

THE VERTICAL WEST:
CLIMBING CULTURE AND WESTERN
GEOGRAPHY, 1946-2025

by
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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of
Doctor of
in
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DEDICATION

For Ali,
who took the journey West with me.

And my parents,
who always brought me to the library &
filled our house with books.

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ABSTRACT

“The Vertical West” traces the rise of climbing culture in the American West from the end of World War II to the recent past and considers the consequences of this development. It demonstrates that climbers engaged in a process of place-making during these decades that redefined the geography of the region and transformed how Americans thought about and interacted with western lands and peoples. Climbers claimed sites across the West as places for recreation, leisure, and adventure. They valued the region’s vertical environments—mountains, rock spires, towers, cliffs, crags, and boulders—above all else. Through images, guidebooks, articles, and word-of-mouth climbers learned about more and more places to visit, while advances in transportation technologies and infrastructures made these places more accessible. Over time, these locations became important sites of cultural memory where climbers connected with the legends of their sport and created their own personal memories. The Vertical West, however, was layered on top of other Wests. At different sites across the region, climbers confronted Native peoples who had their own histories and meanings for the places climbers had claimed. So, too, climbers came into conflict with federal land managers charged with preserving and managing the region’s high places for more than just recreation. “The Vertical West” reveals the powerful roles that place-making and memory play in America’s outdoor recreation communities and the ways outdoor recreationists created new meanings for the West’s high places during the second half of the twentieth century. Ultimately, it argues that to understand the challenges facing the region in the twenty-first century, we must understand how outdoor recreationists constructed their own geographies in the West and how these geographies map onto and are layered over other westerners’ geographies.

INTRODUCTION: A REGION DEFINED

“Writers go to New York. Actors go to Hollywood. Climbers go to Colorado.”

- Michael Kennedy, *Climb! The History of Rock Climbing in Colorado*

“A place is a piece of the whole environment that has been claimed by feelings. Viewed simply as a life-support system, the earth is an environment. Viewed as a resource that sustains our humanity, the earth is a collection of places ... We are homesick for places, we are reminded of places, it is the sounds and smells and sights of places which haunt us and against which we often measure our present.”

- Alan Gussow, *A Sense of Place: The Artist and The American Land*

How has outdoor recreation affected the lands and peoples of the American West? This relatively simple question forms the core of this dissertation. What follows is an attempt to answer this question by examining one group of outdoor recreationists—climbers—during the second half of the twentieth century and early decades of the twenty-first, a period of massive transformation and change for the region.¹

Where is the West? What is the Vertical West?

Any work of western history must, at the beginning, be clear about how it conceptualizes the West. The debate has long been framed as choice between “process” or “place.” The idea of the West as process stems from Frederick Jackson Turner’s 1893 essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” in which he put forth a rather simple argument that the American experience had been defined by Americans’ interactions with a frontier that had moved

¹ During these decades, the West became more populated, more urban, and more cosmopolitan. The West, especially its urban areas, became cultural centers for the rest of the country. The region transformed into an economic hub rivaling other regions of the United States. Perhaps the book that best surveys the ways the West changed during this period is John Findlay’s recent book *The Mobilized American West*. See John Findlay, *The Mobilized American West, 1940-2000* (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 2023).

progressively west across the continent during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries until it supposedly ceased to exist with the 1890 census.² On the other hand, the West as a place comes from historians' attempts in the twentieth century to define the region based on climatic, geographic, or other features. Early attempts often pointed to aridity as a unifying feature of the region, though more recently scholars have considered other ways to make sense of the West.³ One of the more spatially oriented attempts to define the region has come from a group of geographers led by William Wyckoff and Lary Dilsaver who have argued for thinking about mountains as a unifying feature of the region.⁴ Their ideas have influenced my own thinking about the region. The West I write about in this project is inherently spatial and geographic. Mountains play key roles in my writing. Of course, countless scholars have argued for some hybrid between "process" and "place" as the best way to make sense of the American West.⁵

Like many other contemporary western historians, I conceptualize the West as a distinct geographic region. Instead of thinking about the West as a process, always transmuting and capable of being found anywhere a frontier exists, the American West I write about is grounded in physical places and bounded by geographic borders. However, I take a wider view of the region than some. For example, the authors of the *Atlas of the New West* focus on what they term

² See Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" and Other Essays*, ed. John Mack Faragher (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1994), 31-60. Although many historians have turned away from Turner, some have continued to find utility in his ideas. For example, see Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher, *Frontiers: A Short History of the American West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

³ On aridity, see Wallace Stegner, *The Sound of Mountain Water: The Changing American West* (1946; repr., New York: Vintage Books, 2017), 6-14. For an overview of the different ways historians and other scholars have attempted to make sense of the West, including aridity, see William Wyckoff and Lary M. Dilsaver, eds. *The Mountainous West: Explorations in Historical Geography* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 1-20. See also David M. Wrobel and Michael C. Steiner, eds. *Many Wests: Place, Culture, and Regional Identity* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997).

⁴ See Wyckoff and Dilsaver, *The Mountainous West*.

⁵ For a strong discussion of different ways scholars have approached this historiographical problem, see Wyckoff and Dilsaver, *The Mountainous West*, 1-20.

“Interior West,” which stretches “from the foothills of the Rocky Mountains to the crests of the Sierra Nevada and Cascade Ranges.”⁶ In addition to these areas, I include the states of the Northern Great Plains states, especially South Dakota, as well as the states of the Pacific Coast (California, Oregon, and Washington) in addition to Alaska and Texas. I include all of these places because I am interested in the ways climbers knitted geographic spaces across these states into a distinctive region that I have come to call “The Vertical West.”

The Vertical West refers to a geography of places frequented by twentieth-century American climbers. I use the term “vertical” rather than “mountainous” because this word turns out to be a better descriptor of the places climbers traveled and recreated.⁷ This geography includes mountain areas like the Wind River Range, the Tetons, the Sierra Nevada, and elsewhere, but it also includes canyons, cliffs, boulders, and other places that are not in the mountains. Over these decades, climbers recreated in Eldorado Canyon, Colorado; City of Rocks, Idaho; Smith Rock State Park, Oregon; and many more locations. Although these sites are not exactly mountainous locales, they do share particular physical characteristics, the most important being a certain amount of exposed rock steep enough to be of interest to technical climbers. In this sense, vertical refers to the precipitous nature of the places in question.

⁶ “A Region Defined,” in *Atlas of the New West: Portrait of a Changing Region*, ed. William E. Riebsame (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 46.

⁷ On the Mountainous West, see Wyckoff and Dilsaver, *The Mountainous West*, 1-59.

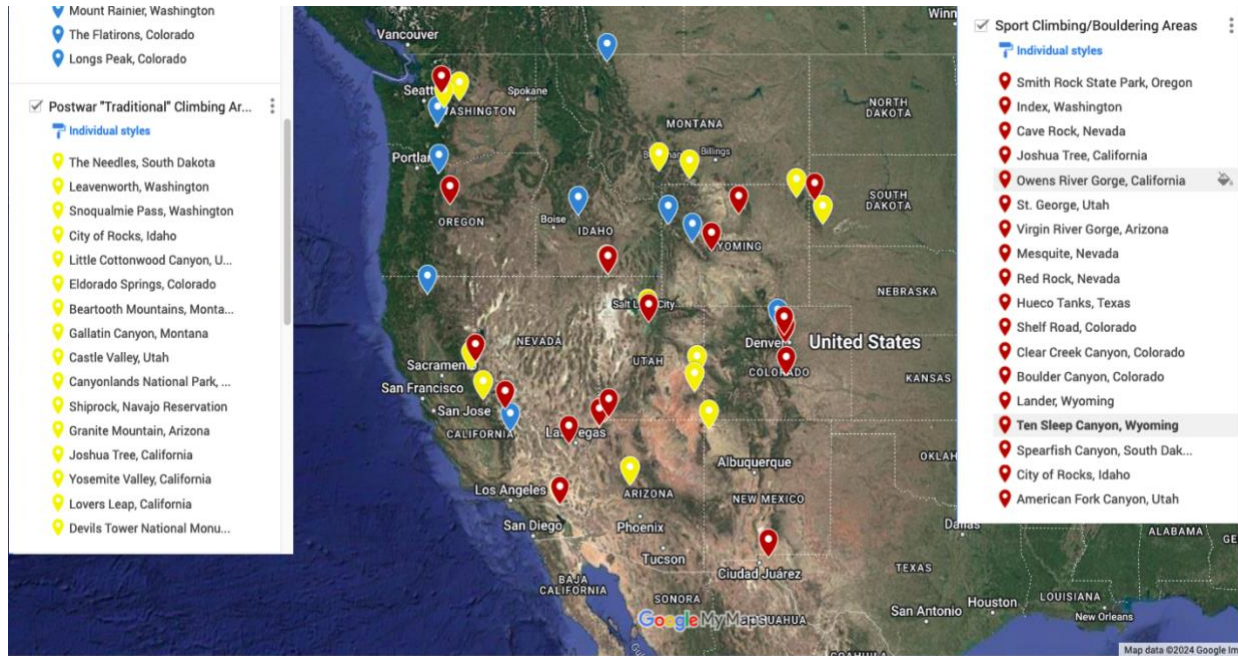


Figure 1.1. Map of climbing areas in the American West. Each color represents the historical layering of climbing areas in the region during the twentieth century. Map courtesy of the author.

Like any geography, the Vertical West resulted from peoples' interactions with specific places. At the base of this region are the nonhuman forces which uplifted mountains, exposed rocks, carved canyons, moved boulders, and created the landscapes that climbers later encountered. Geographies, however, are not simply physical environments; they are also constructed by humans.⁸ Climbers created the Vertical West through their physical interactions with vertical environments across the region. Like other outdoor sports, climbing puts individuals in direct contact with the physical, material world. The embodied, multi-sensory nature of these activities, argues Annie Coleman, are what make them unique.⁹ Climbers are part

⁸ For the relationship between ideas and regions, see "A Region Defined," *Atlas of the New West*, 46-47. For a cultural history of mountaineering, see Robert Macfarlane, *Mountains of the Mind: Adventures in Reaching the Summit* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003).

