In 1937 two young cousins joined the Sierra Club, and so, apparently, began a lifelong joyous romp through an Arcadian landscape: where bright voices of companions echoed like the calls of birds; where the touch of lichen-covered granite felt like an ecstatic revelation; where a single turn filled the mind with a burst of notes; where a climber might suddenly leap into the air, dodging the whistling rockfall that swept below him, to the "great amusement" of his partners; where a girl discovering an old shoe with human bones might declare, "All my life I have hankered after finding a corpse"; and where everyone would hurry off to bed as a great golden moon overflowed the sky, brimming with visions of the next day's pleasures.

A realm of golden laughter and play flowing in a ceaseless allegro, scarcely interrupted by reminders of death, with all the force of life itself—these are the origins of California climbing as one young woman depicted them. Soon after their first outing, the cousins Ruth Dyar and Phoebe Russell became the editors of the Mugelnoos, the Sierra Club's ski-mountaineering newsletter. For Ruth it was the beginning of a life dedicated to alpine climbing and skiing—and to a voluminous correspondence about her pursuits. By the time she died in 1989, she had written thousands of letters to her family and friends. She also kept carbon copies for a future memoir.

Woman on the Rocks: the Mountaineering Letters of Ruth Dyar Mendenhall represents the youngest daughter Valerie Mendenhall Cohen's efforts to compile an approximation of this unwritten book, with passages selected from the more than nine hundred pages her mother left behind. The result is a series of lyrical—and highly personal—echoes from a now scarcely imaginable world. Eight years before he met Ruth at Tahquitz, Ruth's future husband, John Mendenhall, may have been the first Californian to belay and pitch out a climb (on Laurel Mountain in 1930). As the couple wandered through what was still largely a vertical wilderness, the Mendenhalls put up numerous North American first ascents that included the southeast face of California's Mt. Whitney, the north face of Wyoming's Teewinot, and Canada's Mt. Confederation. Ruth continued to edit the Mugelnoos until 1978, while publishing books on climbing techniques and backcountry cooking and eventually joining the American Alpine Club's board of directors.

As a pre-pioneer of California female climbers, Ruth performs a dual role; to her climbing partners she is both a "manly" comrade and a lady: "It is odd how they [male climbing partners] might know a wench can charge up a 14,000-foot peak with great stamina, but regard her as unable to fetch a cup of water from a lake two feet away." Her early prose is almost self-consciously girlish, with the sort of gushing ebullience that one of Jane Austen's more vivacious heroines might use, mentioning a hat "that excited much comment" or a climb during which "as soon as one [man] got out of sight around a corner of rock, the other would begin to flirt."

Over time another voice emerges, with a deeper, more mature consciousness of the wild. Of her journey back from her first attempt on Mt. Confederation with John in 1940, she writes, "We had seen the mountains, not as a pretty scene to be looked at through a glass window.... We had lived the mountains—the cold and the snow and wet; we had slept on the rocks,
smelled them, eaten smoke and ashes without food, climbed over the downed timber, shivered, drank the rivers and the lakes; they would be a part of us, not postcard scenes.”

Throughout her life, climbing remained for the letter writer a means to experience the “highpoints of existence,” the “peaks of exaltation.” Lowpoints are brushed over with a puzzling innocence about accidents and consequences. “In the mountains,” she writes on the top of Mt. Whitney, when she learns that World War II has begun, “the youngest, the strongest, the most skilled, the bravest win—in war they die.” That the best may die in the hills as well is something the letters hardly acknowledge.

For the most part, the book is a wild, continual shout of joy. What it isn’t, as a result, is a gripping narrative. And the reader may well wonder whether the true story might lie in those moments of real commitment that Ruth downplays as she tries to reassure family members. Or else it lies somewhere between that transcendent life she found in the heights and the daily struggles of her domestic existence. Glimpses appear in the editor’s notes of untold family conflicts and climbing near-misses, and of one daughter’s ultimate rejection of the lifestyle her parents chose.

But as its editor writes, the book is not its author’s polished creation: “This is a human story. This is not the story Ruth would have produced for publication.” So why, the reader might ask, should anyone other than a historian keep turning the pages? For the reason that Royal Robbins praises Ruth in his introduction: because she had, in her own manner, “the heart of a mountaineer”—a conviction that climbing might offer a pure source of mental, physical, and spiritual beauty. And because today Ruth’s belief in the sheer enjoyment of adventure seems far more radical and eccentric than it should.

Among her papers, Ruth’s daughter found the introduction to the unwritten book, in which Ruth justifies it best: “Climbing used to be such fun, old climbers so good to new ones.... Now is a time of specialization, foreign expeditions, and public interest in climbing. But then were the great beginnings, and the best climbing friends one could have had. Nowadays the climbers swarm over the earth—but in our heyday, the new routes, the unclimbed summits, lay closer at home, and perhaps were even harder to reach.”

KATIE IVES


Most contemporary climbers know the name Charles Houston, but many aren’t sure where or when they’ve heard it, and fewer still can recall his achievements. Until you bring up K2—high and wild K2. K2 was the scene of one of the most remarkable mountaineering tales of all time: that of the 1953 American K2 expedition and the dramatic fall while the team of climbers was lowering Art Gilkey.

Having grown up in Los Alamos, where George Bell lived for much of his life, I was very aware of the significance of the 1953 expedition from my early high school years, and in the early 1980s, borrowed Savage Mountain from a friend’s father, Eiichi Fukushima, himself part of the Mount Vinson first ascent team.