



AAC Publications

Allen Steck, 1926–2023

Allen Steck was one of the most accomplished and influential American climbers of the 20th century. His long, visionary, and diverse career spanned all types of terrain, literature, and equipment and business innovations. Most American climbers (including the more famous Yosemite figures who followed) benefited from the foundation he built.

A lifelong resident of California's Bay Area, Steck enjoyed his first peak, climbing the east ridge of Mt. Maclure in Yosemite National Park, with his older brother, George. Learning climbing techniques with the Berkeley section of the Sierra Club, Steck spent two formative seasons in Yosemite before visiting Europe in the summer of 1949. There his horizons broadened by climbing classic routes with Karl Lugmayer in the Dolomites, including likely the first American ascent of the north face of the Cima Grande.

Steck returned to California for a marquee 1950 season, starting with the first ascent of Castle Rock Spire in Sequoia National Park, then the oft-tried north face of Sentinel Rock in Yosemite Valley with John Salathé. This notable climb took four days and is still a testpiece of chimneys and offwidths for aspiring Yosemite climbers.

Steck's aspirations transcended pure rock faces and drew him to classic lines on big mountains. An avid skier, he survived an avalanche near Lake Tahoe and completed the first winter ascent of Clyde Minaret near Mammoth Lakes. Five weeks after completing the Steck-Salathé, he traveled to Canada's Mt. Waddington and nearby peaks, where he participated in several first ascents. In Peru's Cordillera Blanca, in 1952, he checked off several long routes, most notably an alpine-style first ascent of Huandoy East.

After this auspicious beginning, Steck stayed close to home, busy with his 1952 marriage to Cyla and the arrival of two children, Lee and Sara. He signed on as manager of the Ski Hut shop in Berkeley, which became a center of the nascent climbing community in the 1950s. Here he designed sleeping bag and shell clothing innovations for the Trailwise brand and hired Steve Roper, future climbing partner and editor on literary projects.

Around 1963, the mountains beckoned again. The trio of Steck, Dick Long, and John Evans completed the first ascent of the Grand Traverse in the Tetons in a day from south to north, setting the stage for their next great objective, the Hummingbird Ridge on Canada's Mt. Logan. In 1965, a party of six, led by Long and Steck, launched up the huge ridge, which stretched six miles and gained 14,000 feet in elevation. Their most important climbing tool was a drilled-out steel shovel that allowed them to excavate steps quickly and traverse the corniced, narrow spine connecting to Mt. Logan's main mass. They hunkered down at Camp 2 for a week, with the cornice they camped on collapsing the day after they left. After 37 days, their topographic commitment and commitment to one another won the summit. Hummingbird Ridge, the largest route in the Western Hemisphere, has never been repeated in its original form.

The desperate undertaking only whetted Steck's appetite for adventure. He followed Hummingbird with the third ascent (and the first non-Robbins ascent) of the Salathé Wall, in 1966, with Long and Roper. Long lugged up a Super 8 movie camera, and the ensuing film is a priceless piece of climbing history. It shows Roper laybacking the Hollow Flake, with no protection for 40 feet, wearing stiff Spider Kletterschuhe boots.

The same year, Steck and Roper approached David Brower of the Sierra Club about publishing a literary journal dedicated to the art of climbing, as opposed to pitch-by-pitch accounts. Brower eventually agreed and Ascent was born. It became arguably the world's most highly respected climbing publication, prompting climber writers to plumb the intensity of their experiences for literary craft. The journal evolved for over 30 years until 1999, when Steck and Roper relinquished editorial oversight.

In 1968, Steck and Leo Le Bon started Mountain Travel, America's first adventure travel company. A citizen of the world, Steck guided Illiniza, Cotopaxi, and Chimborazo in Ecuador and Aconcagua in Argentina. Subsequent Mountain Travel trips took him to China, Tibet, Nepal, Greece, and various other foreign destinations. Other expeditions on his résumé include a 1954 expedition to Makalu, a 1976 trip with the Pakistani army up Paiju Peak in Pakistan, and a 1974 ascent of Peak Lenin in the USSR, where an avalanche buried Steck. His compatriots exhumed him, once again.

His contemporaries took notice of his accomplishments. Jointly with Norman Clyde, he was the first recipient of the Sierra Club's Francis P. Farquhar Mountaineering Award in 1970.

In 1978, a watershed year, Steck sold his interest in Mountain Travel and divorced. He devoted time to writing and editing *Fifty Classic Climbs of North America*, co-authored with Steve Roper and published by Sierra Club Books. When asked years later if he would change any of the climbs, he said, "If anyone complains about them, they can pick their own 50. I hope they do." In 1995, Steck and Roper won the AAC's Literary Award.

Never interested in esoteric climbing debates or personal aggrandizement, Steck joyfully spent his years in the mountains focusing on the climbing. For example, on the Paiju Peak expedition, Steck served in an advisory capacity to the Pakistani team and insisted they summit the peak before him and receive credit for the first ascent.

After retiring, Steck continued to pursue adventurous trips, such as an 82-day expedition through the Grand Canyon with his brother George in 1983. He was the ringleader of a series of climbing trips affectionately called "Golden Gatherings." Including the usual suspects such as Roper, Joe Kelsey, Joe Fitschen, John Thackray, Chris Jones, Eric Beck, and assorted hangers-on, the tribe of elders converged for a week at locations such as Joshua Tree or Owens River Gorge. Evenings were filled with grilling steaks on the fire, embellishing tall tales, and, of course, drinking red wine.

He continued to climb at a high level into his 80s, traveling to exotic locales such as Algeria. He repeated the Steck-Salathé route on Sentinel Rock at least four times, making his 50th-anniversary ascent in 2000, at the age of 74, with Andy Selters, a writer, guide, and frequent Golden Gathering rope gun.

Not a prolific writer or chronicler of ascents, Steck had been urged by Roper and others to record his diverse life. It wasn't until 2009, when his daughter, Sara, asked him to put something on paper to share with his grandson, that Steck became motivated to write his autobiography. *A Mountaineer's Life*, a comprehensive and highly recommended book describing his long, well-lived life, was published by Patagonia Works in 2017.

His last few years were spent in Bishop at his daughter's home. Friends from all over the world came to pay their respects to this renaissance man, who dabbled in music, photography, and pottery, and read Goethe in the original German, in addition to climbing, raising a family, and starting a business.

Following his death in February, two celebrations of Steck's 96 years were held in summer 2023, in Berkeley and Bishop. The program closed with his advice: "Follow your bliss slowly and carefully. Always be sure you have the necessary skills before undertaking your climbing adventures. And make

sure your personal and climbing lives are adequately meshed.”

Words to live by.

—**Sally Moser, with Andy Selters**

Images



Allen Steck on Mt. Logan in 1965.

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