⁹ Annie Gilbert Coleman, "Shredding Mountain Lines: GoPro, Mobility, and the Spatial Politics of Outdoor Sports," in *The American Environment Revisited: Environmental Historical Geographies of the United States*, ed. Geoffrey L. Buckley and Yolonda Youngs (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 125-126.

of the milieu of postwar outdoor enthusiasts who sought an “embodied sublime” characterized by “speed, style, and a rush of adrenaline.”¹⁰ But climbing differs from other outdoor sports in subtle ways. Unlike skiers, BASE jumpers, whitewater kayakers, or mountain bikers who surge downhill at high speeds and react quickly to obstacles and changing conditions, climbers tend to crawl up vertical faces making slow, controlled, and measured movements. Out-of-control, wild movements are frowned upon while control and precision are prized. Although these sports differ in their nuances, they all create strong connections between humans and nature through their kinesthetic movement.

The culture of climbing that emerged in the West during the second half of the twentieth century drew from earlier mountaineering cultures in America but transformed during these decades as a result of new technologies, ideas, and social relations.¹¹ Specialties and subdisciplines emerged within the activity. Rock climbing became an end in itself rather than a way to train for mountain climb. Some people specialized in climbing frozen waterfalls, while others focused on ropeless climbing on boulders. Each of these subdisciplines had their own sets of places, technologies, and cultures that defined them, yet they are all captured under the broad umbrella of “climbing.”

“The Vertical West” tells the story of the growth of climbing culture in the region during the second half of the twentieth century and argues that climbers built relationships with the region’s vertical environments—cliffs, canyons, mountains, boulders, and crags—that defined

¹⁰ Coleman, “Shredding Mountain Lines,” 128.

¹¹ For these earlier American climbing traditions, see Maurice Isserman, *Continental Divide: A History of American Mountaineering* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016), 5-268.; Joseph E. Taylor III, *Pilgrims of the Vertical: Yosemite Rock Climbers and Nature at Risk* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 1-106; and Chris Jones, *Climbing in North America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

their sense of the West. By using a diverse set of archival materials—magazine and journal articles, diaries, equipment catalogs, interviews, and public documents—it demonstrates how climbers constructed their own distinctive region within the West focused on vertical places. This region, however, was layered over other cultural and bureaucratic geographies, which resulted in a series of conflicts during the final decades of the century. These struggles over the meaning of specific geographic sites, revealed the complex nature of land use and management as well as the deep-rooted nature of social conflict in the region, especially between the descendants of Euro-American settlers and Indigenous peoples.

Place-making, Memory, and the West

Climbers engaged in processes of place-making in the region. Climbing appealed to Americans, predominantly middle-class urban and suburban Americans, for a number of reasons. Through kinesthetic movement, the activity evoked a strong sense of place. As landscapes across country, including the West, became more homogenized during the second half of the twentieth century as a result of a complex set of social, political, and economic forces, climbing offered people the opportunity to interact with spaces that looked and felt different than urban areas, suburban housing tracts, strip malls, highway rest stops, or other such environments.¹² Climbing put people in touch with environments that were singular, specific, and sensory. The compact limestone of American Fork Canyon, Utah felt different than the fractured gneiss of the North Cascades in Washington. Canyonlands, Utah where sand, grit, and wind were always present seemed a world apart from the lush meadows and alpine lakes of the Wind River Range,

¹² On the proliferation of these environments in the West during these decades, see William Wyckoff, *How to Read the American West: A Field Guide* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), 230-233, 286-293, and 322-325.

Wyoming. The columns of Devils Tower, Wyoming where climbers jammed their feet and hands stood in stark contrast to the volcanic buttresses of Smith Rock State Park, Oregon where they pinched tiny pebbles between their fingertips and balanced delicately on these dime-sized footholds. All of these places felt far removed from the region's urban and suburban areas. Climbers understood these differences through their lived experiences.

Through personal and collective experience, climbers turned western spaces into western places. Climbers claimed places across the region during the decades after World War II through their direct contact with these vertical environments. They furthered their claims when they published articles, distributed images, and told stories around campfires. Climbers came to know the textures of the region in visceral ways. They felt places with their hands and feet; they breathed in the smell of different plant communities; and they witnessed different landscapes with their eyes. In addition to sensory experiences, climbing evoked strong emotions. There were moments of elevation or pure joy but also periods of intense uncertainty, fear, and suffering. Because technical climbing is rarely done alone, climbers shared their physical and emotional experiences with others. This combination of physical and emotional valences proved exceptionally meaningful. In these ways, climbers turned vertical spaces into vertical places for themselves and other climbers.

Vertical places across the West became important sites of memory for American climbers. Travelling to Yosemite Valley, the Tetons, Canyonlands, Smith Rock State Park, Eldorado Canyon, Wild Iris, and elsewhere allowed climbers to experience important sites in the collective history of their sport. When they staggered to the base of El Capitan in Yosemite burdened by their equipment, tied in to a rope beneath "Chain Reaction" at Smith Rock State Park, or

wandered among the sandstone buttress of Eldorado Canyon, climbers connected with the past. They walked in the footsteps of Royal Robbins, Yvon Chouinard, Layton Kor, Bev Johnson, Lynn Hill, Todd Skinner, Alan Watts, and others. When they pulled onto the rock, they gripped the same holds and danced on the same edges as these legends. Certain physical locations mattered for historical reasons. But these places also mattered for personal reasons. Climbers not only experienced the past as present when they climbed, but they forged their own personal histories in concert with these sites and locations. Places came to have meaning for historical reasons but also because of the role they played in individuals' lives. Sites served as containers for individuals' memories and experiences; they marked the passage of life in tactile, physical ways. This proved to be a heady combination. People became obsessed with the activity because it provided a strong sense of place, history, self, and identity that stood in stark contrast to social, political, economic, and environmental currents in postwar American society that alienated, bewildered, confounded, and perplexed many.

Outdoor Recreation in the West

Other outdoor recreationists took part in similar place-making processes during these decades. Westerners from all walks of life came to value beaches, forests, rivers, mountains, parks, and monuments during the second half of the twentieth century. So, too, did outsiders. "What had been a draw for a few thousand people a year in the 1880s," explains historian Rachel Gross, "has grown to encompass tens of millions of participants (and consumers) every year."¹³ New outdoor sports like whitewater rafting, mountain biking, trail running, and climbing became

¹³ Rachel S. Gross, *Shopping All the Way to the Woods: How the Outdoor Industry Sold Nature to America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024), 9.

popular alongside older favorites like hunting, fishing, hiking, and skiing.¹⁴ Each of these activities, allowed westerners (and outsiders) to experience landscapes, connect with the past, and engage in powerful processes of identity formation. Some people moved to the region precisely because they wanted to live closer to outdoor recreation areas.¹⁵ Eventually, these activities became big business. Rachel Gross estimates that Americans spent over \$400 billion on outdoor recreation in 2023.¹⁶ Since the end of World War II, “adventure recreation” activities have become a key ingredient in the development of the region during these years as well as a catalyst for community and identity formation.¹⁷

As outdoor recreation has become a social and economic force reshaping the region, a group of western historians have worked to understand the effects of outdoor recreation on the region, its lands, and its peoples.¹⁸ For example, a team of scholars from the Center of the American West at University of Colorado-Boulder included an essay and two maps about outdoor recreation in their important book the *Atlas of the New West*. In “America’s New West Playground,” they describe outdoor recreation as a “civil religion sweeping America” and sites of outdoor leisure and play as “meccas.”¹⁹ To be certain, outdoor recreation occurs elsewhere in the United States, but as these scholars contend, recreation sites are “more plentiful in the West, with its wide open spaces, abundance of wild mountains and rivers, and plentitude of federal land.”²⁰

¹⁴ William Wyckoff, *How to Read the American West: A Field Guide* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), 354-361.

¹⁵ Hal K. Rothman, *Devil’s Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth-Century American West* (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 1998) and Findlay, *The Mobilized American West*, 92-110.

¹⁶ Gross, *Shopping*, 9.

¹⁷ Findlay, *The Mobilized American West*, 103.

¹⁸ For an example of this sort of work, see Liza Nichols, Elaine M. Bapis, and Thomas J. Harvey, eds. *Imagining the Big Open: Nature, Identity, and Play in the New West* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2003).

¹⁹ “America’s New West Playground,” in *Atlas of the New West: Portrait of a Changing Region*, ed. William E. Riebsame (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 125.

²⁰ “America’s New West Playground,” *Atlas of the New West*, 126.

There is little question that outdoor recreation has been a major force reshaping the region over the past fifty or so years.

But “outdoor recreation” is a broad container that tends to obscure more than it reveals. A number of different activities—skiing, whitewater rafting, mountain biking, trail running, rock climbing, and more—all fit under the umbrella of outdoor recreation. Yet each of these activities have their own specific cultures and places of interest. “Each outdoor subculture,” explains geographer William Wyckoff, “has its own jargon, competitive events, champion practitioners, and prime destinations.”²¹ If we lump outdoor recreation activities together, we may be able to see the broad ways these pursuits transformed the region, but we might miss the specific ways these different groups thought, acted, and behaved. And, we might gloss over how these groups affected particular places in the region. To better understand how outdoor recreation reshaped the West during the twentieth century, we should consider each activity individually. Doing so reveals the specific culture of the sport in question as well as the set of concerns, issues, and impacts associated with the activity. Different outdoor recreation subcultures developed their own ethics, relations, and organizations. They cared about different landscapes and became engaged in different issues. Examining a particular subset of outdoor recreationists allows us to narrow in on the ways people related to western lands and other westerners.

