

**HENRY BRADFORD WASHBURN, JR. 1910-2007**

On January 10, 2007 we lost a visionary, a world-class mountaineer and explorer, a scientist and teacher, and perhaps the most prolific mountain photographer of all time when Brad Washburn passed away at the age of 96.

I first met Brad only 15 years ago, but as a climber I had known of him and his many accomplishments a long time. Brad and Barbara came to visit, as Brad wanted a look at one of my photographs of Everest that he thought might be useful. Never ones to procrastinate, they arrived just 45 minutes after our first conversation, already in their eighties but still with the energy to put most people half their age to shame. They were busy with Brad's latest innovative project to re-measure the exact height of Mt. Everest using state-of-the-art technology and some top climbers who were to plant a GPS receiver on the highest rock projection near the summit. They did it the next year, and I remember when the new official height of Everest—29,035 feet—was read aloud at the National Geographic Society in Washington DC.

We spent a lovely afternoon with them that first evening. I'll never forget Brad explaining to me with contagious enthusiasm how maps were made—for the first time I really understood! What made Brad a great teacher was his own insatiable interest in so many things.

Most everyone is familiar with Brad's many ascents of Mt McKinley, including the first ascent of the West Buttress, and, of course, the landmark 1947 ascent with Barbara, who became the first woman to climb McKinley. And there were the first ascents of mounts Crillon and Bertha, and that marvelous picture of Brad and Barbara on top.

But not everyone knows that Brad was climbing in the Alps as a teenager and was one of the most accomplished American alpinists of his day with ascents of the Matterhorn, Mt. Blanc, the Charmoz, and the airy needle of the Grepon. His greatest and most technical climb (according to Brad) occurred in the French Alps when he was just 19. Along with local guides Albert Coutier and Georges Charlet, Brad made the first ascent of the 4,000-foot sheer north face of the Aguille Vert in a single day. A good feat even by today's standards, and Brad did it in 1929. He published stories for boys of his early adventures in his popular series "Among the Alps with Bradford," which helped pay his way through Harvard.

Perhaps the most famous and harrowing of Brad's climbs took place in the remote Saint Elias Range of the Yukon, where he and Bob Bates made the first ascent of Mt. Lucania in 1937. It is one of the great epic stories of survival, exploration, and comradeship in all of mountaineering lore. Upon realizing they were stranded at the foot of Lucania after their bush pilot, Bob Reeves, barely escaped the unseasonable slushy conditions on the glacier, the intrepid pair resolved to focus on the climb and worry about finding their way back to civilization—some 120 miles of desolate glaciers, rivers, and wilderness—later.

After 20 days they reached Lucania's elusive summit and, if that weren't enough, they carried on to bag the second ascent of nearby Mt. Steele! The real epic however was yet to unfold, as Bob and Brad spent the next several weeks crossing uncharted territory, negotiating swollen rivers, and eating squirrels and rabbits that Bob shot with his revolver as they made their way back to a tiny trading post.



Brad Washburn © Bradford Washburn, Courtesy Panopticon Gallery, Boston, MA

The stories from these adventures were endless and what often amazed me was Brad's ability to recall specific details from so many years ago, even in his final years when his short-term memory had suffered so much.

If all Brad and Barbara had done was climb mountains they would be famous enough, but they of course did so much more. When we speak of mountain photography I believe there are few if any equals to Brad Washburn. The precision and artistry of his work puts him in a tiny group of visionaries like Vittorio Sella and Ansel Adams. And frankly, in many ways, Brad was better. You can always tell a Washburn. The detail is so exceptional you feel you are right there, peering through the open door of a small aircraft into the cold Alaskan wilderness. And yet in each photo there is something unique and personal, the curious eye of a relentless explorer. No matter how much you magnify a Washburn you will always find more.

From a mountaineer's perspective, it is hard to fathom the enormous impact his photos have had on exploratory climbing and first ascents as practically every serious expedition to Alaska has been planned and plotted over an 8×10-inch black and white of the intended ridge or vertical wall taken by Brad during one of his countless flights over Alaska. We climbers owe him a great debt.

This quote from one of Brad's early mentors sums it up: "Brad Washburn is one of the very few people who have combined spectacular experience in the wilderness with equally spectacular achievements in the world of civilization. One never knows what to expect next from this roving genius of mind and mountains, but whatever it is, we know it will be excellent and effective." (That comment was from Ansel Adams in 1983.)

As a professional cartographer, Brad produced the most accurate and useful maps in existence of Mt McKinley, the Grand Canyon, the Western Yukon, and Mt. Everest, as well as the Everest and Presidential Range scale models. I dare say that the full impact and importance of Brad and Barbara's work will not be known or fully appreciated for many years, the scope is simply so vast.

In 1939, not long after graduating from Harvard, Brad accepted a position as Director of the Museum of Natural History in Boston. This would lead to Brad's instrumental role in founding and developing Boston's Museum of Science and his extraordinary gift to public education. Under Brad's imaginative leadership and effective administration, the Museum of Science has become one of the finest teaching museums in the world. "Museums should be a place where learning is fun and exciting," Brad often remarked, and his museum would set a new standard for interactive exhibits. It was also the first major museum to incorporate all the sciences under one roof. Brad's work with the museum was a lifelong commitment. Forty-one years as its director and well into his eighties, Brad could be found in his office enthusiastically involved in a new exhibit or program.

The museum is also where he met Barbara, who came to interview for a secretarial position at the original natural history museum. She declined at first, and, as she said, "I had no interest in working in that dusty old place filled with a bunch of decaying stuffed animals." But Brad knew a good thing when he saw it, and like everything else he pursued in life, Brad didn't give up easily. After endless pestering from Brad, Barbara eventually accepted the position and they married shortly thereafter. So began a remarkable lifelong partnership, a busy and adventurous life; they were inseparable as they were always working together on some new project. And yet they still found time to raise three wonderful children.

Inevitable as Brad's passing was, it is hard to accept that he is actually gone. Brad's death

marks the end of an era, the final chapter in a visionary life spent so productively that there is no doubt his legacy will survive a very long time, inspiring future climbers, scientists and artists around the world. More than anything else, I'll miss Brad's contagious love for living life to it's fullest. One of Brad's favorite quotes was from Rudyard Kipling's 1898 poem "The Explorer": "Something hidden. Go and find it. Go and look behind the ranges. Lost and waiting for you—Go!"

Brad is survived by his wife Barbara and his three children, Dorothy, Betsy, and Edward.

MARK RICHEY, AAC

*Brief obituaries of other AAC members may be found in the quarterly American Alpine News.*

## NECROLOGY

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