



AAC Publications

Robert John Secor, 1956 – 2017

ROBERT JOHN SECOR, mountaineer, guidebook author, and adventurer, passed away on October 26 at the young age of 61. R.J., as he was known to all, authored four well-known climbing guidebooks: Mexico's Volcanoes: A Climbing Guide; Aconcagua: A Climbing guide; Denali Climbing Guide, and the climbing tome most often referred to as "The Bible of the Sierra," The High Sierra: Peaks, Passes, and Trails.

R.J. was involved in the Los Angeles Chapter of the Sierra Club for more than 30 years, holding leadership roles as chair, vice-chair, secretary, and treasurer of the Ski Mountaineers Section (1980–1985); secretary and chair of the Trail Maintenance Committee(1987–1991); and chair of the Sierra Peaks Section (1998). In 2013, R.J. received the prestigious Francis P. Farquhar Mountaineering Award for his contributions to both mountaineering and the Sierra Club's role in that field. He also was a founding member and president of the California Mountaineering Club (1989–1990).

Mountain wordsmiths shepherd the keys to our mountain kingdoms, and R.J. was a consummate professional both in collecting and disseminating mountain information. He honed his craft by being a driven and prodigious mountaineer. R.J. summited Mt. McKinley (1995), Aconcagua (via the Polish Glacier in 1986), and many of Mexico's volcanoes (more than 20 ascents in all). In the Himalaya he reached 24,000 feet on Broad Peak in 1992. He summited Mera and Imja Tse, and in 1994 and 1990, respectively, he reached 23,000 feet on Cho Oyu and 21,000 feet on Changtse. In his beloved High Sierra, R.J. was the second person to summit the 247 Sierra Club-listed peaks twice, and he was well on his way to completing a third lap on all of them. In total, R.J. attained 737 "summits" in the Sierra Nevada, and I often wonder how many spectacular vistas he witnessed or shared with his partners. A noted ski mountaineer, R.J. also performed multiple trans-Sierra ski tours (1985, 1995, 2000, 2002), with a focus on previously unknown or unrecorded winter routes.

A mountaineering minimalist, R.J. followed a "history is always in style" approach to his climbing gear and personal attire. He wanted to be immersed in the history and environment of the mountains he loved, and the comforts of modern gear would only lessen that experience. Stories abound of R.J. not bringing a stove or headlamp or food on his trips. His partners describe packing extra supplies ahead of time for him, or sharing what they had. Perhaps it was forgetfulness, but given his intellect (he always packed his CFO financial magazine and read it cover to cover), I think it was more an opportunity for others to connect with the sometimes shy or reserved R.J.

A friend and climbing partner, Dan Richter, tells a story of R.J. spontaneously taking off from a group to solo a distant peak. Later, Dan and others were sitting in camp, long after dark, knowing R.J. had no headlamp, wondering about the whereabouts of their friend. Everyone knew that R.J. could comfortably handle an open bivy; however, a fellow camper went to the periphery of the camp every 30 minutes to probe the darkness with a headlamp. Eventually, the faint voice of R.J. far off in the distance could be heard. When R.J. finally arrived back at camp, he was very appreciative of the "beacon" that was provided to him.

In essence, R.J. reveled in the traditions of mountain climbing. He loved the spirit of camaraderie, the immersion in the mountain environment, and all that is the mountaineering experience. R.J. was a walking encyclopedia of Sierra climbing history, recounting details and stories at the drop of a hat. Mountaineering was his primary source of social interaction and connectivity to others, and he

embraced his role in helping others less experienced than himself see the wonders of the mountains safely.

In the early 1990s, Cameron Burns and I were on a blitz of California's 14,000-foot peaks, putting up new technical routes while climbing many established routes. We were producing an inventory of all that the 14ers could offer to climbers for our California 14ers climbing guidebook. Meeting R.J. for the first time, I noticed a lack of introductory formalities; rather, he dove quickly into the jargon of climbing routes and details as though we had known each other before. I mentioned that I had done several non-14er new routes in the Sierra with friends, and one route in particular with Royal Robbins and my dad, and that these older first ascents, collectively, had never made it into print. Through correspondence, R.J. included these routes in his Sierra guidebook, allowing me to share with both Royal and my dad that our backcountry adventures had made it into the bible of the Sierra. R.J.'s work far surpassed that of his predecessor authors and their High Sierra guidebooks—he set the bar to a very high level.

Except for college and living in Mexico for a year, R.J. lived most of his life with his mother and father, who were immense supporters of his adventuring life. An only child, his income came from managing the family's rental properties and/or investments. Many folks believe his choice to live with his parents allowed him to devote himself completely to all things mountain-related. In return, I believe his parents lived vicariously through R.J., who was a master at sharing. This allowed them to travel, meet interesting climbers, and experience adventure in faraway places they would never have experienced without him.

Much can be learned about R.J. from his cousin Joan Colgrove, with whom he grew up. As children, they were very close in age and personalities. Joan described R.J. as a really nice person and said he was interested in life, studying it like a scientist—analytical, with a fantastic memory and a remarkable attention to detail—traits that he would carry throughout his life. In a letter to Cameron Burns, commenting on another author's Sierra climbing guidebook, which was photo-intensive but "written description light," R.J. said, "And I am the first to admit that my photographs suck. I am into words, not images." Joan Colgrove said of R.J., "I appreciate R.J.'s talent for writing, his conversational tone, knack for selecting the right thing to focus on, and his sense of humor."

The rich history of the Sierra Nevada mountains and their explorers provided the vehicle in which R.J. could transport himself, his parents, and anyone else interested to remote, fantastical places. As for so many, the Sierra Nevada also was R.J.'s training ground. A place where he and his partners could hone their skills and acclimatize before setting out for Mexico's volcanoes or the Himalaya. R.J. would joke, often unprovoked, of his poor or atrocious climbing abilities. It was a kind gesture, meant to lighten the moment while acknowledging he knew his place in the sport.

We all make decisions in the mountains that we must live with. I myself have had several out-of-control glissades that I escaped by the skin of my teeth. In 2005, after climbing Mt. Baldy and making the decision to sit-glissade down a snowfield, R.J.'s penchant for old or minimalist gear may have contributed to a climbing accident that affected him the rest of his life. With an old wooden ice axe, possibly too long, he donned yellow slickers like those a fisherman might wear, and, sans helmet, started down the steep slope in a butt glissade. He quickly lost control, lost his ice axe, and slid 1,200 feet and impacted rocks before coming to a stop near the Mt. Baldy's ski hut. Ski patrollers rushed to his aid, and he was airlifted out. He was badly injured, with fractures to his skull, ribs, and shoulder blade.

Some say character comes not from ills that befall us but from how we respond to those calamities. R.J.'s recovery was long and slow; he had to learn how to speak and walk again, and he suffered numerous setbacks, including multiple bouts of pneumonia and low blood pressure. After several years he had what seemed to many as a nearly full, miraculous recovery, but some of the spark and liveliness he was known for was diminished. Then, in 2016, R.J. suffered a serious fall in his backyard that reactivated his trauma. This was a serious setback, and one from which R.J. could not recover.

R.J. accomplished what he was put here to do. He took what he was given—"every person" talents, with a pinch of eccentricity—and through his gift with the written word he showed people that they too could experience mountain summits, where stories are made, souls are discovered, and friendships are forged forever. R.J. will forever be remembered as a pillar in the pantheon of great Sierra Nevada explorers and writers. We will never know how many lives and experiences R.J. touched through his love of the mountains and his unique ability to share those mountains with others.

– Steve Porcella

Images



R.J. Secor with his High Sierra "bible."

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