Some western historians have taken this approach. In her book *Ski Styles*, Annie Coleman explores the history of skiing in Colorado during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She traces the evolution of the activity from mountain mail carriers to ski clubs and festivals in small mountain towns to the large resorts that spread across the high country after World War II.

²¹ Wyckoff, *How to Read*, 355.

Coleman maintains her focus on Colorado throughout—with some diversions to other western mountain regions—and paints a portrait of how skiing evolved in the West over these decades.²² Similarly, Joseph E. Taylor III explores the history of rock climbing in Yosemite Valley, California in *Pilgrims of the Vertical*. Taylor uses rock climbers to analyze how gender, technology, and sporting culture affected peoples' environmental attitudes and relationships with risk.²³ By maintaining attention to one activity and carefully considering geographic boundaries, these studies explain historical transformations in more depth and detail than they could if they took a broader approach. I follow the leads of these scholars by focusing on one activity—climbing—though I expand the geographic scope in an attempt to draw region-wide conclusions.

These studies of outdoor recreation nest within a larger body of literature that examines tourism and leisure in the West. From Earl Pomeroy's signal study *In Search of the Golden West* to Hal Rothman's *Devil's Bargains* to Robert Campbell's *In Darkest Alaska* to Jared Farmer's *On Zion's Mount* and Lawrence Culver's *The Frontier of Leisure*, western historians have written extensively about tourism and recreation.²⁴ These studies have explained Americans' enduring interest in the West as a place for relaxation as well as strenuous physical play. Each has taken a different approach to this topic, though all illuminate how leisure has been one of the defining

²² Annie Gilbert Coleman, *Ski Styles: Sport and Culture in the Rockies* (Lawrence: University of Press of Kansas, 2004).

²³ See Joseph E. Taylor III, *Pilgrims of the Vertical: Yosemite Rock Climbers and Nature at Risk* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

²⁴ Earl Pomeroy, *In Search of the Golden West: The Tourist in Western America* (1957; repr., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990); Hal K. Rothman, *Devil's Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth-Century American West* (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 1998); Robert Campbell, *In Darkest Alaska: Travel and Empire Along the Inside Passage* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Jared Farmer, *On Zion's Mount: Mormons, Indians, and the American Landscape* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008); and Lawrence Culver, *The Frontier of Leisure: Southern California and the Shaping of Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). See also, David M. Wrobel and Patrick T. Long, eds. *Seeing and Being Seen: Tourism in the American West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001).

features of the West since the mid-nineteenth century. Again, William Wyckoff: "... it is crucial to see 'leisure' not merely as some discretionary activity on the region's scenic margins, but rather as a key component of the regional economy, a shaper of landscapes and environments, a powerful influence in defining regional character, and a creator of cultural capital."²⁵ Leisure extends into areas of life that one might not necessarily expect. Studying leisure can reveal the legacies of colonial relations, the hidden labor supporting tourism, the power of myth in how people relate to places, and more. Because of its ability to expose unlikely relationships and dynamics, leisure remains a topic of inquiry by scholars across different fields and specialities. Like these scholars, I take leisure seriously in this study.

A Bit More Western Historiography

Let's dwell for moment on the passage above. In it, Wyckoff appears to defend leisure. He makes a case for leisure as a key force that has shaped the West and a subject of serious academic study. Although he doesn't go into detail, Wyckoff appears to be responding to some argument that leisure is a less important subject to study than others. To whom, we might ask, is Wyckoff responding?

Since the rise of New Western History in the 1990s, western historians have taken on a project of rewriting the region's past in a multitude of ways.²⁶ Many of these projects have exposed stories of violence, trauma, oppression, catastrophe, and mismanagement. Western historians have written extensively about industrial capital accumulation, resource extraction,

²⁵ Wyckoff, *How to Read*, 338.

²⁶ For good overviews of New Western History, see Michael L. Johnson, *New Westers: The West in Contemporary American Culture* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1996), 55-101 and Wyckoff and Dilsaver, *The Mountainous West*, 15-20.

and labor conflicts in the North American West.²⁷ They have described environmental calamities resulting from nuclear testing, the use of toxic chemicals in agricultural areas, and the mismanagement of water and soil.²⁸ They have traced the rise of anti-government militia groups and other extremist forces in the region.²⁹ Scholars have unearthed deeply traumatic and unsettling stories of violence, genocide, oppression, and dispossession throughout the region's history.³⁰ In many ways, western historians have become experts at explaining the region's dark and tortured past. Set against these obviously serious subjects, histories of tourism, leisure, and outdoor recreation may appear less-than-important and less-meaningful.³¹

Yet outdoor recreation demands serious consideration by scholars of the American West.

According to the team at the Center of the American West, "Recreation and tourism comprise the

²⁷ For examples of these sorts of works, see Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Andrew Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison: An Environmental History, 1750-1920* (2000; repr., New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Andrew Isenberg, *Mining California: An Ecological History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005); Thomas Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008); Andrew Needham, *Power Lines: Phoenix and the Making of the Modern Southwest* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014); and Bathsheba Demuth, *Floating Coasts: An Environmental History of the Bering Strait* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2020).

²⁸ See Rebecca Solnit, *Savage Dreams: A Journey Into the Hidden Wars of the American West* (1994; repr., Oakland: University of California Press, 2014); Linda Nash, *Inescapable Ecologies: A History of Environment, Disease, and Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water* (1986; repr., New York: Penguin Books, 1993); and Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (1979; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

²⁹ See Betsy Gaines Quammen, *American Zion: Cliven Bundy, God, and Public Lands in the West* (Salt Lake City: Torrey House Press, 2019).

³⁰ For examples of these sorts of works, see Will Bagley, *Blood of the Prophets: Brigham Young and the Massacre at Mountain Meadows* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002); Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Ari Kelman, *A Misplaced Massacre: Struggling Over the Memory of Sand Creek* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013); Brianna Theobald, *Reproduction on the Reservation: Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Colonialism in the Long Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2019); and Nick Estes, *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (New York: Verso, 2019).

³¹ It's worth noting that many scholars of tourism have approached the subject from colonial and imperial perspectives. This, however, has not been the case for western historians exploring tourism. Robert Campbell's *In Darkest Alaska* and Hal Rothman's *Devil's Bargains* are perhaps the best example of monographs that explore the complex relationship between empire and tourism in the American West.

second biggest share of western state economies (after agriculture).”³² Furthermore, they inform us that “the West’s fastest growing counties lie next to wilderness areas and other public lands,” places valued for recreation.³³ Examining outdoor recreation shows new ways Americans and others valued the region. It demonstrates how Americans reimagined western spaces as places of strenuous physical play and recreation. There are economic reasons why scholars of the American West should study outdoor recreation, but there are other reasons, too. Outdoor recreation helps us track changes in western culture during the twentieth century and think about the ways westerners thought about and interacted with natural areas across the region. It helps us think more critically about the relationships that developed in the region between different cultural groups. If we approach this topic using critical historical geography and spatial approaches to orient us, we begin to recognize the role that these places played in different cultural groups’ identities. Understanding this, we can better understand the conflicts between people that have occurred as a result of outdoor recreation becoming a part of postwar western culture. Without question, outdoor recreation has been a major force reshaping the region during the second half of the twentieth century.

Studies that examine the histories of these sports have the potential to help us think more critically and deeply about the West. Better informed about how outdoor recreationists created their own geographies in the region—how they have been engaged in complex processes of place-making at sites across the West—and how this geography has been layered over other equally meaningful geographies, we are better prepared to consider the future of the region, its peoples, and its lands.

³² “America’s New West Playground,” *Atlas of the New West*, 128.

³³ “America’s New West Playground,” *Atlas of the New West*, 128.

Chapter Overview

The following chapters are organized in a thematic and chronologic order. The first three chapters tell the story of the rise of climbing culture in the West after World War II from different perspectives, while the final two examine particular issues associated climbing. Chapter One explains the geographic spread of climbing in the region after World War II. It examines the ways that transportation infrastructure and climbing equipment affected where climbers traveled. It argues that climbing spread to new areas, including urban environment, as a result of these technological developments. Chapter Two charts the development of the mountaineering equipment industry during the second half of the century. This chapter argues that companies' use of images of western places in their advertisements played a critical role in the creation of the Vertical West. Chapter Three examines who participated in climbing culture. It argues that climbing became more diverse during these decades as the sport became more popular and spread beyond mountaineering clubs and other similar institutions. Chapter Four takes a hard look at conflicts between climbers and Native peoples at sites across the North American West. It argues that through these conflicts climbers became more aware of and sensitive to Native Americans claims to these sites. Chapter Five considers climbers environmental impacts and relationships to environmental causes broadly construed. It argues that climbers, like other outdoor recreationists, cared deeply about the places where they recreated yet had complicated environmental legacies. In the Conclusion, I revisit the major themes of the study and look towards the ways this study helps us consider the future of outdoor recreation in the region.

A NEW GEOGRAPHY OF OUTDOOR RECREATION

In his book about the Wilderness Act, historian Paul Sutter briefly discusses the differences between nature-tourism and outdoor recreation. “Tourism,” writes Sutter, “is a site-specific activity; nature tourists are usually out to see particular places, such as the Grand Canyon, and to acquire the experience of having done so. Outdoor recreation, on the other hand, is often activity specific. If one is interested in hiking, camping, or swimming, any number of places might serve the purpose.”³⁴ Essentially the difference Sutter draws out is this: nature tourists are interested in visiting spectacular places which have been canonized through guidebooks, travel writing, and other means while outdoor recreationists are most interested their preferred activity no matter where they might be.³⁵ Although Sutter goes on to admit that these distinctions are not as neat as he suggests, he nonetheless draws a distinction between nature-tourists and recreationists.

