



AAC Publications

Lou Whittaker, 1929–2024

Win, Lou, and Peter Whittaker (left to right).

Lou Whittaker, a world-renowned mountaineer and guide, passed away at his home near Mt. Rainier on March 24. “Big Lou” was 95.

Lou grew up in Seattle alongside his identical twin brother, Jim. The twins began climbing with the Boy Scouts at age 12, then joined The Mountaineers and the Explorer Scouts climbing group. After practicing at Monitor Rock in West Seattle, Lou, Jim, and their brother Barney did their first alpine climb in 1943: the Tooth, near Snoqualmie Pass. The twins climbed Rainier in 1945, at 16. At 18, according to RMIguides.com, Lou had climbed all the major peaks in Washington, and by 19 he and his brother began guiding on Rainier. That year, 1948, they also joined the Mountain Rescue Council.

Standing at six feet, five inches, the twins were recruited by Seattle University on basketball scholarships, but both preferred Rainier guiding and ski patrolling at Stevens Pass. Upon graduation, in 1952, Lou and Jim were drafted into the army, during the Korean War, and sent to a Signal Corps detachment in California. In January 1953, the two arrived at Camp Hale, Colorado, to train members of the 10th Mountain Division for missions in alpine conditions.

In 1954, the twins returned to Seattle, where their lives, which had been largely shared until this point, diverged. Jim became CEO of the REI Co-op and was the first American to climb Everest, summiting with Nawang Gombu Sherpa. Lou, who was invited on the Everest trip but ultimately declined, was defined by his lifetime connection to Rainier.

Lou served as the chief guide under Rainier’s main concessionaire for 14 years while also working at Osborn & Ulland, a prominent Seattle outdoor outfitter. He opened Whittaker’s Chalet, a ski and mountaineering store in Lakewood and ran it from 1962 to 1972, while still climbing and guiding, then purchased the guiding concession on Rainier and co-founded Rainier Mountaineering Inc. (RMI Expeditions) in 1969 with Jerry Lynch. He was a leader in developing the guiding profession, with, as RMI wrote in a statement upon his death, “many of the world’s premier mountaineers benefiting from Lou’s tutelage.” His son Peter took charge of RMI in the late 1990s, and son Win guides for RMI.

Lou also climbed in Alaska, the Himalaya, and the Karakoram. In 1982, he led a strong team that attempted a new route on the north side of Everest. With him was Washington’s Jim Wickwire and RMI guides including Eric Simonson, Marty Hoey, Phil Ershler, George Dunn, Joe Horiskey, and Larry Nielson (who was to become the first American to climb Everest without supplemental oxygen). Hoey, age 31, a beloved RMI guide on pace to become the first American woman to climb Everest, died in a fall at 26,600 feet.

In 1984, Lou returned to Everest and led the first American ascent of the north side of the mountain. (Phil Ershler summited alone.) At age 60, Lou led an expedition that made the first American ascent of Kangchenjunga. He wrote about his adventures in *Memoirs of a Mountain Guide*.

Upon retiring, Lou and his wife, Ingrid, who had worked for Whittaker’s Chalet, at RMI, and up at Camp Muir, lived in both Ashford, gateway town to Mt. Rainier National Park, and Sun Valley, Idaho. Lou was involved with many organizations, including as a founder and member of the board of Crystal Mountain ski area; he and Ingrid were part of the Nisqually River Council and Nisqually Land Trust.

Lou's philosophy on life was simple: "When it comes down to dying," he once said, "I want to know what it is like to have really lived."

—Adapted, with additions, from tributes published by The Mountaineers

Images



Win, Lou, and Peter Whittaker (left to right).

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