

# WASHBURN REMEMBERED

*Encounters with the man and his photographs.*



Bradford Washburn caught in the viewfinder of his Fairchild K-22 camera in 2000. *Thom Pollard*

*Henry Bradford Washburn Jr. died on January 10, 2007, after a remarkable life as a mountaineer, cartographer, photographer, and museum director. A full obituary can be found elsewhere in this Journal. Here, climbers recall their own experiences with the man and his extraordinary photographs. To read more Washburn memories or to contribute your own story to a permanent archive, please visit [www.americanalpineclub.org/AAJ/](http://www.americanalpineclub.org/AAJ/).*



Bradford Washburn's photographs of the Alaska Range have given me inspiration for action. His picture of the east face of Hunter showed there was clearly room for a route or two to the right of Diamond Arête, and that motivated Paul Figg and I to begin the adventure we called The Prey. On the summit of Hunter, I got out a copy of Brad's photo of the complex west ridge, brought along to guide our descent. The wind snatched it from my hand, and so began a taxing few days.

These photos are profligate in their affections: Just as you begin to think they are giving their secrets to you alone, as you and your partner hatch plans and trace lines, they tell the whole story to someone else and Light Traveler and Canadian Direct get climbed. Their allure is in their clarity, which brings an air of simplicity—they suggest a sort of order to the chaotic flanks of icy mountains that leads you to think that climbing there will have the same simplicity and clarity. Of course you discover that the reality is different, but then you're already there and the photograph has done its job.

MALCOLM BASS  
*Thirsk, England*



Bradford Washburn's map of Mt. McKinley revealed a thin, white line to the top of Mt. Huntington: the southeast spur, mostly snow and ice, a simple way to the top. At Washburn's office at the Boston Museum of Science, an aide showed me to the scrapbook volumes of contact prints from the Alaska Range. There might have been more than a dozen volumes, but I could not find a picture of two dangerous-looking icefalls guarding the spur. I had hoped a photo might confirm a way that I thought they could be bypassed.

Washburn found the picture as soon as I pointed to the map. The icefalls were hard to identify as Huntington's because of the tight framing, but were fully revealed in the print. He pecked at the lower one. Anybody who goes in there, he said, deserves to be knocked on the head.

Kent Meneghin, Joe Kaelin, Glenn Randall, and I climbed the southeast spur that summer, in 1978, bypassing the icefalls by gullies and ramps. Two subsequent parties, however, got a closer look.

Jeb Schenck and Dave Holsworth, not knowing our route, climbed the first icefall later that summer. A block of ice the size of Holsworth's head hit him on the shoulder. "We considered ourselves very lucky to have made it," Schenck wrote.

Jeff Thomas, Dave Jay, Scott Woolums, and Jay Kerr reached the second icefall the next year and shunned our route around it. "Being Oregon volcano sloggers and not knowing better, we took the icefall," Thomas wrote. They discovered "a frozen horror" with ice talus at the angle of repose, active overhanging seracs, and terrifying pitches, including a 70-foot tunnel

and a 90-degree wall plastered with blobs of unstable snow. They followed our route down.

Last winter, while hitchhiking up to Teton Pass to ski powder, I caught a ride in a car with crampons and cameras in the back. It was lucky Jeb Schenck, and soon we were swapping Huntington stories.

“Worse than the Khumbu,” he said of the icefall he had climbed. Sure enough, he and Holsworth also had followed our route down. “One time was more than enough,” Schenck said.

Washburn’s photographs answered questions that otherwise would have required exploration, and these experiences on Huntington proved it.

ANGUS M. THUERMER JR.  
*Jackson Hole, Wyoming*



At first, Dougal Haston and I were planning to climb the east face of Denali, because that was the photo Brad had shown us in England, and he was enthusiastic about this unclimbed wall. But when I visited Brad in Boston during my lecture tour of the States in 1976, he showed me a spectacular photo of the south face. We could see that the entire upper section of the wall was still unclimbed, and we knew that this face would be much easier to reach than the east. So we chose the south face instead, climbing it by a new direct line, and Brad would have to continue in his quest to find someone to climb the east face.