Postwar American climbers complicate Sutter assessment of how nature tourists and outdoor recreationists differ. Indeed, as mountaineering became more popular during the second half of the century and rock-climbing became an end in itself, a list of destinations emerged that attracted climbers to the West. Like Sutter’s nature tourists, postwar Americans traveled across region to particular places in pursuit of vertical adventure. Yosemite Valley, The Tetons, Rocky Mountain National Park, The Wind River Range, and other such places continued to attract people during the second half of the twentieth century, but new places, like Eldorado Canyon and

³⁴ Paul Sutter, *Driven Wild: How the Fight Against Automobiles Launched the Modern Wilderness Movement* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), 27-28.

³⁵ On the canonization of travel destinations and the role of travel writing in tourism, see Robert Campbell, *In Darkest Alaska: Travel and Empire Along the Inside Passage* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008) and Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008).

Little Cottonwood Canyon and later, Smith Rock, Wild Iris, Indian Creek, and Hyalite Canyon, emerged alongside these traditional areas. Indeed, many of the must-visit places in the late 1990s and early 2000s were not yet on the map at the end of the war in 1945. In many ways, the story of climbing in the American West in the second half of the twentieth century is one of geographic expansion. By the early decades of twenty-first century, climbers had many options to choose from when planning a climbing trip in the West, each place catering to a different subset of the climbing public. No stone, it seemed, had been left unturned.

As America's climbers returned home from the war, they returned to the places they had frequented before the war. For example, members of the Rock-Climbing Section of the Sierra Club (RCS) returned to Yosemite Valley, while the Mountaineers continued their explorations of the Cascades and other ranges in the Pacific Northwest.³⁶ At the same time, the 1950s were a decade of explosive growth for the activity in America and the West. New groups of men and women, primarily younger people, found their way to the sport. These new recruits, many of whom lived in the West's growing cities, began to explore their local areas for canyons, cliffs, and outcrops where they could build and practice their skills. In this way, areas like Eldorado Canyon near Boulder, Colorado and Little Cottonwood Canyon near Salt Lake City, Utah became places where a new generation practiced their piton-craft and rope systems before venturing out into the larger, more complex areas of the American West.³⁷ Over time, these areas

³⁶ For postwar Yosemite climbing, see Joseph E. Taylor III, *Pilgrims of the Vertical: Yosemite Rock Climbers and Nature at Risk* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 107-174; Steve Roper, *Camp 4: Recollections of a Yosemite Rockclimber* (Seattle: The Mountaineers, 1994); Maurice Isserman, *Continental Divide: A History of American Mountaineering* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016), 270-274 and 276-284. For the Mountaineers, see Jim Kjeldsen, *The Mountaineers: A History* (Seattle: The Mountaineers, 2008), 62-79.

³⁷ John Flynn, "From Pitons to Plastic: A Vertical History of the Wasatch," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 93, no. 2 (Spring 2025): 95-118.

developed rich traditions and cultures and became hubs in the ever-expanding geography of Western climbing.

Developments in transportation infrastructure and technologies made previously out-of-the-way places more accessible. The creation of the interstate highway system as well as federal, state, and local investments in improved roadways, including forest service roads, made it easier to visit previously difficult to access places.³⁸ Additionally, widespread vehicle ownership and cheap gasoline allowed Americans to take off on road-trips of various lengths and durations.³⁹ Like other members of the postwar generation, climbers embraced automobility as a way of life.⁴⁰ During these years, weekend and week-long trips became normal, while some embraced even more nomadic lifestyles based around automobile travel. Even the energy crisis of the early 1970s did little to quell climber's road-trips; they simply cut costs elsewhere.⁴¹ In addition, the growth of metropolitan and regional airports as well as reliable commercial air service made previously far-flung areas more accessible. As Alan Watts explains, French climbing star J.B. Tribout may have been the first person to book a round-trip ticket from Paris to Redmond, OR when he visited Smith Rock in the mid-1980s.⁴² Further afield, bush pilots made the Alaska

³⁸ On the history of the interstate highway system, see Christopher W. Wells, *Car Country: An Environmental History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013), 269-276. For interstates in the West, see Bill Wyckoff, *How to Read the American West: A Field Guide* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), 230-233. For improved forest service roads and recreation, see Taylor Rose, "The 'Opening of the Clackamas': Log Trucks, Access Roads, and Multiple-Use Infrastructure in Oregon's National Forests," *Western Historical Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (Summer 2022): 167-193. <https://doi.org/10.1093/whq/whac002>.

³⁹ On cheap cars and gasoline and climbing culture, see Yvon Chouinard, *Let My People Go Surfing: The Education of a Reluctant Businessman* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 16.

⁴⁰ On postwar automobility in America, see Wells, *Car Country*, 279-280.

⁴¹ For examples of the ways climbers cut costs, see Chouinard, *Let My People*, 13. On the energy crisis, see Mark Fiege, *The Republic of Nature: An Environmental History of the United States* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012), 358-402.

⁴² Kris Hampton, interview with Alan Watts, *Written in Stone*, podcast audio, January 10, 2024, <https://www.plugtoneaudio.com/written-in-stone>.

Range and Denali into a popular mountaineering venue by the 1970s as they opened commercial flight services to serve the growing population of interested (and eager) mountaineers.

Other developments within the sport proved critical in the geographic expansion of the sport in the West during the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Sport climbing turned previously overlooked cliffs into must-visit destinations. In fact, sport climbing in North America began in the West at Smith Rock, Oregon when Alan Watts turned his attention towards the vertical faces of his local state park. Although some prominent climbers castigated Watts for his approach, other realized that rappel bolting had the potential to open up previously overlooked cliffs.⁴³ Across the West in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, countless new areas were developed using sport climbing tactics. Specifically, areas that were not well suited to “traditional” climbing because of rock type and quality benefited from the growth of sport climbing in the 1990s. Limestone areas such as American Fork Canyon south of Salt Lake City, Utah; Rifle near Aspen, Colorado; Wild Iris near Lander, Wyoming; and Ten Sleep Canyon in the Bighorn Mountains, Wyoming were developed in this style.

This development coincided with a cultural shift within the American climbing culture. Whereas earlier generations of climbers had focused on remote peaks, alpine ridges, and big walls, many climbers in the 1990s and 2000s gravitated towards these single-pitch rock climbing areas. These places—and others like them—became must-visit destinations for many in the late decades of the twentieth century and early decades of the twenty-first. Although climbers never stopped visiting places like Yosemite National Park, Grand Teton National Park, Denali National Park, Rocky Mountain National Park, Joshua Tree National Park, and the Wind River Range,

⁴³ For the debate between sport climbers and traditionalists, see Taylor, *Pilgrims*, 227-232. Also, see Jeff Smoot, *Hangdog Days: Conflict, Change, and The Race for 5.14* (Seattle: The Mountaineers, 2019).

they also began to frequent these other places. As new destinations emerged, the sport continued to spread across the West. Eventually, previously off-the-beaten path places and the towns near them became major recreation hubs where people from across the West and beyond traveled to climb. Some people relocated to the towns near these new areas in order to be closer to climbing.

In the 1990s, climbing gyms in the West's urban and suburban areas introduced countless newcomers to the sport. Previously, climbing and mountaineering had been a nature-based activity. However, after the first international sport climbing competition in America at Snowbird, Utah in 1988, a group of enterprising individuals opened climbing-specific gyms in urban (and eventually suburban) areas. Beginning in the Pacific Northwest in the mid-1980s climbing gyms spread across the region during the 1990s and 2000s. Gyms revolutionized the region's climbing culture by introducing a whole new population to the sport. While some of these gym climbers had no interest in visiting the region's outdoor crags and cliffs, many did. By the early 2000s climbing had become a trendy activity among urban and suburban westerners and visitation at the West's climbing areas had reached new heights. A whole host of issues ensued, including widespread environmental degradation, social conflicts between climbers and other user groups, and disputes with land managers. Nevertheless, climbers continued to traverse the West in search of novel experiences in nature.

Over the course of these decades, climbers came to know the West through their recreational pursuit. By the turn of the twenty-first century, climbing and mountaineering had spread to every corner of the Western United States. Like other postwar westerners who came to know the region primarily through outdoor recreation, many climbers came to know the West

through their pursuit of vertical adventure.⁴⁴ For them, the West was primarily a region of mountains, cliffs, canyons, and boulders, though it eventually came to include urban gyms, too. Similar to other postwar western geographies of outdoor recreation, the Vertical West could quite narrow as climbers prioritized their activity above all else. In many ways, this obsession colored how they understood the wider region, its histories, cultures, and recurrent issues. As recreationists, climbers could sometimes float above these other ways of knowing the West as they prioritized leisure, recreation, and play. Yet this geography also had the potential to connect people to places and peoples that they might not have otherwise encountered.

Through climbing, primarily urban and suburban westerners traveled to places removed from region's metropolitan centers. During their travels they encountered peoples, landscapes, ideas, and cultures that were different than their own. Though some scholars have critiqued postwar outdoor recreationists as mere tourists who cared little about the places and peoples they encountered during their travels, other scholars believe travel has the potential to make people more aware of both peoples and places.⁴⁵ "There are sensitive tourists," writes scholar Rudolfo Anaya, "who appreciate the region and people they experience on their journey. There are some who respect the place and allow themselves to be changed by the people and region they visit. They return from the journey fulfilled, more aware of other cultures."⁴⁶ Although not all climbers acted like Anaya's ideal tourists during the second half of the twentieth century, many did come to know the region, its lands, peoples, and cultures, as they stopped in small towns for food and

⁴⁴ For westerners' embrace of outdoor recreation, see John Findlay, *The Mobilized American West, 1940-2000* (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 2023), 98-103.

⁴⁵ For critiques of outdoor recreation tourism, see Hal K. Rothman, *Devil's Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth-Century American West* (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 1998).

⁴⁶ Rudolfo Anaya, "Why I Love Tourists: Confessions of a Dharma Bum," in *Seeing and Being Seen: Tourism in the American West*, ed. David M. Wrobel and Patrick T. Long (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 2001), 60-61.

fuel, camped on the land, and spent their days in direct contact with the natural world. As climbing spread across the West in the second half of the twentieth century, some climbers—though certainly not all—came to appreciate the West’s unique lands, cultures, and peoples. Along the way, they forged their own relationships with the region’s vertical spaces.

