clientele for climbing lessons and trips. Many of these climbers—like Dougal Haston, Layton Kor, Don Whillans, Chris Bonington, Mick Burke, and others—either stayed at the Vag or could be seen almost nightly in the Vag’s bar. As former ISM instructor Gary Gablehouse told Allen during one of his interviews for the film, “The women hung on us and the men wanted to be us.”

Allen’s film was to be an hour-long documentary about the Vag and its influence on thousands of adventurous young men and women. He spent untold hours and dollars flying around the world and interviewing former residents. (A few of the interviews can be seen [here](#).) Scottish orthopedic surgeon and fellow climber John McCall went on and financially supported many of Allen’s trips, including several to Switzerland and Canada, one to New Zealand, and many more all over the U.S.

“Traveling with Allen was a bit like traveling with Hunter Thompson,” McCall said.

McCall said Allen had a knack for connecting with older climbers, especially Layton Kor, with whom he met in 2011 for an interview. McCall also praised his filmmaking sensibilities, noting, “When he got behind a camera it was almost like you were watching John Ford—or one of those other great filmmakers. He had that kind of sense about him. He suddenly went from being this shambolic guy with a cigarette in his mouth and a bottle of whiskey in his back pocket, and he’d have his shit together and he’d be really focused. He seemed to be really good at it. He was certainly a great still photographer.”

This writer was in line to write the film, although as the years progressed it became obvious that Allen was struggling to move the project along. After introducing Allen to Kor, he, Layton, and I spent untold hours in Allen’s Denver home, looking through old climbing memorabilia and discussing subjects from Dougal Haston to Goethe to goth rock. Most of those visits were precipitated by Kor’s need for medical attention at an area hospital, and we spent considerable time simply sharing thoughts, swapping stories, taking short walks around the neighborhood, shopping for food, and eating. Kor, of course, produced gigantic salads—massive salads that during their production covered two entire kitchen counters.

Several times our trio ventured as far as Eldorado Canyon and the Sink in Boulder, Allen always carrying his beloved Leica and shooting images of Kor below various formations in Eldo. All the while, Allen would pull out tidbits of information about the routes that Kor had first climbed—many of which Kor didn’t even know. Allen was a walking encyclopedia, but he didn’t just have a massive number of facts tucked away in his brain. Allen distilled these facts to understand the context of when and why events happened. I was always intimidated by his intellect.

“Allen was a beat by instinct and lifestyle,” said McCall. “He admired Kerouac, and we would often go to My Brother’s Bar in Denver, a beat hangout connected to Neal Cassady. He admired the climbers of yesteryear, particularly Layton but also the Brits, not so much the Yosemite gang. His métier was the Eastern Bloc. He loved the culture. He reveled in their beer and awful food. He was inspired by their ability to endure, climbing big routes in the Himalayas in winter. He wanted to make films about ordinary humans doing great things. He despised the modern climbing athlete, preferring guys like Whillans and Haston who indulged in life’s pleasures while performing great feats of alpinism.

“He was very well read and an expert on the history of cinema. He was a friend of dogs and old climbers—old people in general. Women were attracted to him not only for his looks but also for his eloquence and great charm. He reminds me a lot of a character in a James Salter story. He had style but reveled in kitschy things. He was a very good cook but didn’t particularly enjoy eating. He was a

great companion on river trips and was an expert oarsman... He did not like the modern climbing films and wanted to bring an artistic sense to climbing, much like Leni Riefenstahl. He admired Werner Herzog a lot, and I think he would have preferred to have been born a European and would have lived there. He saw himself as an existentialist and reveled in absurdity. If you consider his upbringing, he left conformity behind but was still a bit of a snob. I'm sorry he has gone. He was a wild and crazy guy—never boring.”

As his many friends and family members knew, Allen struggled with alcohol for many years. Toward the end of his life, as mentioned, Hill acquired an undiagnosed neurological disorder that had many characteristics of multiple sclerosis

“He could be hilariously manic,” noted longtime friend Hillary Buchannan. “I think that was essentially why he ended up to be such an incredible climber and driven documentarian. Not to mention sometimes endearingly neurotic and hysterical, sometimes not so endearingly. But always true.”

“He was just bright and amusing and funny,” Catto said. “I’m going to miss him.”

– Cameron M. Burns

## Images



Allen Hill.

## Article Details

Author	Cameron Burns
Publication	AAJ
Volume	59
Issue	91
Page	0
Copyright Date	2017
Article Type	In memoriam