



## AAC Publications

---

### Wayne Merry, 1931 – 2019

Wayne Procter Merry passed away at home in Atlin, British Columbia, on October 30, 2019. He was 88. Wayne lived a consequential and deeply satisfying life as a trailblazer in a variety of arenas: big-wall climbing, national park administration, search and rescue, mountain guiding, wilderness first response, experiential education, and conservation.

He was born in California, and his family moved frequently in his youth. All the way through school, Wayne was free to roam in the nearby woods in search of adventure with his younger brother Bill, who belayed him on his first climb in the St. Helena Palisades. He briefly attended Stockton College, where he pursued an interest in music as he played both trumpet and baritone trombone. With the outbreak of the Korean War, Wayne enlisted in the Navy, a move that ended up advancing his climbing career. While stationed in San Diego as a dental technician, he joined the local Rock Climbing Section of the Sierra Club and paired up with the likes of Jerry Gallwas, Gary Hemming, George Schlieff, and Barbara Lilley to climb at Mission Gorge, Tahquitz, Joshua Tree, and eventually Yosemite Valley.

Wayne was drafted for the final push on the first ascent of the Nose of El Capitan, his most famous climb, during a summer in Alaska working with Dr. Dick Long on a three-man glacier-survey crew. "At the end of that summer, Harding contacted me to climb the Nose," Long recalled. "I was married with two kids and my 'job' started the same week, so Wayne took my place."

After narrowly missing out on the first ascent of the northwest face of Half Dome, Harding and friends started up the Nose on July 5, 1957. They pushed the route higher over a total of 45 days spread across two seasons. By the time Wayne joined the effort in September 1958, ropes were fixed to the halfway point atop Boot Flake.

Team members working on the Nose were forced to climb outside of peak tourist season because of the logistical problems caused by the spectacle they created. Under pressure from the Park Service to complete the project, Warren, Wayne, George Whitmore, and Rich Calderwood left the ground on November 1 for a final 10-day effort. On November 12, Harding drilled through the night by headlamp to overcome the summit overhangs and the Nose had been climbed.

When I asked Wayne to reflect on the Nose in 2017, he said, "It is a great thing to look back at from a great distance. No matter how clumsily it was done by comparison to modern techniques, there is only one first. It feels pretty good to have made that particular one. It is a beautiful climb and recognized as one of the most famous in the world, and I am happy with that."

While he was on the Nose, Wayne wrote letters to Cindy Barrison, with whom he had fallen in love. He tossed the notes to the ground in cans with small streamers, and the ground support team added a stamp to each letter and sent them to Santa Monica where she lived. They were married not long afterward.

The National Park Service hired Wayne as a Yosemite interpretive ranger in 1959. After a few years in Yosemite, Wayne and Cindy had their first child. In 1964 the family was transferred to Olympic National Park. A year later, they moved to Wonder Lake in Denali National Park, where Wayne was assigned as a mountaineering ranger.

The Wilcox Expedition tragedy on Denali in 1967, in which seven climbers died, marked a turning point for Wayne's career. He was so frustrated by what he and some others saw as a deficient rescue attempt by the Park Service that he threatened to resign unless he was promoted to chief ranger. He got the job. Wayne quickly developed an aversion for the politics involved in upper level Park Service administration, so he accepted an offer from the Yosemite Park and Curry Company in 1969 to establish a mountaineering guide service. This effort earned quick success and also helped establish some mutual respect between the climbing community, the rangers, and the concessionaires, who often viewed climbers as "somewhere between hippies and bears," in Wayne's humorous estimation.

During the 1960s, as visitors to Yosemite greatly increased, rescues and injury-related evacuations became an almost daily occurrence in peak season. After enlisting Jim Bridwell to act as spokesperson for climbers, Wayne approached Assistant Superintendent Keith Neilson with a sensible proposition: "Look, you have some of the best climbers in the world over in Camp 4. Why don't you take a select group and give them unlimited camping privileges so long as 50 percent of them are available at any one time to be teamed up with you on rescue.... I was so happy that Keith had the foresight to go along with that proposal." This was the beginning of YOSAR.

Wayne next set up the Mountain Shop in Yosemite Valley for the Curry Company and also founded Yosemite's Nordic ski school. As part of the school's promotions, Wayne, Ned Gillette, Jack Miller, and Jed Williamson skied across the Brooks Range on wooden skis, with no climbing skins or sleds, starting with 80-pound packs for the 30-day outing.

During a summer break, a friend who lived in Atlin, British Columbia, invited them to visit and Wayne immediately fell in love with the place. In 1974 he and Cindy bought a house in the town of 400 and set about making a living. Wayne organized a volunteer ambulance service and fire brigade along with search and rescue training seminars, while Cindy taught school part-time. In the late 1970s they started Nortreks, a company that outfitted and conducted wilderness excursions. In the 1980s, they lived on Baffin Island for a time, doing a variety of first-responder and educational work. After moving back to Atlin in 1990, they founded Context North and wrote a series of area-specific search and rescue manuals, which were then combined into a single publication covering all of Canada.

Wayne felt a deep satisfaction from having saved many lives and contributed to the wellbeing of his home and wider community. In assessing Wayne's life and character, a mutual friend and admirer, David Harris, reflected "the world would be a perfect place if it were filled with people like Wayne Merry."

– Steve Grossman

**Editor's Note:** This tribute is adapted from a longer article originally written for Alpinist magazine (available at [Alpinist.com](http://Alpinist.com)).

Images



Article Details

Author	Steve Grossman
Publication	AAJ
Volume	62
Issue	94
Page	
Copyright Date	2020
Article Type	Book reviews