

GENE MASON

1928-1993

Gene Mason loved life, never seemed to stop finding it exciting. The last letter I had from him was from Africa, and it began with the phrase "I've taken my new heart to Africa." It was his last trip there. He was working again as a teaching doctor and was waiting for his wife Lucy, also a doctor, to arrive so that they could travel around to some of the more exotic places they seemed to find in Africa.

In his regular life he was the head of anesthesiology at a hospital in Everett, Washington. He and Lucy had four children, whom they raised in a sort of suburban existence north of Seattle. One of their trips to Africa was to be doctors in Dar Es Salaam for a couple of years. The whole family walked up Kilimanjaro with their nine-year-old daughter becoming, at that time, the youngest person to make the ascent of Kilimanjaro.

As he was born and raised in the Midwest, mountains were a new concept to him when he and Lucy came to the Seattle area to practice medicine. But he went very rapidly from climbing in the Cascades, substantial enough for most of us, to getting involved in the ascent of Mount McKinley in the early 1960s, when going up McKinley was a relatively rare event. This may have been what led him to the idea of climbing the highest summit in every continent. By 1970 when he wrote his book *Minus Three*, he had climbed the highest mountain on three continents and shortly thereafter added a fourth. I always felt he used the idea as a device to climb in interesting places, rather than an end in itself. He had become a member of the American Alpine Club in 1965.

He never really liked climbing a mountain on a route that could be looked up in a guidebook, which must have been complicated since he was operating with climbing skills learned later in life than most persons climbing on the high mountains. He always seemed willing to try things that might have been beyond his skills. In choosing ways up mountains that involved the guessing that goes with unknown routes, he got frostbite or broken leg problems three times that I know about. He had to be carried off a mountain in each case and then transported a long, awkward way out from the bottom of the mountain.

The experience of sitting around in camp or in tents or just talking with Gene was always somewhere between whimsy and good cheer. For Gene, people did things without being self-conscious about them. Life was never a demanding obligation nor a routine plod, but it was an opportunity to do something interesting and exciting. In addition, he managed to make four trips to Africa to make use of his skills as a doctor, to help educate and to doctor, the last time when he took his new heart there. But the new heart failed.

Gene loved to talk, and spending time with him brings to mind the line from a biography of the *New Yorker* humorist Robert Benchley, "... wherever he is now, they are sitting up late talking. ..."

WILLIAM S. DOUGALL