



## AAC Publications

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### **Bob Swift, 1930 – 2019**

Bob Swift began backpacking in the Boy Scouts and took up climbing with the Sierra Club as a teenager. There were practice climbs at Berkeley's Cragmont and Indian Rocks, learning from the likes of David Brower and Richard Leonard, who had been cutting-edge Sierra climbers in the 1930s. Afterward, Brower would invite them over for a spaghetti feed and cheap red wine.

As soon as World War II was over, gear from the 10th Mountain Division troops showed up as Army surplus. Baggy khaki pants with a cargo pocket on the thigh became Bob's climbing fashion. The biggest prize, though, was nylon ropes. Fraying hemp was out—falls could actually be held!

Climbs like the 1950 Steck-Salathé Route in Yosemite Valley set a world-class standard, and Bob Swift was ready. In 1952, he teamed up with Allen Steck for the first ascent of El Cap Tree, the first-ever foray onto the Valley's greatest monolith. Steck became his favorite climbing partner. That same year they made the first ascent of Yosemite Point Buttress. Then Bob joined Warren Harding for the second ascent of the Lost Arrow Chimney (1954) and the first ascent of the East Buttress of Middle Cathedral Rock (1955), one of the "Fifty Classic Climbs of North America." Along the way he got a degree in geology from UC Berkeley and began teaching high school science.

In 1956, Bob turned to expedition climbing in Pakistan, attempting 25,551-foot Rakaposhi. "We got higher than any other team," Bob said, "but we ran out of time and weather at 23,000 feet." He had caught the expedition bug and joined a 1958 trip that succeeded in making the only American first ascent of an 8,000-meter peak: Hidden Peak (Gasherbrum I) in the Baltoro region of the Karakoram. "We got two people on top and we all came down alive," he said. "We made the climbing journals and all that. It made a big splash." Bob created a fine film of their expedition in preparation for the 50th anniversary, Remembering Gasherbrum I, which debuted at the Mountain Film Festival in Graz, Austria.

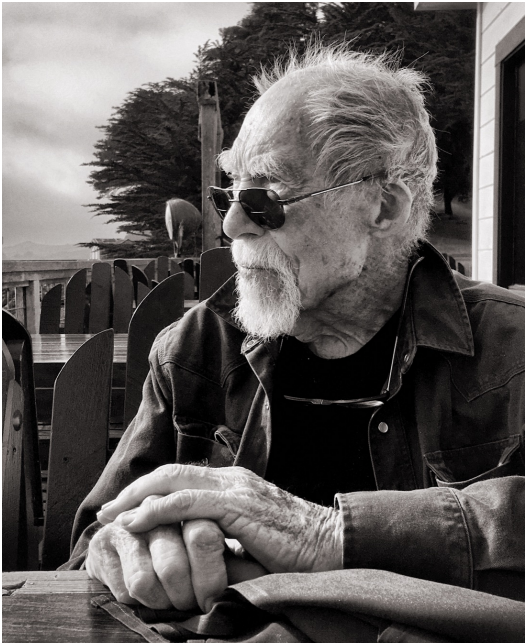
Bob returned to teaching and became chief guide at California's first climbing school, the Palisade School of Mountaineering. Later he took to the sea, sailing four months to the Galapagos and then frequenting the Inland Passage from Seattle toward Alaska. Eventually, he moved to Arizona, where he became an adjunct professor at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff. A cherished project was his trailer full of computers and telescopes, with which he would travel hundreds of miles bringing outreach to remote Navajo and Hopi communities.

Why climb? "It is all-encompassing...there's a joy of moving smoothly over steep rock," he said, adding, "I think that the kinesthetic feeling of climbing fills that depth for me, the muscular part of it."

Muscular to the end, Bob clocked 5,000 miles on a recumbent bicycle before lymphoma became overwhelming. He bought himself a plot and shared in his own wake ("Hey, I want to be there—a wide awake!") with his long-ago students Jan Tiura and Joe Brennan, who had become friends, then fellow guides and sailing buddies, and finally offered Bob sanctuary in their home. The next morning he quietly, and quite legally, took his own life.

– Doug Robinson

Images



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