Washburn In The *AAJ*

A legacy for mountaineers.

Bradford Washburn's photographs first appeared in the *American Alpine Journal* in 1934 (from Mt. Crillon), and they have graced nearly every edition since. His written contributions to the *AAJ* spanned more than seven decades, starting in 1931 with two notes, covering an unsuccessful attempt on Mt. Fairweather and his election as treasurer of the Harvard Mountaineering Club. Over the decades, his articles traced the arc of a mountaineer's life, beginning with reports on his own attempts and ascents, then sharing his ideas for new routes with younger climbers, and finally looking back with stories about mountain science, geography, and history.

Washburn's most influential articles in the *AAJ* were those from the late 1940s to the late 1960s proposing new routes in Alaska and elsewhere. In 1947, after studying maps and photos, he outlined two new routes on Denali: the "Great West Buttress" and the "Wickersham Ridge." (At the time, Denali had only been climbed three times, always by the Muldrow Glacier.) Four years later, it was Washburn himself who led the first team up the west buttress, which soon became Denali's normal route.

Washburn's articles in the *AAJ* in the 1950s and '60s suggested many other lines on Alaska and the Yukon's great peaks, most of which soon were climbed, including the west ridge of Mt. Hunter, Mt. Huntington, and the northwest ridge of Denali. In the 1963 *AAJ*, he published an article called "Mount McKinley: Proposed East Buttress Routes," which began, "Only three 'major routes' still remain unclimbed on Mount McKinley—Wickersham Wall, the East Face, and the East Buttress." Washburn had previously used the *AAJ's* bully pulpit to propose routes up the Wickersham Wall, and in 1963 two separate lines on that face as well as the east buttress of Denali were climbed. Of the final unclimbed route, Washburn wrote, "The east face is exceedingly steep, complex, and difficult, and will, I hope, be the subject of one of these analytical articles another year."

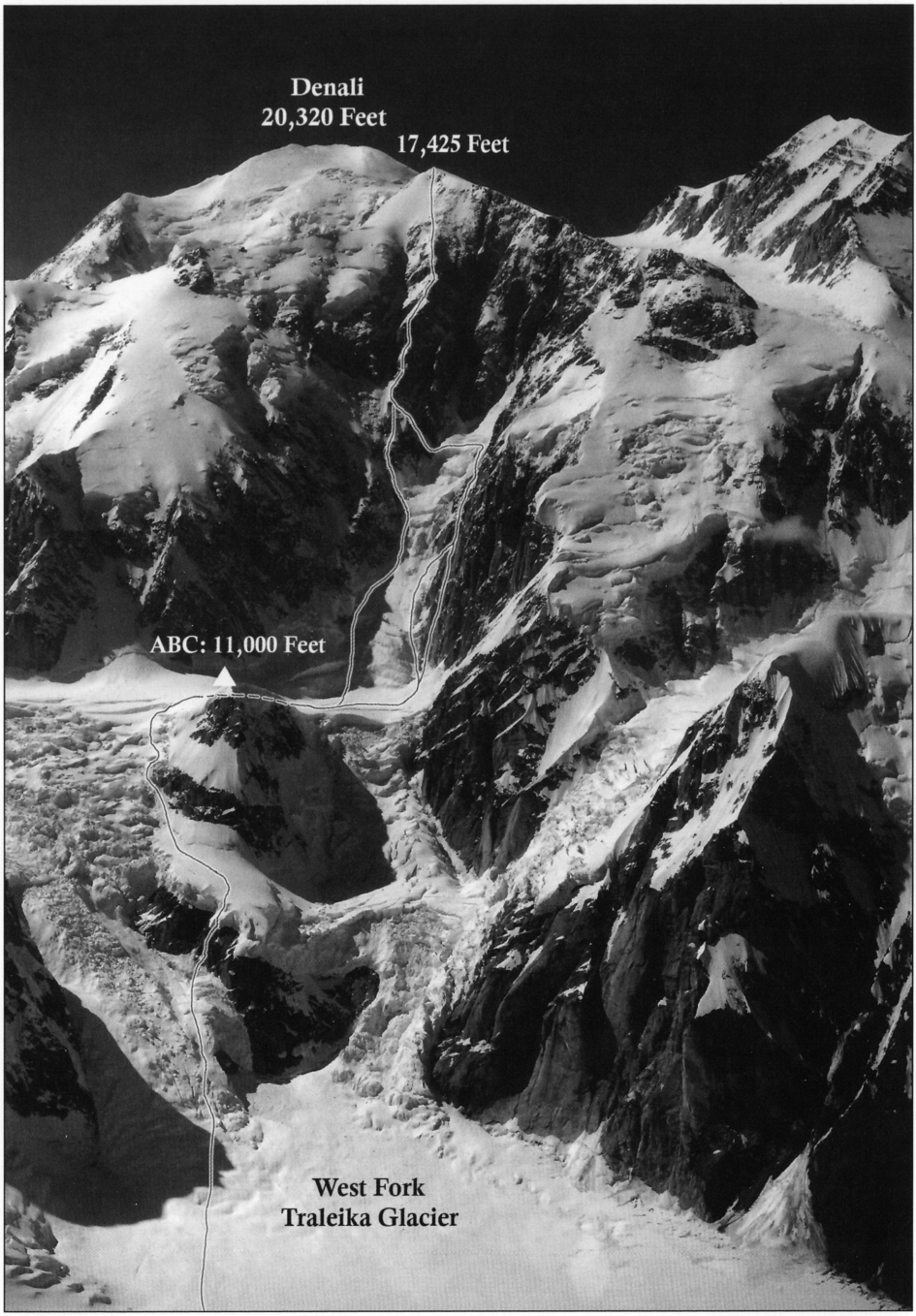
Washburn eventually described his ideas for the east face in his final new-route prospectus, originally published in the April 2000 edition of *Rock & Ice* magazine. That article is reprinted here, with the addition of a single paragraph from a Washburn letter. As of the summer of 2007, the east face of Denali remains unclimbed.

