



AAC Publications

Beckey and the AAJ

A Look Back at Fred Beckey's Unrivaled, Unrepeatable Legacy

NO CLIMBER in the 88-year history of the AAJ has written more reports or had more climbs cited in these pages than Fred Beckey. No one even comes close. Reflecting his extraordinarily long climbing career, the AAJ database holds more than 700 articles by or about Beckey (plus nine reports where his surname was misspelled as Becky). These include hundreds of first-person stories and 22 feature articles, documenting now-classic climbs as well as obscure first ascents that may never have been repeated.

Friedrich Wolfgang Beckey did his very first first ascent at age 16, in 1939, in Washington's North Cascades. His first appearance in the AAJ came three years later, when he wrote a feature article about the second ascent of Mt. Waddington in British Columbia, with his brother Helmy. (Helmy Beckey actually appeared in the AAJ a year before Fred did, as part of the team that made the first ascent of South Howser Tower in the Bugaboos.) After World War II, Fred's new-route production and the significance of his climbs accelerated rapidly, and from the late 1940s through the 1960s he was like a force of nature, completing a dozen or more major new routes nearly every summer. Though he didn't get everywhere—Beckey never did a new route on El Capitan, for example—elsewhere he was prolific, often returning again and again to favorite areas, from Alaska to the Canadian Rockies, the Sierra to the Wind Rivers, the hit list growing ever longer. The volume didn't tail off until the 1980s, when Beckey was in his mid-60s.

More recently, citations of Beckey routes have been more common than new climbs by the man himself. But his life in the mountains has continued, including the first ascent of a remote peak in Alaska in the mid-1990s that was subsequently named for him. He has continued to plan and inspire new routes well into this decade.

In the following pages we recall Beckey's nearly seven decades of contributions to this journal. His reports reflect his skills not only as a climber but also as a geographer, historian, amateur geologist, and evocative and often playful writer. No climber will ever leave a greater mark on the AAJ—or on American climbing.

Notable first ascents from a lifetime of climbing are outlined in the AAJ excerpts that follow. All excerpts are by Fred Beckey and have been lightly edited for modern style.

"CLIMBING AND SKIING IN THE WADDINGTON AREA" – AAJ 1943

By 4 o'clock I had changed to tennis shoes with felt pullovers, and we rapidly mounted the slabs of the upper face. The pullovers adhered well to the rock when wet and could be removed quickly for more friction on dry rock. Rock climbing was a pleasant relief from the ice work below.

In two hours the base of the final 500-foot rock wall was reached, Helmy leading across two steep snowpatches. Ice axes and one pair of boots were left behind here. Crampons had been cached lower

down. I decided to attempt a face route slightly to the right of the chimney climbed by Wiessner and House. [Fritz Wiessner and Bill House did the first ascent of Mt. Waddington in 1936.] Difficulties immediately increased as we started up the nearly vertical wall. For 300 feet wet slabs and difficult pitches, with a few overhangs mixed in, were climbed. Many pitons were used for safety on this wall, which was no place for one who suffered from acrophobia.

The most difficult pitch was a traverse on a vertical face with very delicate holds, followed by a wet, high-angled slab with few useful holds. I had luckily noticed the wet slab from below and redonned my felt pullovers, for one couldn't hope to stick on the wet slab in tennis shoes.... A short traverse brought us to a vertical chimney, the same one climbed by Wiessner, that led to the narrow, snow-covered summit ridge. At 8:30 p.m. the second ascent of Waddington was made. A wonderful view rewarded us, but little time could be had for rest. The match-can register in the cairn was found, and then we hurriedly left the summit at sunset.

Editor's note: The author, although but 19 years old, is a mountaineer of experience, and writes of training for the Mt. Waddington expedition, as follows: "Between June 16th and 21st, 1942, Helmy Beckey, Walt Varney, and I made first ascents of seven rock spires on Kangaroo Ridge, in the N.E. part of the Cascade Mtns. in Washington. Four of these, Big Kangaroo, the Temple, Half Moon Peak, and Mushroom Tower, were technical climbs. To reach the summit of the latter (8,300 ft.), we had to overcome a pitch a good deal more difficult than anything encountered on Mt. Waddington."