DOUG SCOTT  
*Carlisle, England*



My photograph of a 90-year-old Brad Washburn and his big camera, reproduced on page 106, sums up the timeless energy and enthusiasm he felt for his craft. In 2000, together with Barbara, Brad and I spent two weeks in Alaska. We were filming for a documentary about their adventures, called *Alaskan Reminiscences: 60 Years of Adventure with Bradford and Barbara Washburn*. Brad’s 53-pound Fairchild K-22 aerial camera, which he had donated to the University of Alaska at Fairbanks some years before, was under lock and key at a Talkeetna hotel. On display under a glass case, the now legendary camera was carefully guarded by a young assistant to the curator—white gloves and all—under specific instructions not to let anyone touch it, not even Brad. After some choice words that only Brad could so succinctly articulate, the now trembling young man reluctantly unlocked the case, telling us he’d now be leaving for lunch. He expected to see the camera in the case when he returned.

We immediately jumped into our truck, the camera on Brad’s lap, and drove straight to the Talkeetna airport. After taking the side door off of a DeHavilland Beaver, Brad hefted that old camera up on his lap and offered a full demonstration of its workings (which I captured on videotape). He demonstrated how he got into position for each shot by belting out commands to the pilot, how he advanced the frames, the whole story. Brad even wore the same clothing that he’d used so many years before, right down to the L.L. Bean hunting boots.

Not a few days later, the day dawned immaculate. Brad and I quickly returned to the airport. Along with our young pilot we took the door off a turbo Cessna and prepared our oxygen masks, a digital video camera, and my medium-format still camera. Locked safely into

our seats with climbing ropes and carabiners, we flew all way up and over the summit of Mt. McKinley. Turning from the viewfinder of my own camera, I witnessed the intense stare of Brad's eyes as he scanned the Alaska Range below us.

Some months later, Brad stood in an audio booth for me to record his impressions of McKinley for our documentary. He finished the session by reading one of his favorite poems, "High Flight," by John McGee. The quiver in his voice and a tear in his eye belied the stolid sense of strength that Brad showed in difficult situations:

*Up, up the long delirious burning blue  
I've topped the windswept heights with easy grace  
Where never lark or even eagle flew  
And while with silent lifting mind  
I've trod the high untrespassed sanctity of space  
Put out my hand  
And touched the face of God.*

THOM POLLARD  
North Conway, New Hampshire



Like Brad, I decided to specialize in Alaska and the Yukon, going on expeditions to the far north for 13 consecutive summers. To get ideas for new routes, I pored through Brad's bound volumes of contact prints of the great mountains in the Alaska, Hayes, Wrangell, and St. Elias ranges. Brad kept those volumes on shelves in a kind of walk-in closet, accessible only through his regal top-floor office at the Museum of Science. Though Brad gave me carte blanche to loiter inside that sanctum, for years I felt intimidated by his presence, especially on the two or three occasions when he forgot that I was there and I heard his outer door close before he harangued some negligent employee or schemed up research plans with some famous scientist.

From those furtive hours in the walk-in closet came three of my best and toughest expeditions—to the east ridge of Mt. Deborah, the west face of Mt. Huntington, and the southeast face of Mt. Dickey. As Don Jensen and I first realized on Deborah in 1964, Brad's photos were so sharp, so perfectly exposed, that on the ground we could recognize features as small as six inches in diameter that were clearly shown in the pictures we carried with us.

On Dickey in 1974, a Washburn photo may well have saved our lives. Galen Rowell, Ed Ward, and I were attempting the 5,100-foot precipice of granite, snow, and ice alpine style, with bivy sacks and half bags in lieu of tent camps, carrying all our gear and food in one three-day push—fast and light, in the best Washburn tradition. To make this proposition less than suicidal, before attacking the face we had climbed the easy "back side" of Dickey (first ascended by Brad in 1955) and left a vital cache containing a tent, food, a stove, and sleeping bags near the summit, marked by a tall pole.

On the third day of the climb, a fierce storm engulfed the mountain—heavy snow, 50 mph winds, near-whiteout conditions. We were too high to go down. Foolishly we had brought only one ice axe and one pair of crampons, and the last thousand feet of the route was a bewildering complex of steep ice grooves and flutings interspersed with rotten bands of black schist. I took the axe and crampons and led all day, chopping steps for Ed and Galen, who had



Louis-Philippe Ménard studies an article from the 2001 *American Alpine Journal* while resting during the first ascent of the Canadian Direct route on the south face of Mt. McKinley. Ménard and Maxime Turgeon referred to a Bradford Washburn photo of the face (on the reverse side of the photocopy he's holding) to help find their way up the enormous wall. A similar photo, with the new Canadian route marked, is reproduced in the Climbs and Expeditions section of this *Journal*; the story of their climb begins on page 47. *Maxime Turgeon*