Climbers Embrace Automobiles and the Open Road, 1946-1960s

In April of 1952, Walt Bailey packed up his car and left Casper, Wyoming. Bailey, a chemistry professor at Casper College, picked up his friends, Norm Saunders and Ray Sandberg, in Pueblo, Colorado before the trio continued south to Durango. Eventually, the three men arrived beneath the soaring volcanic walls of Shiprock (*Tsé Bit’ a’i*) on the Navajo Reservation. They had come to this remote corner of New Mexico to attempt an ascent of this striking mountain.⁴⁷ In his journal recounting their attempt, Bailey noted, “In way of generous greeting, New Mexico presented us with great quantities of its topsoil. The dust was so thick we could not see Shiprock from the highway or the access [*sic*] road (Red Rock Rd.).”⁴⁸ Bailey had driven over seven hundred miles from Casper to Shiprock, yet he mentions no significant driving challenges other than the dust which welcomed him and his friends to New Mexico. While the lack of discussion about his drive might make sense given the reason for his trip, his omission reveals something about the state of automobile travel in the West in the years immediately after World War II: it was unremarkable. That Bailey could travel over seven hundred miles and not

⁴⁷ Shiprock had become a coveted climb for American mountaineers since it was first ascended by a group of Sierra Club climbers led by David Brower in 1939. See Chris Jones, *Climbing in North America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 135-137.

⁴⁸ Climbing Journal: “Shiprock I 4-10 to 4-13-52,” Box 1, Folder 2, Walt Bailey Papers, Collection Number 2635, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

experience any driving challenges worthy of recounting demonstrates how much car travel in the West had improved since the early decades of the twentieth century.

Bailey and his team benefited from decades of federal, state, and local investments in road improvement. As the geographer William Wyckoff explains, “By the beginning of World War II, the massive efforts to improve and pave ... roads had brought people in the West closer together.”⁴⁹ Improved roads also meant easier and faster travel across the vast expanses of the West. Bailey and his friends likely traveled to Shiprock via the Park-to-Park Highway, a highway system that connected the region’s national parks with its growing metropolitan areas.⁵⁰ Originally envisioned by Stephen Mather, the first director of the Park Service, the Park-to-Park highway was built to encourage Americans to visit and experience the regions’ great national parks like Mount Rainier, Yosemite, Yellowstone, and Mesa Verde. He hoped that the highway would entice Americans, particularly those who lived in the East, to “See America First.” However, the Park-to-Park highway also allowed westerners to travel to once-distant places like Shiprock for short trips or vacations. In Bailey’s case, he traveled to this previously remote corner of the region to take part in a weeklong climbing expedition.

⁴⁹ Wyckoff, *How to Read the American West*, 208.

⁵⁰ On the Park-to-Park highway, see Marguerite S. Shaffer, *See America First: Tourism and National Identity, 1880-1940* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 118-119.

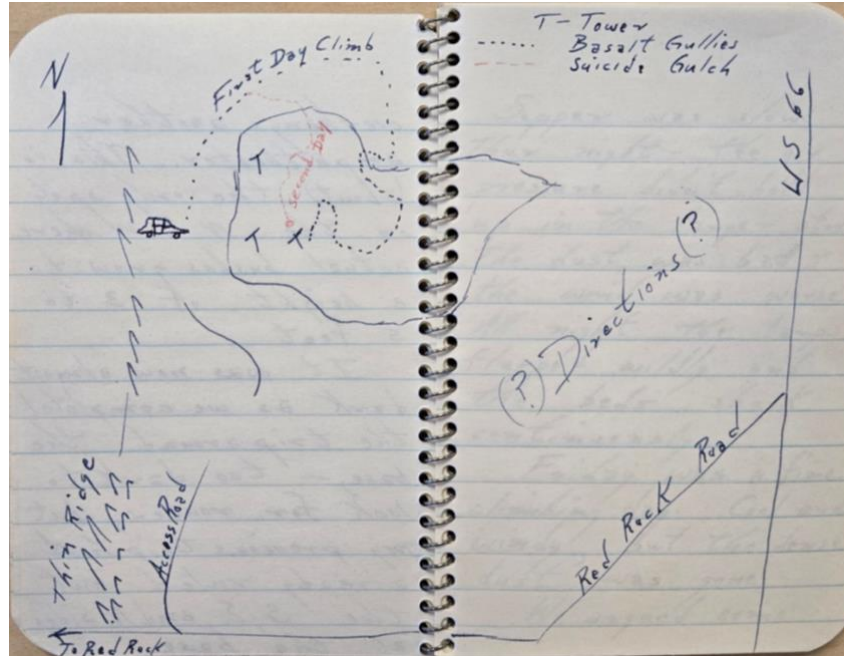


Figure 2.1. Walt Bailey's climbing journal from his first trip to Shiprock (Tsé Bit' a'i) in 1952. The sketch of his small vehicle as well as the roads he took to arrive at Shiprock demonstrate the role that automobiles and highways played in connecting western climbers to vertical nature in the years immediately after World War II. Journal courtesy American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

Although westerners' use of automobiles to access outdoor recreation destinations expanded significantly after World War II, much of the infrastructure for automobile travel in the West was built during the interwar period. "The first Federal Aid Highway Act [of 1916]," explains historian Paul Sutter, "signaled the federal entrance into road building and its recognition of an automobile infrastructure as a public good."⁵¹ While these funds were not specifically meant to boost participation in outdoor recreation, better roads meant easier access to federal lands in the West, lands Americans favored for outdoor play and leisure.⁵² In addition, state and local governments contributed to the growth of outdoor recreation by creating roadside

⁵¹ Sutter, *Driven Wild*, 25.

⁵² Rothman, *Devil's Bargains*, 143-167.

parks and other places for travelers to stop on their way to and from the national parks. At the same time, automobile ownership among Americans increased during these years. By the end of 1929, Paul Sutter estimates that approximately one in every five American owned a personal vehicle.⁵³ Although personal car ownership stalled during the Great Depression, after World War II more Americans purchased personal vehicles. According to historian Christopher Wells, “car ownership more than doubled in the fifteen years [after] World War II, skyrocketing from 28.2 million in 1946 to 61.7 million in 1960.”⁵⁴ With improved roads and the means to travel, more Americans visited the nation’s nature reserves in the years after World War II. Like other outdoor recreationists during this period, climbers embraced automobility. With access to personal vehicles, an end to war time gasoline rationing, and better roadways, American climbers traveled far and wide across the West in the years immediately after World War II.⁵⁵

Walt Bailey’s climbing journals give an idea of where postwar climbers traveled and how they got there. From 1951 to 1957, Bailey made multiple trips to The Tetons (WY), Shiprock (NM), Longs Peak (CO), Devils Tower National Monument (WY), and The Wind River Range (WY).⁵⁶ Like others of his generation, most of Bailey’s climbing occurred in national parks and monuments. Although he doesn’t write much about his travel to these different places, instead choosing to write detailed chronicles of his climbs, automobiles remain in the background of these journals. For example, on a return trip to Shiprock in 1956, Bailey mentions how his group of four climbers had “driven all night, run out of gas at Grand Junction ... [and slept] at a

⁵³ Sutter, 24.

⁵⁴ Wells, *Car Culture*, 279.

⁵⁵ Much of the information in this paragraph comes from Sutter, *Driven Wild*, 23-27.

⁵⁶ Box 1, Walt Bailey Papers, Collection Number 2635, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

Durango motel.”⁵⁷ In addition, during a trip to the Wind River Range in summer 1957, Bailey wrote, “Gary Gayle Dave and I [*sic*] left Casper in time to meet Dud and Jim at the Teton Hotel in Riverton at noon. We drove to Bud LeClair’s packing camp at the St Lawrence ranger station after picking up fishing permits for the Indian Reservation at Ft Washakie.”⁵⁸ In the 1950s, Automobiles provided Bailey and his partners quick and reliable access to the West’s mountains—as long as they remembered to fill the gas tank.

Others in Bailey’s generation embraced automobility even more fully. Herb and Jan Conn, for example, moved into a delivery truck they had converted into a camper vehicle after Herb’s discharge from the Army in 1946. In an article they co-authored for *Summit*, the first American magazine devoted specifically to climbing and mountaineering, they explained their unique living situation: “Our home was a small panel delivery truck, which we equipped with cabinets, drawers, and cooking and sleeping quarters—a kind of permanent tent or overhang on wheels.”⁵⁹ They decided to move into the delivery truck so they could more fully devote themselves to traveling. Over the course of the early 1950s, the Conns travelled across North America in search of new places to climb. They worked odd jobs for six months before taking off on a six-month vacation. During their travels, they estimated they had “uncoiled their rope on about every piece of up-ended rock we could find from the sandstone mesas of the southwest to the glacier-scoured granite of New England, with short forays into both Canada and Mexico.”⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Climbing Journal: “SHIPROCK,” Box 1, Folder 4, Walt Bailey Papers, Collection Number 2635, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

⁵⁸ Climbing Journal: “Wind Rivers 1957,” Box 1, Folder 5, Walt Bailey Papers, Collection Number 2635, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

⁵⁹ Herb and Jan Conn, “We Work In Our Spare Time,” *Summit*, November 1957, 16. *Summit Magazine*, Book Coll. 72a, Folder 1955-1958, Special Collections and Archives, Utah State University Merrill-Cazier Library, Logan, Utah.

⁶⁰ Herb and Jan Conn, “We Work,” 16.

Other articles written in *Summit* reveal their favorite western climbing areas: Big Bend National Park in Texas, Devils Tower National Monument in Wyoming, and the Needles in South Dakota.⁶¹ For the Conns, traveling, climbing, and living out of their converted truck became a way of life in the 1950s.



