



AAC Publications

Glen Dawson, 1912 – 2016

Glen Dawson was born on June 3, 1912, in the Mt. Washington area of northeast Los Angeles, the same birth year as his two most notable climbing partners, Jules Eichorn and Dick Jones. The Sierra Club was then only 20 years old, John Muir was still living, and the Southern California Chapter (the Club's first) had just been chartered the prior November. Glen's father, Ernest, a prominent bookseller, had joined the Sierra Club in 1909 and before long headed the chapter's Local Walks Committee. Ernest would serve on the Club's board from 1922 to 1937, the last two years as president (Glen would serve on the board from 1937 to 1951). At nine years old Glen was presented with a lifetime membership to the Sierra Club as a gift of board member and future president Aurelia Harwood.

As a youth Glen would be deeply shaped by—and would help shape—the Sierra Club's mountaineering/climbing exploits throughout the 1930s. It was a time when climbers wore tennis or basketball shoes and no harnesses or helmets, used static manila ropes, yet romped exuberantly over many formerly "unclimbable" peaks, pinnacles, and walls. Starting in 1901 the Club led an annual four-week summer Outing or "High Trip" that would introduce members (upwards of 200) to the wonders of the Sierra Nevada.

Glen joined his dad on the 1926 High Trip, which went far afield to Yellowstone. Jules Eichorn, from San Francisco, got introduced to his first High Trip in 1927 through his piano teacher, Ansel Adams, who handled the trip logistics. However, Glen and Jules, being underage and in the care of different "chaperones," would have met only casually. Each boy separately made a few significant climbs on the 1929 High Trip. Sensing their kindred, intrepid spirits, the boys agreed to team up the next summer when they would be 18.

On the 1930 High Trip the young duo, after discovering a manila climbing rope in the commissary, would head out on two- or three-day knapsack mountaineering trips of their own, often with a third youth. A later description of this Outing was no overstatement: "Some youthful enthusiasts, including Glen Dawson, Jules Eichorn and John Olmstead, swarmed over everything that looked formidable in the way of a mountain peak."

The summer of 1931 would be the breakthrough year for Glen and Jules. During the High Trip they made the first ascents of what became Eichorn Pinnacle on Cathedral Peak and Eichorn Minaret, pushing the limits of their roped climbing abilities. Responding to the invitation of Francis Farquhar, editor of the *Sierra Club Bulletin* (SCB), Robert Underhill arrived to provide instruction in proper belayed climbing and the use of pitons. The Harvard philosophy instructor was the top American alpinist and was keen to visit the Sierra Nevada after a spectacular season in the Tetons.

A select class of nine "students," including Glen, Jules and Norman Clyde, headed to the Palisades, where they "culled a little bouquet of new climbs in spite of four days of bad weather," quoting Underhill. The climax of this "bouquet" was the first ascent of the last unclimbed California 14er. It would be renamed Thunderbolt Peak to mark the violent storm that had engulfed the summiteers. Only Glen and Jules topped the highest block, which effort nearly cut short their climbing careers.

Farquhar, Underhill, Dawson, Eichorn, and Clyde then headed south to attempt what would be their crowning achievement: an ascent of the untouched east face of Mt. Whitney. For the good of the team, Farquhar held back, leaving Glen to lead Underhill, followed by Jules in front of Clyde. Only at the most exposed segment, the Fresh Air Traverse, did Underhill take the lead, placing the only piton

used. Not wanting to endure a high bivouac, they made the summit in the remarkably fast time of 2 ¾ hours of roped climbing. Seventy-four years later, in 2005, Glen would note: "I've climbed in many parts of the world and published over 300 books. But of all the things of my life, that day in August in 1931—well, I still get a good deal of pleasure out of it."

In 1921, at age 9, Dick Jones arrived with his family in Los Angeles. Attending the same grammar school, he and Glen embarked on a deep friendship, cemented by exploring and climbing in the local mountains. In the spring of 1932 they joined a strong team assembled by Bestor Robinson to attempt the first ascent of El Picacho del Diablo, the high point of Baja California at 10,155 feet. The climbing party, which also included Norman Clyde and two others, would unexpectedly extend their "day hike" ascent into a two-night bivouac. They would later learn that a prior solo ascent had been made from an easier direction.

Jules Eichorn, Norman Clyde, Robert Underhill, and Glen Dawson, just after their first ascent of the east face of Mt. Whitney in 1931.

