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George Whitmore, 1931 – 2021

In the spring of 2020, legendary climber and conservationist George Whitmore, 89, texted a friend about November 12, 1958, the day he and partners Warren Harding (1924–2002) and Wayne Merry (1931–2019) completed the first ascent of The Nose on El Capitan. “I am now the last man standing, and the wolves are circling,” Whitmore wrote in his text. “Probably don’t have much time left. In the meantime, I get satisfaction from questing after unreachable stars.” On New Year’s Day, at a hospice facility in Fresno, California, Whitmore, weakened by complications from COVID-19, finally reached those stars.

Climbing El Capitan ranks with the most unlikely tasks a human can ever do. Even with the space-age technology and Olympic-caliber fitness of modern climbers, scaling El Capitan is never a sure thing. In 1958, it was revolutionary.

Warren Harding, Bill “Dolt” Feuerer, and Mark Powell began the climb on July 4, 1957. Whitmore, then 27 and recently discharged from the Air Force, was working as a pharmacist down in Fresno. As Harding and company slowly climbed higher up The Nose, leaving fixed ropes behind them, Feuerer abandoned the adventure and then Powell went down with an ankle injury, leaving Harding without a partner. Wayne Merry, a leading Valley climber, quickly signed on to share the leading; Rich Calderwood was recruited to help haul loads. Whitmore joined the team in September 1958, with 2,000 feet to go.

Whitmore was a seasoned scrambler and peakbagger who’d climbed mountains in the Andes and throughout the Sierra Nevada, but had little meaningful experience with cutting-edge rock climbing. (Few people did in the late 1950s.) However, Whitmore’s fitness, tenacity, steel nerves, and his yen for “unreachable stars” proved indispensable. Hauling on a big wall is grievous work, even today with ascenders and pulleys, but nothing compared to the nightmare of hauling bags in 1958, which Whitmore was tasked to do, single-handedly, during the final days of the summit push. (Calderwood had had to bail, in order to save his job.) Harding’s famous and epic all-night push over the summit headwall was only made possible when Whitmore—battling a storm—prusiked up waterlogged ropes with a fresh supply of drills and bolts, fetched from Camp 6, 650 feet below.

The Nose was Whitmore’s first and last big technical rock climb, but his contributions to the world, and all of us on it, were only beginning.

According to Nancy, his wife of 42 years, Whitmore retired from the pharmacy in the early 1970s to focus on conservation. He was involved with the Sierra Club in local, state, and national campaigns, serving as chairman of the Fresno-based Tehipite Chapter. El Capitan had taught Whitmore to think big and to act boldly. So, he did.

From the late 1960s through the early 1970s, Whitmore spearheaded efforts by the Sierra Club to prevent Disney from developing a ski resort at Mineral King. The project was halted, and the site became part of Sequoia National Park. Whitmore’s tireless lobbying helped establish the Kaiser Wilderness in 1976 and the California Wilderness Act of 1984. These added 1.8 million acres into the National Wilderness Preservation System, including present-day Ansel Adams, John Muir, Dinkey Lakes, and Monarch wilderness lands. He helped protect Mono Lake and prevented a proposed highway over the Sierra in the San Joaquin River corridor.

As a staunch ally of the Friends of Yosemite Valley, Whitmore helped the group win a decisive court victory in the 2000s against the National Park Service that halted development near the Merced River. Whitmore was also instrumental in nixing a proposed dam project on the Kings River. "What means most is that protection is now complete from Tioga Pass Road in the north to Sherman Pass Road on the Kern Plateau in the south," Whitmore told The Fresno Bee in September 1984. "It is the longest stretch of de facto wilderness in the lower 48 states."

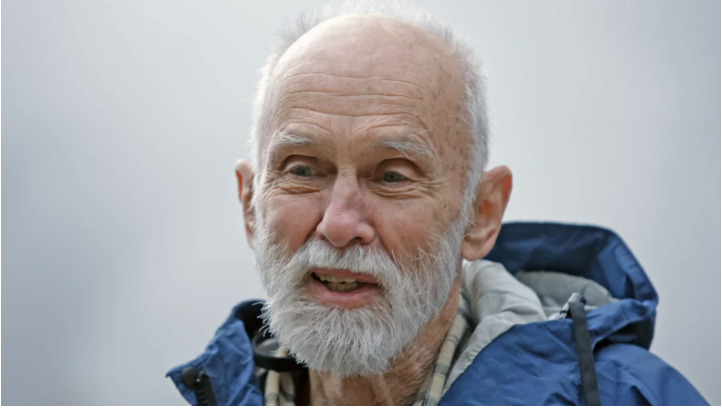
Whitmore's nephew, Randy Fisher, asked him a few years ago if he would put his El Cap climb on the top of his list of accomplishments. Whitmore told him he wasn't sure he'd even put it on the list.

"He was a climber, but that was secondary," said his wife, Nancy. "His love of the wilderness is the most important legacy that he left us."

— **John Long**

Editor's Note: This tribute is adapted from a longer article published at [Patagonia.com](https://www.patagonia.com).

Images



George Whitmore.

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