Figure 2.2. Jan and Herb Conn at rest in their converted delivery truck. After Herb was discharged from the Army in 1946, the Conns climbed across the West while living out of this vehicle. In the postwar years, cars, cheap gasoline, and improved roadways made accessing climbing and mountaineering areas much easier. Like other Americans during this period, some climbers gave up traditional ideas about family and work and chose to live on the road full-time. For them, climbing was much more than a hobby or pastime.

While the Conns pursued their climbing in relative obscurity, some postwar climbers became legendary for their road trips around the American West. Fred Beckey, a Pacific Northwest climber, has long been mythologized for his wide-ranging and life-long exploration of

⁶¹ For articles the Conns wrote about these places, see Herb and Jan Conn, "The Devils Tower," *Summit*, September 1956, 9-11; Herb and Jan Conn, "Climbing Fun in the 'Needles,'" *Summit*, October 1956, 4-5; and Jan Conn, "This Is Texas?," *Summit*, March 1957, 18-10. *Summit Magazine*, Book Coll. 72a, Folder 1955-1958, Special Collections and Archives, Utah State University Merrill-Cazier Library, Logan, Utah.

North America's mountains. Perhaps more than anyone else, Beckey epitomized the postwar generation of American climbers for whom climbing was a way of life. After graduating from the University of Washington with a degree in Economics and Business in 1949, Beckey worked a series of jobs that allowed him to pursue a life of climbing, adventure, and writing.⁶² Like the Conns, automobility was an important aspect of Beckey's less-than-conventional life. "He would regularly drive 1,000 miles to attempt something," explained climbing partner Cameron Burns. "If thwarted by unmanageable personalities, the weather, or just a bug up his ass, he might then turn around and drive 1,000 miles to another objective, always on the move, always reaching for the next great climb."⁶³ From Utah to Alaska and everywhere in between, Beckey authored countless first ascents during the second half of the twentieth century. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Beckey's pink Ford Thunderbird transported him across the vast distances of the American West.

In many ways, the Conns and Beckey saw automobiles as more than just middle-class consumer products. They, and others like them, recognized the liberating potential of a life built around car travel. Like other postwar Beatniks, they embraced a less-than-conventional life in which cars were a main ingredient. Over the course of the twentieth century, their lifestyles became mythologized and romanticized as "dirtbag" culture.⁶⁴ In many ways, they prefigured today's climbing culture with its sprinter vans and obsession with life on the road.⁶⁵

⁶² Megan Bond, email message to author, August 15, 2024.

⁶³ Cameron M. Burns, "North American Climbing Legend Fred Beckey Passes Away," *Climbing*, November 3, 2017, <https://www.climbing.com/news/fred-beckey-dies-at-age-94/>.

⁶⁴ On dirtbags, see Taylor, *Pilgrims of the Vertical*, 190-217.

⁶⁵ For #vanlife, see Rachel Monroe, "#Vanlife, The Bohemian Social-Media Movement," *The New Yorker*, April 17, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/04/24/vanlife-the-bohemian-social-media-movement>.

Whether a weekend climber or a full-time traveler and climber, automobility defined postwar American climbing culture. Guidebook authors Orrin and Lorraine Bonney underscored the role of car travel in their 1960 guidebook to Wyoming. In a section titled “Planning Your Trip,” they advised their reader, “Your own automobile is certainly the most popular and surest way” to travel to the mountains.⁶⁶ Instructing their reader further, they continued, “You will obtain a highway map at the nearest filling station, free and up to date [and] we will carry you on from there. [We will] tell you where to turn from the roads shown on the map, where to camp, the trails to follow, and the mountains to climb.”⁶⁷ As all of these examples make clear, American climbers and mountaineers more often than not drove their personal vehicles to and from the mountains in the decades after World War II.

While backcountry climbing remained an important part of western climbing culture in the years after World War II, climbers also began to discover and frequent roadside areas. For example, Eldorado Canyon near Boulder, Colorado became a popular area with the postwar generation precisely because it was easily accessible by automobile. Eldorado Canyon had been a resort area in the early decades of the twentieth century, but began to attract climbers from Denver and the Front Range in the 1950s as an alternative to the Flatirons above Boulder.⁶⁸ Unlike nearby backcountry areas like Rocky Mountain National Park or the Wind River Range, where climbers had walk a couple of hours or more on trails to reach climbs, at Eldorado Canyon they could simply drive up to the base of the cliffs and start up the rock. Indeed, this was one of

⁶⁶ Orrin H. Bonney and Lorraine Bonney, *Guide to the Wyoming Mountains and Wilderness Areas* (Denver: Sage Books, 1960), 38.

⁶⁷ Bonney and Bonney, *Guide*, 38

⁶⁸ For Eldorado Canyon’s history as a resort, see Steve Levin, *Eldorado Canyon: A Climbing Guide*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Sharp End Publishing, 2013), 19-20. For a history of climbing in Boulder see Pat Ament, *High Over Boulder: A Historical Guide to Rock Climbing Near Boulder, Colorado*, 5th ed. (Boulder: Two Lights, 1995), 1-31.

the most attractive features of Eldorado Canyon. In the 1950s and early 1960s, climbers from throughout the greater Denver-metro areas began frequenting Eldorado Canyon. In time, the canyon became one of the most influential places in the national scene, on the same level as Yosemite.⁶⁹ Eldorado Canyon, and other places like it, expanded the geography of climbing in the region. Whereas previous generations had focused on national parks and monuments with tall mountains and remote summits, a new generation explored cliffs and crags closer to roads. By the early 1960s, previously overlooked areas had become important places for western climbers.

Cars carried mountaineers to trailheads where they shouldered their backpacks and took off down the trail in search of vertical adventure. Whether far from the region's population centers or close to home, cars facilitated climbers' exploration of boulders, outcrops, canyons, and cliffs throughout the West in the years after World War II. Like other Americans who took to the road to visit nature reserves and parks during these years, climbers embraced automobiles as efficient means of travel. While many climbers used automobiles to get away for quick weekend trips or a week-long summer trip, some embraced automobility more fully. These people moved into vehicles and departed on lengthy road-trips around the West. While much would change in western climbing culture over the course of the following decades, climbers' reliance on personal vehicles would not. Like much of postwar American culture, western climbing culture in the second half of the twentieth century was very much a car culture. The environmental costs of such a car-oriented culture were not yet known, though they would become a major point of conflict by the end of the century.

⁶⁹ For a history of climbing in Eldorado Canyon, see Levin, *Eldorado Canyon*, 30-37. See also, Jeff Achey, Dudley Chelton, and Bob Godfrey, *Climb!: The History of Rock Climbing in Colorado* (Seattle: The Mountaineers Books, 2002).

Airplanes: Flying in and around the Vertical West

In addition to cars, airplanes revolutionized access to western mountains in the years after World War II and further grew the geography of western climbing. A growing number of municipal and metropolitan airports as well as reliable commercial air service made many parts of the region more accessible to non-westerners and westerners alike.⁷⁰ Like cars, airplanes tightened the connections between places across the vast spaces of the American West.⁷¹ By the last decades of the century, it was no big deal to board a plane in Denver and fly to San Francisco, Anchorage, or anywhere else in the region for that matter. Airplanes, of course, were used for much more than just leisure and recreation during this period, but one of the by-products of the rise of the airline industry was the growth of regional, national, and international tourism. By connecting places across vast distances, commercial airline services made short vacations to far-flung destinations a common experience for many Americans during these years.⁷² Although flying for climbing only really became necessary in Alaska, air travel opened up new routes of travel for climbers and mountaineers and brought western mountains closer than ever before.

Let's consider Wyoming in the early 1960s. In the Bonneys' guidebook to the mountain areas of the state, which we've already examined in this chapter, they included a brief discussion about airplane travel in their section about trip planning. After counseling most climbers to take their personal vehicles to the mountains, they included a long paragraph for people who might be traveling from further away. They discuss two airlines—Frontier and Western—that offer flights

⁷⁰ See "Flying In and Out of the West," in *Atlas of the New West: Portrait of a Changing Region*, ed. William E. Riebsame (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 69.

⁷¹ William Wyckoff, *How To Read The American West: A Field Guide* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), 208.

⁷² On airplanes and postwar tourism, see Shaffer, *See America*, 320.

to regional airports across the state, including Riverton, Powell-Cody, Greybull, Laramie, Rawlins, Jackson, or Sheridan.⁷³ Although admitting that each of these flights required a connection through one of the larger metropolitan areas in the region like Denver, Salt Lake City, Cheyenne, Billings, or Idaho Falls as well as a long bus ride to a wilderness trailhead, they nevertheless provided these options for potential visitors. For such a sparsely populated state—in 1960 Wyoming counted a little more than 330,000 people living across approximately 97,000 square miles—seven regional airports located in relative proximity to the state’s mountainous areas seems like a high number.⁷⁴ This statistic demonstrates how much air travel had become an important part of the western transportation infrastructure in the decades after World War II. By the early 1960s, mountaineers were not only driving to the mountains, but they were flying there as well. As the Bonneys demonstrate, air travel had become another way for outdoor recreationists, including mountaineers, to visit western nature.

Air travel was particularly important in the growth of Alaskan mountaineering in the second half of the twentieth century. As bush pilots learned how to land and take off on the region’s glaciers, they opened the mountains to more and more climbers. These pilots, many of whom were based out of the small village of Talkeetna, helped spur the growth of the mountaineering industry in Alaska during the 1970s and 1980s. By the 1990s, this industry had become a significant tourism business in the region. Without air taxi services, it is unlikely that mountaineering in Alaska would have developed the way it did. With the advent of commercial

⁷³ Bonney and Bonney, *Guide*, 38.

⁷⁴ For population numbers in 1960, see “Wyoming’s Population,” accessed August 26, 2024, <https://www.wyo.gov/about-wyoming/wyoming-history/population>. For square miles, see “Wyoming Information,” accessed August 26, 2024, <https://www.wyo.gov/about-wyoming>.

glacier flights, what had previously been a week or longer trek into the mountains became a quick, efficient flight.