Glen and Jules reunited for the 1933 High Trip. Their major endeavor was organizing four parties by three routes to the highest of the Devils Craggs in one day. The next day, joined by Ted Waller, they made the first ascent of the next two highest Craggs—and then the weather took a bad turn. Taking initial refuge under a chockstone in a chimney, they were shortly engulfed in heavy rain. Glen and Ted leapt to one side of the chimney and Jules to the other, where he precariously stood on a very narrow ledge for an hour, exposed to falling rocks and water that threatened to sweep him away. Glen noted in a subsequent writeup that, "the Devils Craggs seemed to be coming apart."

Just over a week after the High Trip, Glen and Jules received the summons from Francis Farquhar (then Sierra Club president) to assist in the search for Walter (Pete) Starr Jr., missing in the Minarets/Mt. Ritter area. Glen also recruited Dick Jones. Normally traveling fast and solo, Starr (30) was then close to completing his "Guide to the John Muir Trail and the High Sierra Region." The climbing team of Glen, Jules, and Dick, one of four parties, focused their search on the Minarets. They climbed both Michael and Eichorn Minarets, and also made the first ascent of what became Dawson Minaret—the only Sierra feature bearing Glen's name. (Starr's body was discovered later; he had suffered a fatal solo climbing fall.) Both Glen and Jules became members of the American Alpine Club in 1933, at 21 likely among the youngest. Glen was proposed by Francis Farquhar and seconded by Will Colby.

Although neither would have imagined it then, the search for Pete Starr was the last time that Glen and Jules would share a rope. They would not be on another High Trip together, and during later joint Los Angeles/San Francisco Rock Climbing Section trips to Yosemite Valley, the boys would be leading with their own groups. How appropriate, then, that Dick Jones shared the rope with them in their last joint climbing effort, as he would become Glen's favorite partner.

The Sierra Club's first Rock Climbing Section (RCS) was chartered by the San Francisco Bay Chapter in 1932, with Dick Leonard as chair and Jules Eichorn on the management committee. With Glen Dawson's strong support, the Southern California Chapter was only about a year behind in developing a rock climbing group, and its RCS was formally established in 1934. In 1935 the chapter also approved its Ski Mountaineering Section, whose founding roots dated back to when Glen and Dick Jones were members of the UCLA ski team.

Shortly after his graduation from UCLA in June 1935, Glen set off on what would become a 14-month around-the-globe trip. It offered splendid opportunities to advance his skills as both a bookman and a climber. Befriended by young guides, his exploits began in the Alps with ascents in the Wetterstein and the Dolomites. He noted that many of their routes "were probably first ascents by an American." (On a European book-buying trip in 1928, the 16-year-old Glen and his dad had made guided climbs of the Jungfrau and the Matterhorn.) The next year would find Glen also climbing in North Wales, the Caucasus, and the Japanese Alps. He waited a week below Mt. Elbrus without getting suitable

weather conditions for an attempt. On his return home he would write: "After having climbed in a dozen different countries, I can agree with John Muir and Clarence King that our own High Sierra is the finest and most friendly of all."

The year 1937 would prove to be a phenomenal one for the team of Glen Dawson and Dick Jones. Over that Memorial Day weekend, the joint LA/SF RCS contingents swarmed all over Yosemite Valley. Glen, Dick, and Bill Rice made their first climb of Higher Cathedral Spire.

Labor Day weekend found the LA/RCS romping in the Mt. Whitney area. Glen and Dick, joined by brother Muir Dawson, Howard Koster, and Bob Brinton, returned to an effort begun the prior year: an attempt directly up Whitney by its east buttress. On September 5 they launched, and their two rope teams made it up in three and one half hours. On the occasion of the 70th anniversary of this climb in 2007, Glen remarked: "In 1931 it was the vision of Francis Farquhar to climb the east face of Whitney. He selected the participants. The real leaders were Robert Underhill and Norman Clyde. Jules and I did what we were told. In 1937 it was my idea to climb the East Buttress. I was the leader and selected the participants, although it was a cooperative leadership. The East Face is a big undefined wall with lots of loose rock. The East Buttress is a clearer route with mostly solid rock. It is my favorite climb but, so far as I now remember, I made it just once." Depending on the guidebook, the East Face is now rated at 5.4 to 5.6 and the East Buttress at 5.6 to 5.8.

Just a month after their Whitney success, on October 3, Glen and Dick made a special effort on a frightful Tahquitz route to push it higher than any prior attempt—and they completed it. Later named Mechanic's Route, it took 16 pitons, with Dick in the lead, despite a long, crackless, runout pitch. Many years in the future, this route would be hailed as the first 5.8 climb in North America.