"MT. DEBORAH AND MT. HUNTER: FIRST ASCENTS" – AAJ 1955

Soon the crest showed its mettle. [Heinrich] Harrer hacked his way over some fantastically steep pinnacles, some of them completely overhanging the eastern edge. In what seemed like hours, we exchanged leads; I found slightly better going along the left edge of the ridge, and it was possible to climb safely with the 12-point crampons and good belays. As the ridge steepened again, we had to cut steps. This was a team climb; if anyone slipped, the others would have to leap over the opposite side of the ridge.

How to get up three vertical ice steps near the summit was a provocative question. The steep slope of ice on the left would require hours of chopping and the use of many ice pitons. I was prepared to do battle, but welcomed [Henry] Meybohm's suggestion that he try to cut a channel directly up the steps. At least we could belay safely. Chopping vertically upward to remove masses of rotten ice so that a ladder of clean steps could be made, he worked his way up the narrow pillar-like wall. It was hard work, but success was near.

As we stepped onto the summit at 9:45 p.m., it was our unanimous conclusion that Deborah was the most sensational ice climb anyone of us had ever undertaken....

The setting sun, barely above the horizon, made everything terrestrial seem to fade into insignificance. The biting cold began to take its effect as we lingered to admire the grand view—it was time to descend. Even with the steps carved and aided by a few rappels, it took over four hours of fast climbing to get off the ridge. The climb had been a delicate one, and we felt years younger once on the the relative safety of the glacier.

"MT. HOOD, YOKUM RIDGE" – AAJ 1960

As we swung the car up the last few switchbacks to Timberline, Mt. Hood stood crystalline clear against the blue sky. There had not been many clear days like this during the present season.... The Austrian, Leopold Scheiblehner, and I had some ski mountaineering in mind, but after scanning the upper slopes of the mountain, we could not resist the idea of something more complex. At the time we did not know that the entire [Yokum, or Yocum, Ridge, on the west side] had never been climbed. Since the mock-up in the lodge did not show a dotted route, it aroused our curiosity.

...It is not hard to oversleep, and we managed this well.... Putting the crampons on, we roped immediately and crossed the saddle to the Reid Glacier. Here we descended and traversed to the lower flanks of Yokum Ridge. The knife-like blades of ice seemed like a nightmare of ice problems instead of a route to the summit. With a covering of ice feathers, not a single rock was visible. Getting onto the crest was a toe and ice-pick workout—a strenuous one for the first cramponing of the season.... Because of the frost and rime formations, the whole surface was often a buildup of frost feathers. An axe belay was often useless, and ice pitons could not be placed.... We continued flanking the worst towers just under the crest, being careful to work into tiny belay spots on the ridge or behind towers. Once I chimneyed my way up a 30-foot section of vertical ice, grasping long columns of ice feathers and pulling outwards to keep my balance while kicking and cutting footholds. This required great care, for the wrong slash of the ice axe might have brought the whole chimney wall down. It was a difficult and dangerous place—sometimes I could see daylight through the frost feathers two feet under the veneer surface. At one point Leo cut some huge holds over his head and somehow swarmed up a 12-foot overhang.

...About one o'clock we stood on the top, facing a strong, biting wind. Our descent down the normal route led us into camp again. Skiing wide open, we raced for the lodge in the afternoon sun.

“TEHIPITE DOME” – AAJ 1964

If Tehipite Dome were in Yosemite Valley, it would come close to rivaling El Capitan in height and grandeur. But it is located in the wilderness of the Middle Fork of the Kings River, and here it has no rival. Its 7,700-foot summit towers 3,600 feet above the glaciated valley floor.... Standing next to an abandoned prospector's cabin, after a 21-mile hike from the North Fork of the Kings, Ken Weeks and I just shook our heads in despair. Not only were we cut off from our projected assault of the immense south face by a torrent called Crown Creek, but the majesty and size of the Dome was simply overwhelming....

[Beckey and Weeks recruited two more climbers, John Ahern and Herb Swedlund, and a week later began an “expeditionary rock climb” of the 17-pitch south face.]

