

OBITUARIES

Fred Beckey, Conqueror of North American Peaks, Dies at 94

By ROBERT D. McFADDEN OCT. 31, 2017

Fred Beckey, a fabled mountaineer and author who was the first to take hundreds of routes to the summits of North America's tallest peaks in Alaska, the Canadian Rockies and the Pacific Northwest in an audacious seven-decade climbing career, died on Monday in Seattle. He was 94.

Megan Bond, a close friend of Mr. Beckey's, wrote in a Facebook message that he died of congestive heart failure in her home. A longtime resident of Seattle, he had been in hospice care for four days, she said.

Rawboned and tenacious, Mr. Beckey made as many as a thousand ascents that no one was known to have taken before. He wrote a dozen books on mountaineering, many of them considered definitive guides to the terrain of the continent's best-known and least accessible peaks.

Mr. Beckey was virtually unknown to the general public — the exact opposite of Sir Edmund Hillary, the New Zealander who, with his Sherpa guide, Tenzing Norgay, won worldwide fame by conquering Earth's tallest peak, the 29,029-foot Mount Everest, on the Nepal-Tibet border in 1953.

Indeed, Mr. Beckey shunned publicity and people. He lived like a hermit in Seattle, holing up to write or vanishing for months on expeditions. He looked like a scruffy hobo — a wiry, stooped nomad with a backpack, a shapeless jacket, dirty pants and sneakers. But he was all-purpose: the craggy face leathery from sun, wind

and snow; powerful hands scarred with cuts; flyaway hair crushed under a woolen cap; keen eyes for the next toehold; and a toothy smile for the book signings.

He never married or had children, never had a business or sought security. Friends said he just wanted to climb mountains.

But to the fraternity of climbing enthusiasts around the world, he was a phenomenon whose exploits above clouds and tree lines at 10,000 to 20,000 feet resounded in mountaineering lore and journals: the achievements of an eccentric daredevil who took on the continent's last unclimbed peaks and uncharted routes, who probably took more risks than anyone in history.

He wrote guidebooks and lectured for the cognoscenti, Americans and Canadians who appreciated the history, topography and perilous beauty of their wilderness strongholds, and for those who hoped to test their mettle on glacial escarpments with rope, ice ax and aching limbs for the reward of standing on the crown of a mountain called Terror or Despair, overlooking a vast panorama of the world.

“If Thoreau and Emerson describe the transcendental American theme, then Beckey — after Ahab, akin to Kerouac — describes the oddly manic drive to scale and map and detail the wilderness in a modern way,” Steve Costie, executive director of the Mountaineers, a Seattle-based outdoor recreation group, told *The New York Times* in 2008, when Mr. Beckey was in his 72nd year of mountaineering.

He climbed Africa's tallest peak, Mount Kilimanjaro (19,341 feet), and Switzerland's highest massif, Monte Rosa (15,203). But he rarely ventured into the Himalayas, straddling the borders of China and India, where a dozen of the world's greatest summits defied human intrusion for centuries, rising more than five miles above sea level into an otherworldly realm of yawning abysses, 100-mile-an-hour winds, perpetual cold, and air so thin that the human brain and lungs cannot function properly in it.

While other experienced mountaineers repeated ascents of Himalayan and Andean peaks for speed records, Mr. Beckey roamed North America in search of

unconquered summits and routes considered too difficult to climb. He often climbed 40 or 50 different peaks a year.

He was not the first to climb Alaska's Denali (20,310), North America's highest peak (formerly known as Mount McKinley). A team did that in 1913. But in 1954 he and several friends achieved mountaineering's Triple Crown by reaching the caps of the Alaska Range giants: Mounts Hunter (14,573) and Deborah (12,339) — both in virgin ascents — and Denali's rarely climbed North Peak (19,470).

In a notoriously dangerous sport, Mr. Beckey sustained a crushed rib cage and another climber, Charles Shiverick, was killed when an avalanche carried them a quarter of a mile down Mount Serra in British Columbia in 1947. An ice pinnacle snared Mr. Beckey's rope, saving him, but his companion struck a rock and died of internal injuries.