Their wanderlust evidently not yet sated, later that same month Glen and Dick were seeking new challenges in Zion National Park. Along with two other RCS companions, they made the third ascent of the Great White Throne—and the first that did not require a Park rescue. They then stumbled upon the fact that the East Temple had never been climbed. Glen and Dick each led a rope of two. As reported by Glen, "Not until we used a three-man stand were we able to unrope on the pleasant forested summit area. The 1,100 feet of elevation had taken five and one half hours of unhurried climbing, much of it exceedingly difficult." They built a bonfire to signal success to a friend below—and to keep warm for their topside bivouac.

Glen Dawson (left) and Royal Robbins in 2011.

In 2002, looking back 65 years and referring to these climbs on Whitney, in Yosemite, and in Zion, Glen would state, "The year 1937 was in many ways the apex of my climbing career." His extended quote overlooked the Mechanic's Route. In all five of these climbs he was paired with Dick Jones.

Although perhaps past his "apex," in mid-August of 1938 Glen assembled a strong team for the first LA/RCS foray into alpine Canada, focusing on the Bugaboos. The other members were Muir Dawson, Bob Brinton, Howard Koster, and Homer Fuller. With considerable exposure and great boldness, they succeeded in the third ascent of Bugaboo Spire, first topped by Conrad Kain in 1916 (and which he ranked as his most difficult Canadian climb). The peak has twin summits, both about the same height, according to Kain. Faced with threatening weather, the RCS team did not continue to the other summit, which is now known to be the higher.

Glen married fellow Ski Mountaineer Mary Helen Johnston in 1940, a union that would last 62 years and raise three kids. He and his brother, Muir, succeeded their father as proprietors of Dawson's Book Shop in Los Angeles. Glen largely withdrew from climbing in 1942 following the death of his close friend Bill Rice while he was climbing the Grand Teton. During World War II he helped train ski troopers before and after he entered the Army. A member of the famed 10th Mountain Division, Glen was awarded a bronze star for his service in Italy.

Starting in his late 70s and then for nearly 30 years, Glen presented to or was featured in numerous

programs for climbing audiences. He would commonly introduce himself as “a historical curiosity—a living fossil.” He never boasted of his exploits, but he was aware of their historical significance. His amazing recall along with his dry wit and self-deprecating manner endeared him to all. He knew he had led a blessed life, in his climbing and bookman careers and in his large extended family. We were privileged to have had him among us for 103 years. We can imagine that Jules and Dick may have saved some “unclimbable” heavenly spires on which to once again share a rope. Belay on!

– Bill Oliver

Editor's note: Bill Oliver has prepared a 24-page, well-illustrated Sierra Club tribute to Glen Dawson's life and climbing career, which can be downloaded [here](#). His extensive Tribute Series on Norman Clyde, Jules Eichorn, and Glen Dawson can be found [here](#).

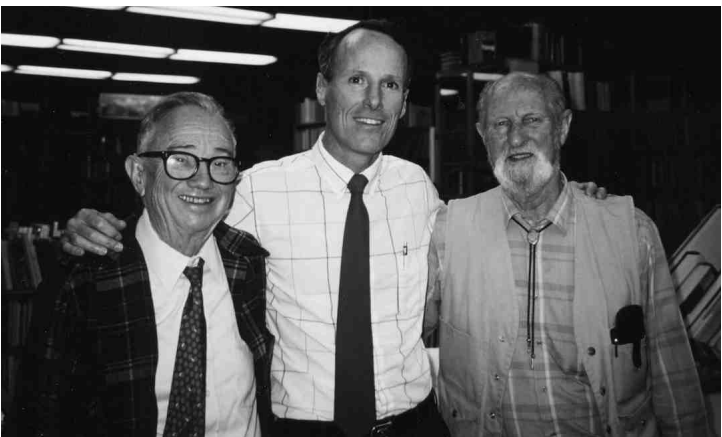
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Just back from the first ascent of the East Face of Mt. Whitney, 8/16/31. L-R: Jules Eichorn (19), Norman Clyde (46), Robert Underhill (42), and Glen Dawson (19).



Glen Dawson in 1929.



Glen Dawson, Bill Oliver, and Jules Eichorn (left to right) in 1990.



Glen Dawson on the summit of Fountain Peak, Providence Mountains, California, in November 1938.



Glen Dawson (left) and Royal Robbins in 2011.

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