...During the night the cloud cover vanished, and the morning, June 2, was brilliant. We planned to push the lead ropes up the face another day, and then make a final push with bivouac gear after another trek out for more food. While Weeks and Ahern were hauling supplies up the deep chimney, Swedlund and I prusiked up to our high mark and continued up the dihedral system that became our route line. I worked up an overhanging layback that was difficult but went free to the end of a lead. Swedlund then spent several hours nailing up a pitch that was a slanting overhang.... It was still early afternoon; we decided to make one more lead and then leave all ropes hanging for the finale. The dihedral flared out badly, forcing me to do a great deal of hand-jamming and awkward pressure work with the right shoulder. It was slow going. Fortunately the protection opportunities were adequate, and once past a really hard crux move, I saw that the angle of the wall began to decrease. Also, knobs and solution holds were beginning to appear. After Herb arrived, we held a war council and decided to risk a lead further.

Sensing a victory that day, because of the lessening angle and the appearance of knobs, we took only a selection of iron, some slings, and with the one rope began to climb like demons. After a pitch Herb yelled that it looked even better, so we continued up on several pitches of marvellous, exposed face climbing, always with just sufficient knobs.... At a crucial smooth slab, the dihedral suddenly reappeared, much to our relief. Swedlund made a fine direct-aid maneuver around a corner, on a slanting overhang, and then swung left from a piton to a bush. “Climb like mad,” was the shout, “I think we'll make it.”

“MOSES, CANYONLANDS NATIONAL PARK” – AAJ 1973

One of the last great desert towers, this one discreetly hidden in remote Taylor Canyon east of the

Green River, was climbed October 26. Lin Ottinger, Moab tour guide, had long known of it under the name "Moses," its curious shape resembling the image of the desert leader of history. Eric Bjørnstad and I had examined the 500-plus-foot tower in 1970 during the climb of "Zeus," then climbed the overhanging first pitch a year later, only to become stalled by a heat wave. With a solid base camp resembling a safari, with the jeep, VW bus, tents, assorted friends, and a kennel of three hungry dogs, the climb had to be a success this time. Our timing was perfect, for downpours preceded and followed the climb. The climbing was largely careful aid on Wingate sandstone, with three "super-solid" hanging belays.

"CATHEDRAL MOUNTAINS" – AAJ 1997

In June, John Middendorf, Calvin Hebert, and I visited a small, isolated cluster of granitic peaks with small glaciers to the west of Mt. Foraker, at the edge of the high tundra. The peaks are bordered by Cathedral Creek on the west; one wonders if they were originally intended to be the Cathedral Spires (now the Kichatna Spires) to the southwest. The "Cathedral Mountains" are in fact a Kichatna miniature, with an inferior quality of rock.

After an airdrop on the Cathedral Creek glacier, we hiked into our base camp from the roadway of the Purkypile Mine. The ascent of the highest summit of the peaks (just over 8,500 feet) had an interesting glacial sweep, then a narrow summit snow ridge. The crux was a really loose section of flaky rock (5.5). Most of the climb was done with light snow falling, so the views we expected were limited. The area has some wall climbing potential, but much smaller than the Kichatnas. It seems certain that we were the first climbers to visit these peaks.

Editor's note: This report was one of three Beckey accounts of new routes published in AAJ 1997. The Alaskan mountain was subsequently named Mt. Beckey.

Images



"Fred Beckey," original oil painting on wood panel, after a photo by Kris Stanton.



Fred Beckey below Mt. Edith Cavell, Canadian Rockies, 2007.

1923 Born in Germany, immigrated to the U.S. in 1935.	1938 First climbs, Washington state.	1939 Mt. Despair, North Cascades, Beckey's first first ascent.	1940 Fortelson Peak, Inspiration Peak, and Peacock Peak, North Cascades.	1942 Mt. Washington, British Columbia. Second ascent and partial new route on south face. First A.M.F. article.	1945 Mt. Shuksan, Price Glacier, Mt. Adams, Adams Glacier, Cascades.	1948 Liberty Bell and Nodocus Tower, North Cascades, Kates Needle and Devils Thumb, Coast Mountains, Alaska.	1947 Hocomeen, South Peak, North Cascades, Mt. Asperity, British Columbia.	1948 Mt. Baker, north ridge, Puak Peak, Cascades, Pigeon Spire, northeast face, Bugaboo, Canada.	1949 Big Baron Spire, Red Finger, and Harlock Spire, Sawtooths, Idaho; Michael's Spire, Jannau Icefield, Idaho.
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Fred Beckey chronology, 1923–1949

