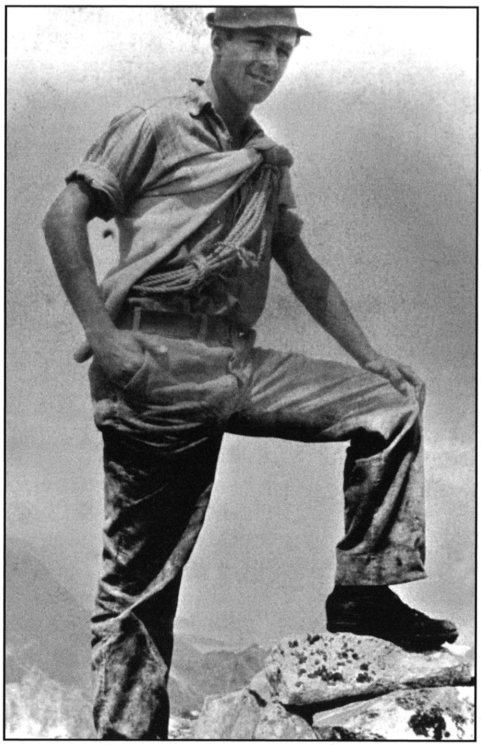
GLENN EXUM
1911-2000



Glenn Exum on the day he made the first ascent of the Exum Ridge on the Grand Teton.
YVON CHOUINARD COLLECTION

Nothing defined Glenn Exum as enduringly as the harmonies that filled his life. They touched his passion as mountain climber and guide, his profession as music man, his love as husband and father, and his witness to his values of truth and faith.

Thousands of people in America today count their brief connection with Glenn Exum as a lifetime landmark in their discovery of a deeper relationship with the earth, of their reverence for the mountain climbing experience seasoned with modesty. He taught almost every day of his adult life until age and illness took him away from his mountains and his music rooms.

Did all of this make the guy a stiff, walking icon, a poster for four-square piety in all of his works and his philosophy?

No, not that. Glenn was a mischievous story teller who milked his shaggy dog stories for every dram of wackiness around hundreds of campfires in his years as the director of the Exum Climbing School and Guide Service, by the shore of Jenny Lake in Grand Teton National Park. He spoke in a soft, mellifluous voice that seemed to hypnotize his audience, whether made up of young people new to the western life or experienced climbers and hikers. And when he produced his snappers at the finish of those stories, his ruddy face erupted in gales of guffaws whose decibels outran his audience's. His targets sometimes were his friends, but his stories never drew blood.

He died at 88 in March, and much of the romance of the early American climbing culture went with him. With Glenn, a day of climbing was a song to the hills. That was partly the music teacher in him, but it was partly the adolescent joy he felt in winging it on the high slabs, sure in his craft, climbing easily and always with style. Style was important to Glenn. It was part of the harmony he sought and achieved all of his life, in his marriage to Beth, in his friendships, with his God, and on the mountain. He was tidy and precise, in how he dressed, in the angle of his feathered Tyrolean hat (before the helmets came in), and in his movements on the mountain. He was a handsome guy, trim and athletic, once invited to a Hollywood screen test. But the mountains were where he belonged.

Many of his climbing instructors became world-class mountaineers, reaching the highest peaks of the Himalaya and the Andes, people like Willi Unsoeld, Barry Corbet, Pete Lev, Al Read, and many others. Glenn might have matched those deeds, but his horizons—apart from

a few flings at the Matterhorn—were closer to home, the summits of his Tetons. But in the prime of his career, he could climb them as few did, with a grace and art that flowed instinctively out of the rhythms within him. "When you climbed with Glenn," guide Herb Swedlund said, "you could almost hear the mountains sing."

Mountains, of course, can't sing. Mountains can make echoes, and they can thunder with avalanches and roar with rockfall, but they're made of granite and snow and frozen lava. So on this day 20 years ago, how could a mountain harmonize with a 68-year-old man who was moving on its skyline, smiling and humming in the breeze and letting the gusts romp in his hair? Well, the mountain couldn't sing, but it could harmonize. They were a duet, the old man and the mountain, the Grand Teton, his mountain. This was the 50th anniversary of his climb, the first climb of what is now the Exum Ridge of the Grand, the most popular in America. He'd gone alone, a college kid from Idaho, wearing football shoes and carrying a rather useless length of clothesline rope. Paul Petzoldt, his partner in the national park's first climbing school, suggested Glenn might want to explore the ridge as a new route. Not far from its beginning, on what the climbers now call Wall Street, the rock ledge disappears into 1,500 feet of nothing but straight down. Exum couldn't pick out the tiny rock nubbin that now offers a foothold for the climber. In 1931, it was either leap the eight feet of air splitting the ledge, or walk back down. Exum walked back down to the start of the ledge seven times. That last time he came sprinting up to the edge of the chasm and jumped.

What were his thoughts, one of his pals later asked him.

"I was thinking," he said, "how bad it would be for me if I missed."

He didn't, and he became in the years that followed the patriarch and gentle warden of the mountaineering ethic. Mountaineering, he thought, should not be the fuel of a climber's life. It should not turn him into a summit fanatic, but it could be a field of legitimate achievement and thrill, as long as it did not inflame the ego into recklessness. He would gather novice climbers into the Jenny Lake climbing shack before their first guided climb. Climbing a summit, he said, didn't heighten a person's worth or put him or her into a clan of the elite. Accept a climb for what it is, he said, a rare walk into the heights. Accept it for what the climb can tell you. It can tell you about physical and psychological strength you were unaware was in you, and repay your effort with satisfactions you didn't think you could achieve. It might tell you something about adversity and dealing with defeat, if you want to call it that. It can teach you that in order to deserve a height, you have to exert and test your limits.

But it can also raise a flag of warning to the sensible climber. If you're not fit, if you're hurting, or if the mountain is simply too much for you on this day, turn back. That is not cowardice. It is telling yourself, another day will be better. Don't let pride ruin this day, or your life.

He would talk that way, and those of us who climbed with him would often walk into that climbing shack filled with novices, simply to hear his quiet wisdom and to sense one more time the unmistakable good will and humanity of this remarkable man.

And oh, how we miss him.

JIM KLOBUCHAR

JULES M. EICHORN
1912-2000

Sierra pioneer Jules Marquard Eichorn, a 66-year member of the American Alpine Club, died February 15 after a climbing career that left his name indelibly etched on the Range of Light.

Born in San Francisco on February 7, 1912, he was the son of German immigrants who