The first ascent of the west buttress of Denali in 1951 illustrates this point. On June 18th, 1951, Dr. Terris Moore, then president of the University of Alaska, fired up his Super Cub 125, a small fixed-wing aircraft, on the shore of Chelatna Lake approximately one hundred miles northwest of Anchorage, Alaska. As Moore started the plane, the engine sputtered then whirred at a mind-numbing, deafening volume. Moore maneuvered his plane into position, then sped down the gravel runway beside the remote Alaskan lake. In a matter of seconds, the small plane was airborne. Once airborne, Moore lowered a set of aluminum skis past the aircraft's wheels. As he steered the aircraft north from the lake, the massive bulk of Denali, the tallest mountain in North America, rose in front of him. In thirty minutes, Moore landed at approximately 7,700' on the upper Kahiltna Glacier beneath the towering flanks of Denali.⁷⁵ His landing strip was a vast expanse of snow and ice surrounded by summits laden with hanging glaciers and teetering seracs.

Arranged in the small plane with Moore was the geographer, photographer, and mountaineer Bradford Washburn and a load of equipment.⁷⁶ Washburn was no Alaskan greenhorn. He had led a number of expeditions in the territory during the 1930s including a successful ascent of Mount Lucania in 1937, which at that time was the highest unclimbed peak in Alaska.⁷⁷ In addition to Lucania, Washburn had made multiple trips to Denali including a trip

⁷⁵ For more on Moore's pioneering flight, see Fred Beckey, *Mount McKinley: Icy Crown of North America*, (Seattle: The Mountaineers, 2013), 132-138.

⁷⁶ A number of books cover the life, career, and climbs of Brad Washburn, see Michael Sfraga, *Bradford Washburn: A Life of Exploration* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2004) and David Roberts, *The Last of His Kind: The Life and Adventures of Bradford Washburn, America's Boldest Mountaineer* (New York: Harper, 2010).

⁷⁷ For the full story of Washburn's Lucania climb, see David Roberts, *Escape from Lucania: An Epic Story of Survival* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002).

to test cold weather equipment with the U.S. Army in 1942.⁷⁸ In 1951, Washburn was back in Alaska to attempt Denali from a different direction. He wanted to climb Denali by the mountain's west buttress, a route he believed promised easier and safer travel than previous routes.⁷⁹ Moore dropped Washburn off on the glacier before returning to the lake for his companions, Capt. William D. Hackett, Dr. Henry Butchel, and James E. Gale. Over the course of two days, from June 18-19th, Moore flew four round-trip flights from Chelatna Lake to the upper Kahiltna Glacier ferrying both men and supplies to the climbers' advanced basecamp where they awaited the arrival of the second half of their party and undertook some surveying work.

On June 23rd, as Washburn, Hackett, Butchel, and Gale were settling into their glacier camp, the second half of their party, Barry Bishop, Dr. John Ambler, Dr. Melvin Griffiths, and Jerry More, left Wonder Lake, to the north of Denali, in what Washburn described as "a miserable downpour." They were led by Carl Anderson and a pack-train of horses. The men crossed the braided McKinley River and made their way southeast towards Peters Dome. In the Straightaway Valley, Anderson left the men with enough supplies to make the final climb over Peters and Kahiltna Passes to where Washburn and the rest of the party had been dropped by Moore. After "zigzagging through a number of nasty crevasses" and climbing in terrible snow conditions that Washburn described as "steep blue ice covered with powder snow and breakable crust," the men arrived at the team's base camp on the glacier. Bishop and the rest of the team

⁷⁸ For more on Washburn's gear testing expedition for the Army, see Rachel Gross, *Shopping All the Way to the Woods: How the Outdoor Industry Sold Nature to America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024), 76. See also, Sfaga, *Bradford Washburn*, 95-110.

⁷⁹ For more on the party's reasons for being on Denali, see Bradford Washburn, "Mount McKinley: The West Buttress, 1951," *The American Alpine Journal* 8, No. 2 (1951): 213-226.

arrived one week after leaving Wonder Lake. They were “exactly on schedule” according to Washburn’s report. Although Washburn doesn’t note the physical and emotional state of the men upon their arrival, it is likely they were tired, hungry, and fatigued from their grueling journey across the tundra, through crevasse riddled glaciers, and over steep mountain passes.⁸⁰ And they still had a lot of terrain to cover to reach the summit.

The West Buttress proved to be a turning point in the history of Alaskan mountaineering. Although a few mountaineers, including Washburn, had experimented with using airplanes to access Alaskan mountains, glacier landings were not yet common when Moore landed his plane on the Kahiltna in 1951.⁸¹ Moore, however, demonstrated that a fixed-wing plane could be flown onto and off of the region’s glaciers without incident. In the words of Fred Beckey, “such air support ... forever change[d] the nature and tactics of most Mount McKinley ascents.”⁸² As access to the mountain became easier, more climbers traveled to Alaska to attempt the mountain. By the early 1970s the number of climbers on Denali had grown substantially. Whereas seventy-one climbers attempted Denali in 1969, one hundred and twenty-four climbers attempted the peak in 1970. Just six years later, during the bicentennial year of 1976, over five hundred climbers registered for the mountain. These numbers continued to climb through the 1980s until they leveled out at approximately one thousand climbers a year in the early 1990s.⁸³ Although part of the rising popularity of climbing on Denali had to do with postwar prosperity and

⁸⁰ The preceding story comes from Bradford Washburn, “Mount McKinley: The West Buttress, 1951,” *The American Alpine Journal* 8, No. 2 (1951): 213-226.

⁸¹ For an extended discussion of Joe Crosson’s pioneering 1932 landing on the Muldrow Glacier in support of Allen Carpé’s ill-fated scientific expedition, see Terris Moore, *Mt. McKinley: The Pioneer Climbs* (1967; reis., Seattle: The Mountaineers, 1981), 121-129. For Washburn and Bates’ flight with Bob Reeves in 1937, see Roberts, *Escape from Lucania*, 13-37.

⁸² Beckey, *Mount McKinley*, 135.

⁸³ See “Annual Mountaineering Summaries,” *National Park Service, Denali National Park & Preserve, Alaska*, last updated April 19, 2024, <https://www.nps.gov/dena/planyourvisit/mountaineering-summary-reports.htm>.

increased leisure time, airplanes made trips to the mountain logistically easier and shortened the length of a typical Denali expedition from an entire summer season to a single month.

At the same time, other developments in transportation made Alaska more accessible. For example, the completion of Anchorage International Airport in 1953 made it significantly easier to travel to and from southeast Alaska.⁸⁴ Whereas early Denali aspirants had arrived by boat, they now arrived in modern jet planes. Likewise, the completion of the highway between Anchorage and Fairbanks including the Talkeetna Spur Road in 1963 made the village of Talkeetna, where the majority of air taxi services were located, more accessible.⁸⁵ These developments meant that a climber could board a plane in Denver, Seattle, or Boston in the morning and be in Talkeetna that same evening. Theoretically, if weather and logistics lined up, they could be on the glacier beginning their climb the next day. The increasing ease of access to Alaska during these decades made Denali a sought-after prize for American—and international—mountaineers.

Pilots in the small village of Talkeetna began to cater to this new group of tourists. Don Sheldon and Glen Hudson were the first pilots to open businesses in Talkeetna after the village built an airstrip in 1938. Hudson opened Hudson Air Service in 1946, while Sheldon and his business partner, “Stub” Morrison, opened Talkeetna Air Service a year later. Initially, these men supplied the miners in the region as well as the hunters, fishers, and other people who wanted access to the Alaskan backcountry.⁸⁶ However, as mountaineering on Denali became more popular over the course of the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, the air taxis shifted their focus from

⁸⁴ Gail Phillips, “Historic Recap – Aviation in Anchorage, Alaska,” *Alaska Aviation Museum*, January 2016, <https://aamendowment.com/historic-recap-aviation-in-anchorage-alaska/>.

⁸⁵ “Talkeetna Area History,” *Talkeetna Historical Society*, Accessed September 5, 2024, <https://www.talkeetnamuseum.org/history-and-museum/>.

⁸⁶ Erinn Drage, “Understanding Stakeholder Perspectives of Aviation Tourism Growth in the Alaska Range: An Exploration of History, Change, and Sustainable Tourism in National Parks and Gateway Communities” (master’s thesis, Penn State University, 2021), 30. <https://etda.libraries.psu.edu/catalog/18823ead5587>.

prospectors and miners to mountaineers. At the same time, other pilots opened their own air taxi companies. For example, after working as a pilot for Cliff Hudson, Doug Geeting opened Doug Geeting Aviation in 1982.⁸⁷ By the early 1990s, there were four air-taxi services operating out of Talkeetna: Talkeetna Air Taxi, Hudson Air Service, Doug Geeting Aviation, and K2 Aviation.⁸⁸ Not only were there more air taxis operating out of the expanded Talkeetna Airport, but the air-taxis also began to purchase more aircraft and hire more pilots in order to meet the growing demands of climbers. Furthermore, the flight services hired a basecamp manager to live and work on the Kahiltna glacier during the height of the climbing season, from late-May to early-July. Throughout the 1970s, 80s, and 90s supporting and supplying mountaineering expeditions became an important business in Talkeetna.

The use of small aircraft dramatically reduced the amount of time, energy, and overall commitment it took to climb Denali. Using fossil fuels and fixed-wing aircrafts meant climbers could bypass tedious and time-consuming overland travel. At the same time, developments in regional, national, and international transportation made the mountains of southeast Alaska much more accessible to American and international climbers. As more climbers arrived in Southeast Alaska during these decades, this once distant place became more connected to other places in the Vertical West. Many climbers who began their mountaineering apprenticeships in the Cascades, Sierra Nevada, or Colorado Rockies aspired to one day climb Denali, the tallest mountain on the continent. Over the course of these decades, Denali became a magnet for mountaineers. For some, Denali became the pinnacle of their climbing ambitions. Fortunately,

⁸⁷ Doug Geeting, interview by Bill Brown, February 27, 1992, interview 93-02-02, Denali Mountaineering, University of Alaska Fairbanks Oral History Program, <https://jukebox.uaf.edu/p/2706>.

