



## AAC Publications

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### Fred Beckey, 1923 – 2017

**In July 1938 the north face of the Eiger was finally climbed, after many attempts and multiple fatalities. It was Europe's greatest prize in climbing at the time and a widely celebrated ascent.**

During the same period, a similar race was taking place in North America for the first ascent of Mt. Waddington in British Columbia's Coast Mountains. After 16 unsuccessful attempts and one fatality, German-born Fritz Wiessner finally succeeded, partnered with Bill House, in July 1936. The climb was of comparable difficulty to the Eiger's north face, but in very remote wilderness, not right above the hotels and telescopes of Kleine Scheidegg.

Just a few years after Wiessner's ascent, in 1942, the climb was repeated by two unknown teenagers from Seattle. Fred Beckey was 19 years old, and his brother Helmy turned 17 the day after the climb. It was shocking news to the climbing world. This was long before Facebook, but it was the sort of radical surprise that today would be talked about on every climbing website worldwide. The modern equivalent would be two high school students going to Pakistan over summer break and climbing a new route in alpine style on Gasherbrum IV.

Fred made his first first ascent, of Mt. Despair in Washington's North Cascades, in 1939. He continued making first ascents, both of mountains and routes, for seven decades. His legacy of climbs, considering the difficulty and volume, is absolutely unparalleled, not only in North America but in the entire world. He wasn't establishing just one-pitch rock climbs or new routes on faces where several already existed, but first ascents of huge mountains, often very remote, and nearly always by technical lines.

In the Cascades alone it would take over an hour to list all of Fred's first ascents, but some highlights are Forbidden Peak, Inspiration Peak, Crooked Thumb, Nooksack Tower, Liberty Bell, the South Peak of Hozomeen, Prusik Peak, the Northeast Buttress of Goode, the Price Glacier on Shuksan, Yocum Ridge on Mt. Hood, the Complete North Ridge of Mt. Stuart, and the Northeast Buttress of Slesse.

In need of both greater difficulty and new mountains to climb, Fred went often to Canada and Alaska. Again, his first ascents are too numerous to list, but some highlights are Kate's Needle, Devils Thumb, Mt. Asperity, the north face of Mt. Edith Cavell, the north face of Mt. Sir Donald, the west buttress of South Howser Spire, and the first winter ascents of Mt. Sir Donald and Mt. Robson. Fred's 1954 trip to Alaska is the most successful Alaskan expedition of all time. In one season he made the first ascent of the Northwest Buttress of Denali, the first ascent of Mt. Deborah, and the first ascent of Mt. Hunter. Each of these climbs represented cutting-edge alpine climbing at the time. But Fred ticked them one after the other in the span of a couple of months.

I think that young climbers today can easily misjudge Fred for an "old-time mountaineer." He was in fact one of the best rock climbers in North America during the 1940s, '50s, and '60s. Yvon Chouinard said that when he teamed up with Fred, in the 1960s, he always had to ask to rope up before Fred felt the need. Fred established most of the early hard routes in Leavenworth and Index, and at one time nearly all the hard routes in Squamish were his. As usual there are too many to mention, but some that have become modern classics are Outer Space and Orbit on the Snow Creek Wall, and Squamish Buttress, Angel's Crest, and Tantalus Wall on the Stawamus Chief.

In July 2003 I was fresh out of high school and Fred was already in his early 80s as we stood together on the summit of Mt. Adamant in British Columbia's Selkirk Mountains. Although his age slowed him

on the summit snow slopes, Fred was as graceful as ever on the steep, white granite buttress below. Watching his calloused hands work their magic, I wondered how many thousands upon thousands of feet of alpine rock those hands had touched.

Fred's legend goes far beyond climbing achievements. He more or less invented the lifestyle of the dirtbag climber. He chose to eschew climbing fame, financial security, marriage, and all other aspects of the American dream in pursuit of climbing, back when it was an unheard-of choice. Thousands of young climbers across North America are now copying Fred's ideal.

He wrote more than a dozen books, which are astoundingly well researched. The *Cascade Alpine Guides* are, I think, the only example in the world of such comprehensive, in-depth guidebooks to such a vast mountain range. Keeping track of climbing routes is one thing, but he was also a knowledgeable geologist and extremely accomplished historian. If you gave his *Range of Glaciers* to someone unfamiliar with Fred, they would deduce it was written by a decorated professor of history at a prestigious university, not a dirtbag climber who stole condiments packets from restaurants and slept half of his nights on the side of dirt roads. In fact, after publishing *Range of Glaciers*, Fred was offered a professorship at the University of Washington, but of course he declined.

During his climbing career he witnessed the development of crampons, nylon ropes, harnesses, helmets, nuts, rock shoes, and cams. He partnered with, and outlasted, multiple generations of celebrated climbers. Fred was without a doubt the most accomplished climber ever to come out of North America, and is among the all-time greats—right alongside figures such as Ricardo Cassin, Herman Buhl, Lionel Terray, Walter Bonatti, and Reinhold Messner.

– Colin Haley

Editor's note: This article is drawn from a talk that Haley prepared for the Mountaineers' annual dinner in 2015. The 2016 edition of the AAJ included a lengthy tribute to Beckey's decades of contributions to this publication. Another remembrance of Beckey, prepared for the AAJ by Alex Bertulis, can be found [here](#).

Images



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