Under the beam of my headlamp, the book between my hands seems like an art piece, totally capturing my attention. Every time I turn a page, it feels like discovering a new world. There are no colors, just a perfect scale of grey that defines every little feature. The Washburn images are so clear that looking at them almost feels like flying over the range. Flipping back and forth through the pages, I keep returning to the same photo. A formation seems to leap out of the picture, contoured on either side by the traces of previous ascents. The line is so obvious: Two perfectly aligned buttresses, one on top of the other, ending right on top of the southeast spur. The lower buttress has never been climbed directly. It almost feels as if the photographer had wanted to underline it....

MAXIME TURGEON  
Montréal, Québec, Canada

to use their rock hammers for purchase in lieu of axes.

Protection was almost nonexistent. If one of us slipped and fell, he would likely pull the other two off, and we would take the big ride. It was crucial to our survival that we find the cache near the summit, but I felt that I was heading blindly upward into a maze of bleary white treachery. At regular intervals I pulled out of my pocket the crumpled Washburn photo of our route that I had carried up the mountain and tried to correlate its details with the real world. Yes, amazingly, that serpentine fluting over there, that prong of schist here, showed up on Brad's picture: So I needed to angle a bit farther left.

With ice coating our beards and eyelashes and hypothermia just a careless step away, we struck the summit ridge only a hundred yards from our cache. We pitched the tent, crawled into our dry sleeping bags, and brewed up a victory soup.

DAVID ROBERTS  
*Cambridge, Massachusetts*

*Excerpted with permission from an article in the April 2007 issue of National Geographic Adventure magazine.*



On June 5, I set foot for the first time on American soil, a country which is still somewhat legendary for Europeans: legendary for her history, legendary for her numerous great men, her progress, her spirit of liberty. And, I say it with complete sincerity, I was not disillusioned by this first contact with the United States; only, at times, I was astonished by people and customs which were new to me. Almost as if in a dream, the great conglomeration of New York and later of Boston returns to mind; and suddenly, quite clearly I see the kind face of Dr. Washburn, who hardly knows his great and unselfish contribution to our expedition: photographs, maps, explanations. He gave essential insight into our undertaking, which, added to facts given to me in Italy by Piero Meciani, gave me, even before arriving, a clear picture of the difficulties which awaited us."

RICCARDO CASSIN, *writing in the 1962 American Alpine Journal about his expedition to make the first ascent of Mt. McKinley's south ridge.*



In 1972, I and my fellow 17-year-old climbing buds were inspired to read *Bradford on Mount Fairweather*, a book written by him on his first climbing expedition to Alaska, at age 20, to attempt Fairweather's first ascent. We committed ourselves to climbing Fairweather, which still had seen few ascents, via a new route, much to the skepticism of many we talked to. Upon learning of his collection of photos at the Boston Museum of Science, we drove up from New York City to have a look and study route possibilities. We were blown away when Brad, then in his mid-60s, burst into the room to introduce himself, talk to us about the mountain, and enthusiastically suggest lines while pulling out photos. Most importantly, he believed in the high school students in front of him and instilled confidence in our plans.

That was the first of many winter visits during the 1970s to Dr. Washburn's photo library, and each time he made time to sit down with us and add to our enthusiasm for the unclimbed lines we were scoping on McKinley, Foraker, Hunter, and Huntington, while also suggesting, with great authority, additional lines. His passion matched our own, and it was as if, for at least

the time we were in his archival room, he was the fifth or fourth or third member of the team.

PETER METCALF  
Salt Lake City, Utah



I can't claim to have been Bradford Washburn's intimate friend, though we worked together for more than 20 years across an Atlantic divide during my reign as editor of *Crags* and more significantly *High* magazine. In all that time, I never managed to train him into the ways of the electronic modern world, though I tried. I would fax him requesting a photograph and he would phone me up. In later years, I would email him and about a month later he would phone me up. The trouble was that because of the time difference between the U.K. and the east coast of America, he always called when I'd gone to the pub in the evening, so that when I returned home my wife, Jackie, was smiling, having been charmed by this lovely man. Can you believe the man was pushing 90 years old and still able to turn the head of a woman 40 years his junior?

