

**VERA KOMARKOVA 1942-2005**

Vera Komarkova, a strong and courageous mountaineer, talented and respected plant ecologist and teacher, fiercely dedicated mother of two sons, and a loyal and caring friend, died of complications of breast cancer treatment on May 25. She could be outrageously blunt; she had a wicked sense of humor, a fatalistic streak, and a high standard of honesty. Vera set ambitious goals and worked hard to achieve them. She was full of fun and serious at the same time, and never boring.

Vera was born on Christmas Day, 1942, in the small town of Pisek in the former Czechoslovakia. Her father was the eminent botanist Jiri Ruzicka, a specialist in Desmidiaceae, a large order of mostly fresh-water algae. Vera entered Charles University in Prague in 1959 when she was nearly 17, graduating in 1964 with an MSc in biology. She was married in 1963 to Jiri Komarek, a fellow botanist and alpinist 11 years her senior. She spoke five languages: English, German, French, Czech, and Russian. After graduation her first job was in the Krkonose National Park near the border with Poland, where she wrote a small guide to the park flora.

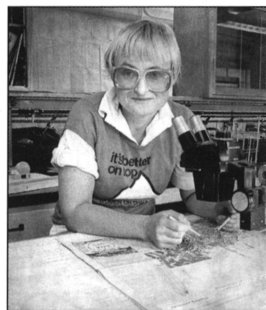
Vera started climbing while at university and during the next 10 years put together an impressive resume of summer and winter climbs in the High Tatras and other areas of the Carpathian Mountains, as well as in the Western Alps.

During the political thaw leading up to Prague Spring, Vera and three women climbing friends had the crazy idea to walk to the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City. They called themselves Slapoty, which means "Footprints" in Czech. They crossed Austria and Switzerland, then walked through France and England and took passage on a ship from Liverpool to Canada. After walking nearly 5,000 miles, the team arrived in Mexico City in time for the games. While in Mexico they climbed Ixtaccihuatl and other peaks and Vera was briefly married for the second time to Esquinoza Aquillar. The women of Slapoty would remain lifelong friends.

The Russians invaded Czechoslovakia in August of 1968. The border was closed in October of 1969, but somehow Vera managed to emigrate to the United States in 1970, followed by her third husband, Vladimir Farkas. She arrived already a fully trained plant ecologist and enrolled in graduate studies in botany at the University of Colorado, receiving her Ph.D. in 1976. Her thesis, "Alpine Vegetation of Indian Peaks Area, Front Range, Colorado Rocky Mountains," was published as a two-volume monograph in 1979 and remains the best example of Braun-Blanquet methods in North America. Adold Ceska, a fellow Czech botanist who emigrated at the same time, said, "...she was the greatest phytosociologist the U.S. has ever known."

I first met Vera when she came to my home in Palo Alto seeking an American woman to propose her for membership in the AAC. Highly qualified, she became a member in 1973. AAC membership was an important recognition to Vera; she would go on to write accurate and interesting articles for the AAJ about four of her major climbs and speak about one of them, Cho Oyu, at the 1984 annual dinner.

Vera combined field trips to the North Slope of Alaska with climbing opportunities, including the third ascent of Doonerak in the Brooks Range in 1975, in which I participated. The following year Vera would climb the South Buttress of McKinley with a six-woman team led by Kate Persons. In 1977, with the Czech climber Tomas Gross, she would complete a very difficult extended new route on the southeast face of Mt. Dickey, above the Ruth Glacier in the



Vera Komarkova in Leysin.  
Robert Hutchison

Alaska Range. After fixing the first five pitches, they spent 23 days on the ascent. The climb totaled 47 pitches and they nearly ran out of food. Vera said she felt like a bird on a wall.

When Arlene Blum decided to try for Annapurna in 1978, I immediately suggested Vera, by then a naturalized American citizen, as a member. We shared a tent on the walk in, and Vera collected plants along the way. As they accumulated, we had a joke: press release: climber killed by falling plant presses. We enjoyed the camaraderie of the Sherpa fire in the evenings, and we were climbing partners during the first and last parts of the expedition. On the summit day I felt fortunate to be climbing with Vera again. We agreed that the Sherpas, Chewang and Mingma, were part of the team, and if they wanted to summit they deserved a chance. That day we were a team of four roped together, more symbolically than because of technical difficulty. It was very strenuous going because of the breakable crust with cotton candy underneath. Vera was significantly stronger on the summit day than I was. At one point I asked if we could take a break, and Vera said she didn't think so! Chewang added, "Slowly going, summit," which turned out to be true. Fortunately Vera had enough energy to take a summit photo.