Dougald MacDonald

Denali's East Face

By Bradford Washburn

Once, many years ago, the lower icefall insulating Denali's east face was traversed as part of a summit bid via Thayer Basin. In 1998, determined to solo that mighty and aloof virgin, Eigerwand ascensionist Tom Bubendorfer studied the icefall thoroughly, then



Bradford Washburn's proposed route up the east face of Mt. McKinley. This photo, Neg. #5816, was taken in July 1966, and ice formations on the face are likely to have changed. *© Bradford Washburn, Courtesy Panopticon Gallery, Boston, MA.*

prudently backed off, the route being too isolated for a reasonable solo ascent. But this is the sort of face that eventually gets climbed, no matter how difficult or dangerous.

The east face rises 9,000 feet above the Traileika Glacier to its 17,425-foot crest—still 3,000 feet below Denali's summit and two and a half miles east of Denali Pass. To reach its base requires an 11-mile hike from McGonagall Pass, which means a 30-mile trek from Denali Park Highway, or 40 miles from Kantishna Airport. Although the utterly crevasseless Traileika Glacier would permit a DC-10 to land at base camp, the National Park Service prohibits all aircraft landings in the area. Air drops—free-fall or by parachute—are likewise a no-no. In short, the east face is very, very remote.

I suggest a simple end-run around the Park Services regulations: Hire a competent sled-dog driver to haul a big cache of food and fuel from Kantishna to an excellent position for a base camp on the West Fork of the Traileika at an altitude of about 7,500-8,000 feet. This could be done early enough in the spring to be certain that the McKinley River is still frozen solid enough for sledge traffic to cross it safely and easily.

Given its position and magnitude, Denali's east face is likely to fall to a party of four climbing in two, closely related teams or to a single powerful pair. The icefall danger at the start is no worse than the Khumbu, which, though dramatic and dangerous, is traversed by hundreds of Himalayan climbers each year. The route's upper part, characterized by steep granite and ice, looks climbable and thrilling. The primary obstacle making the east face so treacherous is avalanches.

Before setting foot on the east face, climbers would be wise to spend *at least a week* studying its avalanche patterns. Most of the activity seems to originate from three small hanging glaciers, situated above the route and to its left, at about 15,000 feet. Does debris really cross the route? How frequently? After a big slough, is there a "safe" period before the next avalanche hits, or is the route cursed by a steady trickle of little falls the whole time?

The best place to study the avalanche behavior is at an 8,000-foot base camp at the head of the Traileika Glacier. There, hopeful climbers can train powerful binoculars on the proposed line until it's known exactly when, where, and how frequently the avalanches occur.

The weather on the northeastern side of Denali is much less violent than its western and southern aspects. However, less direct sunlight and rare storms can make the east face a much colder place than elsewhere. If I were to try this route, I'd leave Kantishna in mid-June and make the climb in early to mid-July.

Assuming a feasible route still negotiates the lower icefall, climbers will find a marvelous advanced base camp location at 11,000 feet, thus reducing the altitude gain of the most difficult part of the climb to about 5,000 feet. What climbers should do at the 17,425-foot crest of the east face poses its own questions. Should climbers deposit in advance, by way of the west buttress, a substantial cache of food, fuel, and even a tent, for a summit bid? Or is a speedy descent via Thayer Basin a better proposition. Then again, should climbers make a hurried retreat down Denali Pass, or simply downclimb the route on the same day as the ascent? Only one thing is certain: An attempt should only be made in excellent weather. The race is on!

This article originally appeared in Rock & Ice *No. 99 (April 2000) and is reprinted with permission of* Rock & Ice *and Barabara Washburn.*