1953 Burgundy Spire, Mt. Condit, west tower and northeast face, North Cascades.	1954 Dental, northeast summit, first ascents of Mt. Donald and Mt. Harter, Alaska; Mt. Sooke, northeast face, North Cascades.	1957 Mt. Rainier, Houch Peak, north face, west ridge, and Mt. Hood, north face, North Cascades.	1958 Liberty Bell, west face, Washington Peak, west ridge, Golden Horn, north face, Olympic, North Cascades.	1959 Mt. Hood, Yocum Ridge, Snowpack Spire, west face, Bugaboo, Mt. Owen, Cooper Aella, Teton, Squawish, Idaho.	1960 Shark's Nose, Snowling, Mt. Michael, north face, Wood River, Outer Spine, Snow Creek Wall, Washington.	1961 South Howser Tower, Buggy Mt., Bugaboo Mt., Edith Cove, north face, Canadian Rockies, The Pearl, Utah.	1962 Warrior, east face, Wind River, Oubette, east Oubette, Canadian Rockies, High Overhang, Lone Peak, Utah.	1963 Stature Peak, northeast summit, Mt. Stuart, complete north ridge, Tangle Dome, south face, and Day Needle, east face, Sierra Nevada.	1963 cont. Elaphant's Punch, Beckley Dome, Sawtooths, Idaho; Hauserbach and Pinger, Wind and Day Needles, east face, Sierra Nevada.
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Fred Beckey chronology, 1953–1963

1964 Mt. Ratz, Silline Range, British Columbia, Glacier Peak, north face, near north, Montana.	1965 Mt. Robson, Canadian Rockies, first winter ascent, Squamish, north face, Yukon, Mt. St. Elias, Squamish Mountains, Squamish, north coast, British Columbia.	1966 Echo Tower, Utah, Mt. Ararat, north face, Yukon, Mt. St. Elias, Teton, west face, Teton, west face, Sierra.	1967 Great White Throne, Zion National Park, Middle Sister, Mountaineer, Quail, El Matador, Whitney Portal, and Carlton Peak, west face, Sierra.	1968 South Early, West Side, east Middle Sister, Piutean Ridge, Whitney Portal, and Carlton Peak, west face, Sierra.	1969 Eltingwood, north face, Fremont, west face, Sequoia, west face, Anselmo, south face, Wind River Range.	1970 Warlock Needle, south face, Charlater Dome, south face, Lora Poo Peak, direct south face, Sierra Nevada.	1971 El Segundo, Whitney Portal, Fresno Dome, and Bullion Dome, Mount Sierrita, Lone Pine Peak, California.	1972 Moses, Campanella, Utah, Christie Spire, Arizona, Mt. Jackson and the Truck, Alaska.	1973 Jacobs Ladder, Monument Valley, early climb in October throughout, Arizona.
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Fred Beckey chronology, 1964–1973

1974 El Gran Tono Blanco, north face, Nevada; Sierrita Nevada, north face, and Bubba Creek Wall, new route, Sierra Nevada	1976 Fremont Peak, west Bathorn, Mt. Helen, west face of Tower One, Wind River; new routes on James Icefields, Alaska	1977 Angel Wings, Wings Over Sequoia, Maroon Dome, south face Mt. Langley, west face of rockhead peak, Sierra Nevada	1984 Gothics, East Peak, southwest face, Sedona; Pointe Peak, east buttress, Coast Mountains, British Columbia	1985 Mt. Pathula, first ascent; Mt. Gardner, new route, Coast Mountains, British Columbia	1989 Kadmereth, south face, attempt; Kila Heardstone Peak, north buttress, Canada; Galben Peak, south buttress, Alaska	1998 Cathedral Mountains, Alaska; first ascent of Peak 8,200, later named Mt. Beckey	1998 Bomber Lake Arête in the Wind River—the Carnegie Burns A.A.J. report was the last to document a new route climbed by Beckey	2008 Snowcap Mountain, Alaska—the 2008 A.A.J. account was the last report Beckey has submitted (he did not attempt to summit)	2013 The 2013 A.A.J. reported the first ascent of Jody Shan in China, during an expedition led by Beckey
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Fred Beckey chronology, 1974–2013



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