



Rod Newcomb, 1934–2025

Rodney Albert Newcomb, who died October 9 at age 91, was a pioneering avalanche expert and educator, and a leading mountaineer of his time.

Rod was born in Riverside, California, in 1934 to Margaret Root and Daniel Albert Newcomb. He grew up during World War II, during which his father was an air-raid warden. By high school, he and his family had moved to the California desert in the Coachella Valley, outside of Indio.

Rod helped with his father's citrus nursery, hiked the desert hills, was an outstanding track and football athlete in high school, and became an Eagle Scout. He was drafted for two years in the peacetime Army, attended Occidental College, dropped out, traveled around Europe on a motorbike and, in 1953, wound up in the Tetons of Wyoming.

Rod—my father—first worked in guest services at the Square G Ranch, later at Jackson Lake Lodge, and eventually at Jenny Lake Lodge, starting off as many young people do in Jackson Hole, earning just enough money to get by while spending as much time as possible learning to run rivers, ski, hunt, and climb. A natural athlete, Rod was a quick study. He first climbed the Grand Teton (13,775') in 1954, his second summer in the area.

In 1961, Rod, Jake Breitenbach, and Frank Ewing attempted Mt. Steele (16,641') in Alaska, making three tries (one of which brought them within 2,000 feet of the summit) but turning around due to storms. Jake, who wrote the AAJ report, was to be lost to serac fall at age 27 on the 1963 American Mount Everest Expedition.

During this era, Rod and Frank and Dick Pittman skied across the Thorofare, a remote area of wilderness southeast of Yellowstone Lake, from Blackrock Ranger Station to Cody, Wyoming, and also crossed the Wind River Range on skis.

In 1963, Rod stepped it up further, and with Warren Bleser, Peter Lev, Al Read, Jed Williamson, and Fred Wright, made the landmark first ascent of Denali's East Buttress. Their route had been suggested by Bradford Washburn, who wrote in the 1963 AAJ, "Only three 'major routes' still remain unclimbed on Mount McKinley—Wickersham Wall, the East Face, and the East Buttress." The Jackson-based crew started their overland trip to Alaska with Frank Ewing towing them up Teton Pass because only five out of the six cylinders worked in the car they were driving.

That same year, 1963, Rod began working for Exum Mountain Guides. He met his soon-to-be wife, Anne Bearer, through their mutual friends Angie and Dick Pittman, and in 1965 he and Annie carried their first baby, Lisa, home to a tent cabin in Guide's Camp at the foot of the Tetons. Their son, Mark, was born in 1967 and their other daughter, Maria, in 1968. In the summer of 1968, Rod took time off from guiding to work on building a home outside of Wilson, where the family lived for 48 years.

Starting around 1962, he worked as a part-time ski patroller at Snow King Mountain Resort, the ski area in the town of Jackson, where he experienced tragedy firsthand when his good friend Dick Pittman died in an avalanche. Following this traumatic event, Rod was determined to learn more about snow and avalanches.

When Jackson Hole Mountain Resort opened in 1965, Rod was hired as the assistant snow ranger to Juris "Juri" Krisjansons, a U.S. Forest Service ranger and expert in avalanche-hazard reduction, whom he aided in terrain mapping, management, and gathering data. When Juri left in 1971, so did Rod, finding a job in Silverton, Colorado, working for the Institute of Arctic and Alpine Research (INSTAAR) and studying the effects of cloud seeding on the area snowpack. In that job, he rubbed shoulders with Ph.D. snow scientists, from whom Rod, with a nascent scientific background from working with his father in the citrus industry, quickly picked up technical and analytical snow-observation skills.

As winter backcountry travel became more popular, Rod identified a need for widespread avalanche education accessible to the lay person. In 1974, he founded the American Avalanche Institute, the first privately owned avalanche school in the country. He designed its standard four-day course, conducted half in the field and half in the classroom, and hired expert instructors. He taught avalanche courses throughout the Rocky Mountain West, with others in Alaska and back East.

Yvon Chouinard attended one of his courses, telling the Jackson Hole News&Guide, "I came because Rod Newcomb is one of the most knowledgeable men in the world about avalanches."

