



AAC Publications

Michael Chessler, 1944–2026

Michael Chessler and his wife, Heinke Forfota. Photo by George Meyers

Michael “Mike” Chessler, owner and purveyor of one of the world’s leading collections of mountain literature for over 40 years, died June 28, at 82, after a long illness. His business, Chessler Books, became the international one-stop source for climbing literature in many languages, with an evolving inventory that included old, obscure, and collectable publications spanning 170 years.

A native of Brooklyn, New York, Mike was exposed to the out-of-doors through camping and hiking with the Boy Scouts. In 1962, as a new member of the Brooklyn College Open Road Club, he began rock climbing in the Shawangunks of New York and sought snow and ice experience in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. Mike got the mountain bug, and spent the next few years hiking and climbing throughout the Northeast.

By 1968 he was managing one of the first dedicated climbing shops, an upstairs climbing and camping center called Leon Greenman’s, in New York City, which he followed with work at the influential Climber’s Corner in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In 1971, Mike moved to Santa Barbara, California, first working for the pack maker Kelty and then for Sierra West, one of the first manufacturers utilizing Gore-Tex.

At that time he started seriously collecting mountaineering books, often purchased on the road during his next job, which was as a sales rep for Sierra West. Weekends were spent in the Sierra, climbing and skiing. In 1982, he joined a trip to the Caucasus, hosted by mountaineers from the Soviet Union. By the time he moved back to New York City later that year, he had over 5,000 mountaineering books and hints of a possible business.

Opportunity knocked for Mike during a trip to England in 1984. A large collection of mountaineering books was for sale, and with one phone call, Mike quit his rep job. He loaded his credit cards to their limits and bought the whole set of books, sending two pallets back to his home in New York. This was the start of Chessler Books. By 1986, with burgeoning sales and the constant acquisition of collections crowding out their small apartment, he and his wife, Heinke Forfota, moved to Evergreen, Colorado.

P. Thom Davis, a collector who received advice from Chessler over the years, still has his Michael Chessler Books Catalog Seven, Spring 1986, from which he quoted a friendly paragraph suggesting the company was largely mail order, but was not impersonal: “After you’ve bought twice, we probably will remember your name. We accept personal checks (but not credit cards yet) and extend credit to established customers. We take checks in foreign currencies. We answer the phone on weekends and evenings, when rates are cheaper for you. And we ship the day we get your order.”

Mike was well-prepared to succeed in the used-book business: He had a quick wit and friendly disposition, and he developed an encyclopedic knowledge of mountaineers and their books. Mike read the books he sold. He also spent much of his time on the phone with customers, many of whom were accomplished climbers.

Over the past 30 years or so, Mike sought out notable climbing authors from Jon Krakauer to Yvon Chouinard to sign his stock of their books, while generously donating to charities important to them.

Mike also had notable climbers sign pitons, gear, and, most fun, the multitude of wooden-handled ice axes he imported to showcase the signatures of such luminaries as Edmund Hillary, Reinhold Messner, Heinrich Harrer, Anderl Heckmair, Maurice Herzog, Chris Bonington, Gaston Rebuffat, and many, many more. Alex Honnold signed pitons.

Mike read constantly, with subject matter ranging widely: sports figures, political biographies, even the mundane. He told me he had read a history of the shipping container three times.

Rick Accomazzo, a longtime climber, attorney, and author, recalled in an email: "Michael was a New York City boy who loved the mountains. But even as he moved to the Rockies, he was a New Yorker through and through—he was street smart and did not suffer fools gladly." Rick calls him "a witty and fun-loving conversationalist who could back up his opinions with facts and literary sources that he had at his fingertips. He loved history, especially World War II, and had amassed a vast collection of World War II books and memorabilia.

"Many great climbers would take the windy dirt road to the home of Chessler Books," Rick added. "Michael would often drop these famous names into the conversation, like when giving directions to his mountain abode: 'Be sure to turn right at the dirt road. Chris Bonington missed that turn and got very lost.'"

For some years, a few of us living in Evergreen—all publishers of various sorts—would join Mike and Heinke at their house periodically over vast dinner spreads.

After Chessler Books ceased operations due to Mike's illness, a climber and collector, Daniel Kay, who runs the online store Dirtbag Dan Books, posted that he had acquired much of the inventory. He wrote on dirtbagdan.com, "Chessler Books was the place to buy climbing books in the USA for over 40 years." He has left the Chessler Books stickers on the books.

The treasure trove that was the Chessler website is closed for business, but as of July 2025 you could still peruse it; scroll down on the opening page to see Michael's photo gallery of dignitaries signing books.

—George Meyers

Images



Michael Chessler, 1944-2026.



Michael Chessler in his early climbing days.



Michael with Jamling Tenzing, son of Tenzing Norgay, Everest summitter with Sir Edmund Hillary. He is showing Michael Chessler his father's Porter Book, signed by Hugh Rutledge, who led expeditions to Everest in 1933 and 1936, and by Eric Shipton and Bill Tilman.



Michael Chessler with Jim Whittaker, first American to climb Mount Everest.



Michael Chessler with Jim Wickwire, first American to climb K2.



Michael Chessler and his wife, Heinke Forfota, who was from Hungary.

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