GEOFF BIRTLES  
Sheffield, England



Like so many, I saw a startling Brad Washburn image, felt the adrenaline surge, and knew, "I've got to climb that mountain!" In my case it was the St. Elias Range's Pinnacle Peak, a mountain of symmetry. Seeing Brad's photograph led me to make nine climbing trips to the St. Elias and also set me on a voyage to find out what had not been climbed in the wild St. Elias landscape. The product of this endeavor was published in the 1992 *Canadian Alpine Journal*. That article was transformed from a sterile list to a best seller because Brad, who knew me not from Adam, spent literally hours on the telephone from Boston to Toronto, helping me choose which of his photographs would illustrate the article. His wonderful black and white photographs, reproduced in the *CAJ*, were the spur to creating new routes all over the St. Elias, including the first ascent of three 4,000-meter-plus St. Elias peaks for my friends and I.

ROGER WALLIS  
Toronto, Canada



After seeing superb photographs by Bradford Washburn in a mountaineering journal, I realized what a magnificent field of action the McKinley Range would be for an enthusiast of *grande alpinisme*. Immediately I began to dream about the possibility of climbing some of these peaks. As early as 1955 I got in touch with Bradford Washburn, Bob Bates, Fred Beckey, and other American climbers. . . . In December 1963 I began to actively prepare for the expedition. As always, unforeseen difficulties cropped up, but thanks to Bradford Washburn and Mrs. Helga Bading of Anchorage all the American problems were quickly solved.

LIONEL TERRAY, writing in the 1965 *American Alpine Journal* about his expedition to make the first ascent of Mt. Huntington in Alaska.



I first met [Washburn] in 1990, when he was a sprightly 80-year-old, lodged at a temporary office in the Royal Geographical Society, waiting to install his huge relief model of Mt Everest for a special London exhibition. “We’ve spent the whole week trying to get my model out of your darned British customs at Heathrow,” he fretted. “They must think it’s stuffed full of cocaine or something.” The model was released eventually and the only white powder involved was actually some innocent icing sugar dusted over the section joins of his stunningly accurate representation of the world’s highest summit.

The model was based on the latest, highly accurate 1:50,000 map of Mt. Everest—a project masterminded by Washburn, using the pinpoint accuracy of aerial photos from a Learjet to complement the ground-slogging surveys of the pre-War British explorers, dating right back to the 1921 Reconnaissance, when Washburn was a young boy in Boston taking his own first pictures on a Brownie box camera, with compositional advice from his mother. Where some cartographers might see photography purely as a surveying tool, he embraced the medium for its own sake, delighting in light and form to produce some of the greatest 20th century landscape photographs. As Jim Enyeart of Eastman House once put it, “Brad Washburn’s aerial photographs are exactly what Ansel Adams would have taken if he had used a magic carpet.”

In Europe, his aerial shots of the Matterhorn give a whole new understanding to that mountain of a thousand chocolate boxes. Likewise his seminal study of moonrise over the Grandes Jorasses. But, like so many great photographs, the most famous one of all, depicting tiny human figures on the obscure Doldenhorn, was taken by accident. When I asked how it happened, he explained, “It was in 1960 and we were going to get some shots of the Jungfrau. We took off from Interlaken, turned left at Kandersteg, over the Oeschinenensee ... then way down to the right I saw these figures on that ridge, so I forgot all about the Jungfrau and said to the pilot, “Jesus Christ, let’s get down there.”

They did get down there and he got his picture. The exposure is flawless, light and texture scintillating. The tiny silhouettes are just recognizable as humans, giving scale and context to an essentially abstract composition. As with all his great photographs, Washburn uses height to create a whole new dimension, but he doesn’t get so high as to flatten the landscape. And, on the basis that big subjects need big negatives, he went for 7-inch by 9-inch frames on a colossal Fairchild K-6 (later upgraded to a K-22) weighing in at 53 pounds—quite a progression from his 12-ounce Kodak Vestpocket! He sat on an empty five-gallon garlic box with a rope tied tightly around his waist and back to the other side of the plane, giving him exactly enough slack to lean right out of the open doorway with the great beast balanced on his lap.

“When you bank it weighs 100 pounds,” he boasted gleefully.

“But I thought you said it weighed 53 pounds,” I pointed out to him.

“Ah yes, but there’s G force,” explained the man of science. “That can double or even treble the effective weight.”

STEPHEN VENABLES  
*Bath, England*

*Excerpted from an article for Geographical magazine, with permission of the author.*