In an international expedition in 1955 to conquer the world's fourth-highest peak, Lhotse (27,940) in the Himalayas, Mr. Beckey was denounced by colleagues for abandoning his tentmate with a cerebral edema at 23,000 feet in a howling blizzard the night before they were to attempt the summit. He descended alone, he said, to get help.

The stricken man, snow-blind and nearly frozen without a sleeping bag, was rescued by others, but it was a misadventure that Mr. Beckey never lived down. While he was a compelling choice for the first American team assault on Everest in 1963, he was not invited — a snub that ended his Himalayan forays and confirmed his preference for climbing alone or with a few companions.

Mr. Beckey was caught in shrieking gales, trapped on rock ledges and buried in avalanches. But he was rarely hurt seriously, a testament perhaps to fine judgments: How to cross a snowfield that might conceal a crevasse? Where to hammer a piton into rock or ice to secure a rope on which life might hang? Where to cling or step when hugging a sheer vertical rock face over an abyss?

“This man survived nearly 1,000 first ascents, where a climber doesn't know where to go and often has to deal with loose rock,” Peter Green, director of the

outdoor program at Portland's Catlin Gabel School, told *The Oregonian* in 2012. "It's amazing he's still alive. His decision-making and judgment must be so good."

Wolfgang Beckey was born on Jan. 14, 1923, near Düsseldorf, Germany, to Klaus and Marta Maria Beckey. His father was a surgeon and his mother an opera singer.

The family, including a brother, Helmut, emigrated to Seattle in 1925. The boy called himself Fred and learned climbing techniques as a Boy Scout and in a Mountaineers course.

He is survived by his brother, who Ms. Bond said lives in Germany.

At 13, Fred and two friends reached the top of Mount Despair, a rugged 7,292-foot peak in the North Cascades that mountaineers had considered unclimbable. He soon began making local history climbing summits in the Olympic and North Cascade ranges.

He loved skiing, and in 1942 he joined the wartime Army's 10th Mountain Division, based in Colorado. After the war, he attended the University of Washington, but spent most of his time with his brother and friends scaling peaks in Washington, Wyoming, California and Oregon, the Bitterroots in Montana, the Bugaboos in British Columbia and desert rock formations in the Southwest.

After graduating in 1949 with a degree in business administration, he sold ads for *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer* and was a print shop sales representative. He also finished his first book, "Climber's Guide to the Cascade and Olympic Mountains of Washington" (1949).

Later books included "Challenge of the North Cascades" (1969); "Cascade Alpine Guide," a three-volume set with many editions (1973 to 2008); "Mountains of North America" (1982); "Mount McKinley: Icy Crown of North America" (1993); "Range of Glaciers: The Exploration and Survey of the Northern Cascade Range" (2003); and "Fred Beckey's 100 Favorite North American Climbs" (2011).

His home was plastered with photos of his conquests, including two named for him: Beckey's Spire, also known as Christianity Spire, in Sedona, Ariz., which he

climbed in 1970, and Mount Beckey, an 8,500-foot Alaskan peak in the Cathedral Mountains, which he climbed in 1996.

Friends called him a cantankerous cuss who hated talk about himself. He sped long distances in his old pink Thunderbird, screaming all night to stay awake at the wheel, and howled at tourists who gawked at his camps. On a mountain, he amazed fellow climbers with his uphill speed and stamina, even in his 80s.

“I guess you have your choice of trying to make money or getting involved with adventure,” Mr. Beckey told Lincoln Stoller for the Learning Project in 2007. “Most people get married, and by the time they’re 30 they’ve got a couple of kids, and then they’re strapped down. Then they have to work.”

Correction: November 15, 2017

An earlier version of a picture caption with this obituary omitted credit for the photograph of Mr. Beckey on an expedition to Mount Seattle in Alaska in 1966. It was taken by Jim Stuart.

Reggie Ugwu contributed reporting.

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