With the deaths of Vera Watson and Alison Chadwick-Onyszkiewicz two days later on the second summit attempt, the aftermath of the expedition was difficult for everyone, and I had no contact with Vera for several years. She almost single-handedly organized and led the American Women's Expedition to Dhaulagiri I in 1980. They attempted the difficult Pear Route on the north side. Heavy winds led to avalanche conditions, and after the death of a member of the support team they mutually abandoned the attempt after reaching 23,300 feet. While on a business trip the next summer I visited Vera in Boulder. We both broke out laughing when I saw she was quite pregnant. Her first son, Mipam Moudry, was born a month later. In keeping with Vera's Buddhist beliefs, his name was chosen from the book title, "Mipam: the Lama of the Five Wisdoms," Moudry meaning "wise" in Czech.

In the next few years Vera continued her work as a research assistant at INSTAAR, the Institute for Alpine and Arctic Research, at the University of Colorado. She made several botanical trips to the Antarctic Peninsula and also visited China and Tibet. In 1984, still ambitious for high summits, she climbed Cho Oyu with the small team of Dina Sterbova and the two Nepalese climbers Ang Rita Sherpa and Nuru Sherpa. They were the first women and Vera was the first American to summit; at 8,201 meters, or 26,900 feet, it was Vera's personal altitude record.

Vera's second son, Dorje, was born in 1985. Because her European training in plant ecology was not appreciated here at the time, Vera did not find a permanent academic position in the U.S. With two young sons to raise, she gave up expeditionary climbing. Moving back to Europe in 1986, closer to her parents, she took a teaching position at the American College in Switzerland in Leysin. She taught a variety of science subjects and became Professor of Science and Information Technology. The computer lab at the college was very much her project. In addition, she taught classes at another school, and in her spare time continued to write papers, articles, and book chapters. I visited Vera twice, in 1994 and 1996; the second time I walked in unannounced and found Vera, her mother, and an 11-year-old Dorje all working on illustrations for her father's third, still unfinished book. The bedroom was piled high with boxes of unfinished botanical projects, just like the tent on the Annapurna approach.

As a single mother of two, Vera did not choose an easy path, but she was proud and self-reliant and worked extremely hard to provide for her family. She endured much pain in recent years, undergoing and recovering from two hip replacement surgeries. Rereading her annual Christmas letters over the last 10 years, one finds dedication to her family, unending

projects, humor, trenchant comments about the political scene, much concern for the recipient, but no self-pity. Typically, she told no one but her immediate family about her illness. She leaves behind her mother, Tatiana Ruzickova, of Pisek in the Czech Republic, and her sons Mipam and Dorje Moudry, in Switzerland, Mipam in Bossonnens and Dorje still in Leysin. She had hoped to retire to the Czech Republic in a few years, and her ashes were interred there in Pisek in a family tomb.

IRENE BEARDSLEY, AAC

#### HEATHER L. PAUL 1970-2005

The most touching part of Heather Paul's memorial service occurred near the end. A nurse and several physicians she had worked with came to the podium and paid tribute to an aspect of her life that we mountain comrades had wondered about.

Over 300 friends gathered on a perfect Jackson Hole summer day, at a ranch at the foot of the Tetons. Heather had died few days earlier from a fall while descending Cloudveil Dome. Family and friends reminded us that Heather moved to Jackson Hole after graduating from ASU in 1992 because of the beauty, the people, and because, she discovered while working a summer job, it felt like home. She arrived with energy, enthusiasm, and athletic talent, credentials as a bicycle racer, and an urge to become proficient as a climber, but timid about venturing into the mountains. She never expected to climb the Grand Teton.



Heather Paul

Subsequent speakers filled us in on Heather's achievements during her Jackson Hole years—three new routes in the Tetons, four in the Wind Rivers; old classics like Blackfin, Serendipity Arête, Italian Cracks; ski descents of Wister, Apocalypse Couloir, Pinocchio Couloir; the 2003 North American Randonnée Series woman's champion; car-to-car marathons to and from the Wind Rivers' Fremont Peak in eight hours, Downs' Mountain in 14. Her first 11 climbs of the Grand were by 10 different routes.

Everyone had stories of meeting her hurrying along a trail—on foot, on skis, on a bike. One friend related how she checked caller ID before answering early-morning phone calls because it might be Heather, whose infectious enthusiasm would have them out in the hills whether she was up for it or not. Another painted an image of Heather far more evocative than a list of her accomplishments—skinny bare legs, huge pack, blond hair, bouncing along the trail. Paul Horton, her longtime partner, summarized Heather: whatever the activity, she was thrilled just to participate, just to be there. Heather's close friend Nancy Johnstone simply remembered her as epitomizing the meaning of friend.

Among the tributes to her energy, I heard an untruth. Someone related how on the Sunday before she had climbed the Grand, then gone directly to work. Not so. She had descended from the Grand and, with a few hours to spare, had stopped by a cookout I was having at my cabin, then worked all night.

When it seemed that Heather's mountain life had been fully memorialized, a nurse came to the podium and spoke, then a doctor, then others. A year before Heather had completed her