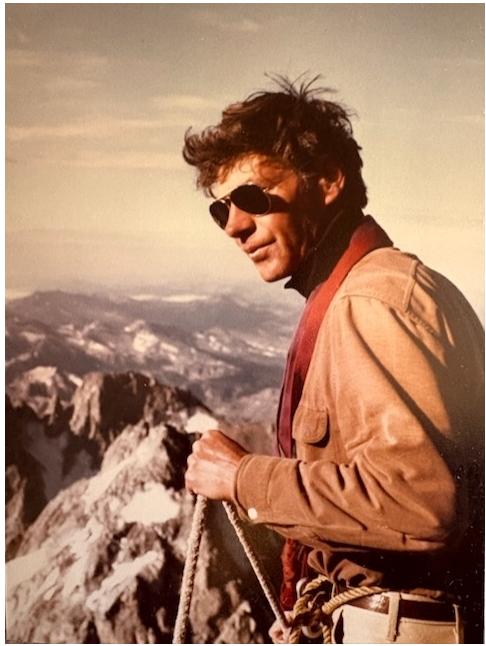
In his 48 years of guiding for Exum, where he became a co-owner in 1978, Rod climbed the Grand Teton over 400 times, in 2009 doing it with me in a day at age 75. As the Exum website reported, "Rod kept the hammer down the entire trip, taking only short breaks and leading a couple pitches on the Owen-Spalding route."

He was given a lifetime achievement award from the American Mountain Guides Association in 2006.

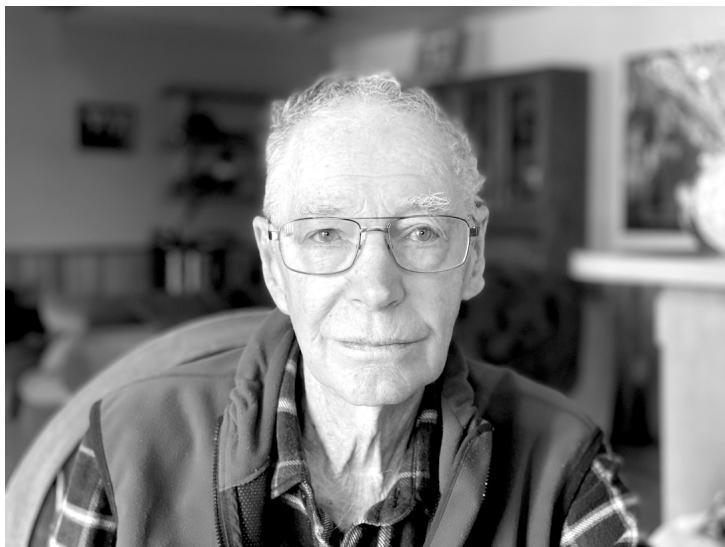
Snow safety, backcountry travel, and family life shaped Rod's world. His humble demeanor and enduring kindness made him a remarkable father, grandfather, and mentor to many. He died October 9, at age 91, in St. John's Hospital in Jackson, with family by his side. Rod is survived by his wife of 61 years, Annie Newcomb; children Lisa, Mark and Maria Newcomb; grandchildren Tristan and Skylar Moehs, Charlie and Bowen von Maur-Newcomb; and sister Barbara (Joe) Jayne.

—Mark Newcomb

Images



Rod Newcomb on the Grand Teton, which he climbed over 400 times, including a one-day ascent at age 75.



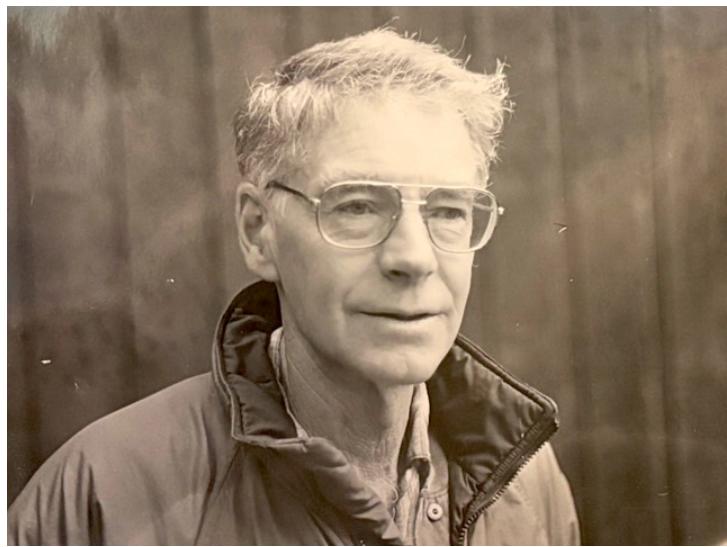
Rod Newcomb at home, November 14, 2024.



Rod Newcomb, avalanche science educator, teaches a course on Teton Pass, Wyoming, 1984.



Rod Newcomb at 13,000 feet on the first ascent of the East Buttress of Denali, done with Warren Blesser, Peter Lev, Al Read, Jed Williamson, and Fred Wright in 1963.



Rod Newcomb, portrait.

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