



AAC Publications

Fred Beckey Remembered

Fred Beckey had three favorite subjects that he enjoyed talking about: challenging mountains, the weather, and the pursuit of women. His photographic memory of mountains and challenging new routes was amazing. His obsession with climbing made him the most accomplished mountaineer in the history of the sport, without a doubt. Of course, the availability of unclimbed peaks and new routes is in diminishing supply, and thus there will never be another mountain climber who will be able to amass such an impressive list of climbing achievements.

I started climbing with Fred when I was in my early 20s and he was in his 40s. At that time our climbing community in Seattle considered Fred an “old man” and wondered out loud why he was still climbing. After all, he had already made his reputation as a “living legend.” Fifty years later, Fred was still climbing and these pundits were still wondering when Fred would retire. Well, he stopped climbing at the age of 94 when his body gave out with finality.

Fred gained international fame in 1942 when he and his brother Helmy made the second ascent of Mt. Waddington. They were both teenagers at the time. Henceforth, Fred continued pursuing new routes and impressive first ascents at a pace that defied gravity, it seemed. His home turf was the Cascade Range of Washington, where there are countless “Beckey routes” that are still popular as Northwest classics. The list of his notable climbs would not do justice to enter in the limited space available here. Instead, I refer readers to his classic book *Fred Beckey's 100 Favorite North American Climbs*.

His opus magnus was the three-volume *Cascade Alpine Guide*, commonly known as “Beckey’s Bible.” No sensible climber dares to venture into the Cascades without referring to the climbing routes and trail approaches described therein.

It would be unfair to say that Fred’s focus was only on accounts of climbing routes. His book *Range of Glaciers: The Exploration and Survey of the Northern Cascade Range* is an academic masterpiece (500 pages). It garnered him an offer to become a professor of history at the University of Washington, which he declined because it would have taken him away too much from his climbing schedule.

During most of his climbing career, he lived out of his car like a vagabond. This life style earned him the title “Dirtbag Climber.” He carried this title as a badge of honor.

Over a period of about ten years he lived at my house. At times he would come home after a long drive and join me for dinner or a cup of black coffee (he did not have a tolerance for alcoholic beverages). At such times he would reminisce about life and the opportunities he may have missed if he had had a normal life. When he was younger, he never lacked for having a lady friend around to keep him company. He was not a loner. He was tall, handsome, and a natty dresser when he needed to impress. One time he confided that his biggest regret in life was that he never got married. His “wife and family” were the mountains he climbed.

[Click here for Colin Haley's In Memoriam tribute to Beckey, published in AAJ 2018.](#)

Images



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