



AAC Publications

Robert M. Failing, M.D., 1928 – 2018

Robert “Bob” Mayo Failing was born in Ann Arbor, Michigan, the son of Joseph Henry Failing, M.D., and Virginia Mayo Neely. He attended Starr Commonwealth School in Albion, Michigan, graduating in 1946 at age 17. He moved to Murphy, North Carolina, and took a job with the Anglo-American Lumber Co. He entered Western Carolina Teachers College (now Western Carolina University) in 1948, graduating in 1951. He attended Duke University School of Medicine and received his degree in 1956. He spent the next five years at the Los Angeles County General Hospital in an internship and residency. During that same time he moonlighted as an emergency room physician at St. Luke Hospital, Altadena, California, and as a Deputy Medical Examiner for the County of Los Angeles.

Bob joined Santa Barbara Cottage Hospital’s pathology department in 1961 and worked there until he retired in 1996. During the same period he served as a principal forensic pathologist for the Santa Barbara County Sheriff/Coroner’s Office, Medical Director of Tri-Counties Blood Bank, Chief of Laboratory Services of Santa Ynez Valley and Pinecrest Hospitals, and was a founding director of Medical Group Pathology Laboratory Inc. Because of his forensic expertise and storytelling skills, he frequently consulted with author Sue Grafton for her “alphabet series” of detective novels. Ms. Grafton dedicated “Q is for Quarry” to Bob because one of his unsolved cases gave her the idea for the book.

Once settled in Santa Barbara, Bob’s dormant love of wilderness and mountains reawoke. Through a close friendship with William Hansen, then supervisor of the Los Padres National Forest, he explored the vast San Raphael Wilderness, leading several youth student groups on weeklong camping trips through its remote terrain. In the late 1960s and early ’70s, he became a “river rat,” running the Stanislaus, Yampa, Green and Snake rivers. In 1968 he ran the 230-mile section of the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon, which at that time had been attempted by fewer than 2,500 people. Bob joined the Los Padres Search and Rescue Team as its team physician, serving terms as director and president. This turned his interest toward mountains.

At age 49, and for the following 18 years, mountains were Bob’s love. He was the ninth person of record to summit all 50 state high points—from Florida’s 345’ Britton Hill to Alaska’s formidable Denali. He reached the top of six continents (all but Asia) and scaled the high points of over 45 nations. One of his partners would often welcome his return from a mountain adventure with, “So, another suicide attempt failed!”

His last major climb (1994) was the first ascent of Antarctica’s Mt. Vaughan with 89- year-old Norman Vaughan, for whom the mountain was named by Admiral Byrd. Vaughan was the chief dog “musher” on Byrd’s 1928-30 Antarctica expedition.

Bob was a longtime director and past president of the Community Arts Music Association. A lifetime Episcopalian, member of All Saints by the Sea, he served his church in various capacities: vestryman, diocesan delegate, and convocational member of the diocesan department of missions. A loyal alumnus of Western Carolina University, he served on its Foundation Board for over a decade.

His proudest non-mountaineering feat began at age 62. Each year on his birthday, for 12 consecutive years, he would walk, carry his clubs, and play the same number of holes as his age. At age 72, he walked and played 72 holes (more than 15 miles), carrying his own bag with 14 clubs. He completed the rounds in 9 hours, 25 minutes, monitored by one or more club members. Nobody at his country

club has come close to matching this achievement!

Bob was a member of the Valley Club of Montecito, the Santa Barbara Club, the Mount Vernon Country Club (Golden, CO), the American Alpine Club, the Explorers Club, California Mountaineering Club, and founding director and member of the High Pointers Club.

He is survived by his wife of 41 years, Nancyann, and children Robert Mayo Failing Jr., Lee Scheuermann, and Margaret Wrath-Esposito, step-daughter Carol Crego, step-son Stephen Raber, six grandchildren, and three step-grandchildren. He was pre-deceased by his daughter, Sarah Gronna.

Images

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