⁸⁸ Beckey, *Mount McKinley*, 271.

the mountain had become ever more accessible over the course of the twentieth century as airplanes whisked climbers from the region's metropolitan areas to the cold, hard glaciers of the Alaska Range.

Hangdogs: Sport Climbing in the American West, 1980s-2000s

At the same time that cars and airplanes expanded the Vertical West to include new and previously distant places, developments within the sport further re-made the geography of climbing in the region. Growing out of the climbing cultures of Yosemite Valley and Joshua Tree in California, Eldorado Canyon in Colorado, the Black Hills of South Dakota, and the Shawangunks in New York in the 1970s, a new cohort of climbers found satisfaction in the physical (and mental) challenges associated with rock climbing.⁸⁹ This new generation of climbers were more interested in difficult rock climbs than exploring mountain environments. Although many of these climbers also sought out wilderness climbing experiences during these decades, they prioritized cliffs and crags where good weather and easy car access allowed them to exert themselves on relatively short sections of rock. In the early 1980s, this focus on physical difficulty developed into a new—and eventually dominant—subculture that came to be known as sport climbing.⁹⁰ During the 1980s and 1990s, a whole slew of areas were developed in this style and became go-to destinations.

Sport climbing in the American West (and the United States, for that matter) began in a small state park in central Oregon far from the hotbeds of California and Colorado. When Alan

⁸⁹ For a brief history of the Stonemasters in Yosemite, see John Long, “A Short History of the Stonemasters,” *Climbing*, Accessed September 5, 2024, <https://www.climbing.com/people/stonemasters/>.

⁹⁰ Sport climbing differs from traditional climbing primarily in the type of equipment that climbers use. Whereas traditional climbers place and remove protection as they climb, sport climbers use pre-fixed expansion bolts to safeguard their routes.

Watts began to frequent Smith Rock as a high schooler in the 1970s, there were some other climbers in central Oregon but not many. Watts grew up in the small farming town of Madras, Oregon nearby the volcanic tuff of Smith Rock and the winding Crooked River. His father introduced him and his siblings to outdoor play and recreation, including rock climbing, at an early age. Although Watts initially wanted to be an alpine climber, he fell into rock climbing because of how close he lived to Smith Rock.⁹¹

Similar to other places in the West with exposed rock, Smith Rock had some history of technical climbing prior to the 1950s and 1960s. Yet unlike areas where climbing had caught on and become a cultural activity, Smith Rock's early climbing history was neither extensive nor significant to the larger culture. Although it remains unclear if indigenous peoples climbed the spires and towers of Smith Rock (Animal Village) prior to Euro-American settlement, the history of modern climbing at Smith Rock began in 1930s, though it did not really get underway until the 1960s.⁹² In these early years, only a small group of locals, some climbers from the college towns of Eugene and Corvallis, and the Mazamas mountaineering club from Portland visited the park. Most of these early climbers focused on summits and spires with an anything-goes attitude. With the summit as their focus, it was not uncommon for climbers to stand on each other shoulders or grab equipment to climb higher. By the early 1970s, however, free climbing had become more common, especially on the basalt columns of Smith Rock's Lower Gorge. At the same time, a few climbers began to explore the free climbing potential of the volcanic tuff of the

⁹¹ Alan Watts, interview by author, Terrebonne, Oregon, June 7, 2024. Interview in possession of author.

⁹² On indigenous stories of Smith Rock State Park, see Len Necefer and Tera Kerzhner, "Smith Rock is Animal Village," Patagonia, September 21, 2022, <https://www.patagonia.com/stories/smith-rock-is-animal-village/story-127115.html>. For an early history of climbing at Smith Rock, see Alan Watts, "Smith Rock History," 2-5, unpublished manuscript in author's possession.

main area.⁹³ Although Smith had its own climbing culture when Watts began to climb in the park during the 1970s, it was not yet a place known outside of Oregon's relatively small and tightknit climbing community.

In the 1980s, this changed in dramatic ways. After free climbing many of the established aid routes in the park, Watts began to wonder about the climbing potential of the soaring faces that had yet to be climbed. In his own words, he says,

I soon realized that any potential held by the blank-looking crags wouldn't be revealed by standing on the ground, so I started rappelling everything that looked promising ... It didn't take long to discover that the seemingly featureless walls of Smith Rock held a hidden secret - they weren't blank at all, instead studded with edges and pockets, large and small ... I realized that Smith might grow beyond my personal obsession into something truly special.⁹⁴

Inspired by what he discovered during his initial forays, Watts began to rappel down the park's vertical walls, clean loose rock, hand-drill expansion bolts, work out sequences, and otherwise prepare these rock walls for ascents. Watts's approach at Smith stood in stark contrast to the style in vogue in America at the time, which emphasized ground-up ascents without the pre-inspection of sequences or pre-placed gear.⁹⁵ Hangdogging, or figuring out moves while hanging on the end of the rope after falling, was strictly forbidden.⁹⁶ If you fell off a route, you were supposed to immediately lower to the ground and pull the rope. This ethic was dogma at the region's traditional climber centers like Eldorado Canyon or Yosemite. But at Smith Rock, Watts was removed from the centers of American climbing and generally free to proceed in whatever style

⁹³ Watts, "Smith Rock History," 5-8.

⁹⁴ Watts, "Smith Rock History," 9.

⁹⁵ For American climbing ethics and style in the 1970s and 80s, see Taylor, *Pilgrims*, 223-232.

⁹⁶ For a definition of hangdogging, see Taylor, 229.

he wanted. Though he received some pushback from some local climbers, Watts continued with his top-down development style.



Figure 2.3. The cover of *Mountain* in Jan/Feb 1986 which put Smith Rock on the map for American and international climbers alike. In the early 1980s, Smith Rock was still a backwater of American climbing, but by the end of the decade it had become a must-visit destination for climbers from America and the world. The developments at Smith Rock influenced the growth of climbing across the West in the last decades of the twentieth century as more climbers accepted sport climbing as a legitimate way to climb and develop their own areas in a similar style. Photo courtesy of Alan Watts.

By the mid-1980s, Smith Rock caught the attention of climbers from the surrounding region as well as the rest of the world. Although a couple of international climbers visited central Oregon in 1985 to sample the new routes at Smith Rock, a feature article in *Mountain* magazine written by Jeff Smoot with photos by Austrian Heinz Zak put Smith Rock on the map.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Watts, “Smith Rock History,” 11-12.

Alongside photographs of Watts climbing sun-drenched walls in a bright yellow t-shirt and aviators, Smoot declared Smith Rock to be “one of the finest rock gymnasiums in the country, with some of the hardest routes in the world.”⁹⁸ In the following years, people from around the region, nation, and world traveled to central Oregon for the sole purpose of rock climbing. Although climbers never stopped traveling to Yosemite Valley, Eldorado Canyon, and Joshua Tree National Park, many chose to visit Smith Rock, too. Eventually, most leading climbers of the day made their way to central Oregon, even if they disagreed with Watts’s approach.

Over the course of the 1990s, central Oregon became a destination for people wanting to take part in adventure recreation activities, including rock climbing. While the majority of people traveled to Smith Rock for short trips, some moved to Bend and Redmond to live close to Smith Rock. A few opened climbing businesses as climbing became a trendy part of the booming outdoor industry. For a brief period of time, central Oregon was the epicenter of the climbing industry in the United States precisely because of the climbing at Smith Rock.⁹⁹ Over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, a little-known state park in the middle of the Oregon desert became the epicenter of the American climbing scene. Its popularity has endured through the decades. Today, hundreds of thousands of people make pilgrimages to the birth place of American sport climbing each year.¹⁰⁰

What happened at Smith affected the rest of the region. As sport climbing became accepted in the 1990s, other climbers began to explore previously overlooked cliffs in their own

⁹⁸ Jeff Smoot, “Smith Rock: Central Oregon’s Crooked River Gorge,” *Mountain*, Jan/Feb 1986, 26. Alan Watts private collection.

⁹⁹ Alan Watts, interview by author, Terrebonne, Oregon, June 7, 2024. Interview in possession of author.

¹⁰⁰ “Smith Rock State Park: Master Plan,” *Oregon State Parks*, April 7, 2023, 11.

local areas.¹⁰¹ For example, Rifle near Aspen, Colorado; American Fork Canyon near Salt Lake City, Utah; and Wild Iris near Lander, Wyoming were developed during the 1990s using a similar style Watts and his friends used at Smith Rock. The major American climbing magazines during these years, *Climbing* and *Rock & Ice*, produced feature articles about these places with colorful photos of physically fit men and women moving gracefully over steep, brightly colored rock.¹⁰² These articles brought these new places into the limelight. In the late 1990s, a whole new geography of climbing emerged around sport climbing, and people began to visit these areas as well as the traditional western climbing venues.

Some people moved to the cities and towns near these areas to be closer to climbing. In a similar way to what happened in Bend and Redmond during the 1990s, many transplants arrived in these small western towns and cities in the early 1990s looking to build a life around the sport. For example, Lander, Wyoming, a small ranching and mining town on the southern edge of the Wind River Range, became a climbing town in the 1990s. Although Lander has long had a unique relationship to climbing, in part, because of the town's proximity to the Wind River Range—American alpinist Paul Petzoldt opened the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) here in the 1960s for this exact reason—the town gained new relevance during the sport climbing revolution of the 1990s. Todd Skinner, a charismatic and itinerant climber who grew up

¹⁰¹ American climbers hotly debated the topic of sport climbing in the 1980s and 1990s. While some believed that sport climbing offered a way to more fully explore the physical limits of climbing by reducing the danger, others thought this approach to climbing was an abomination of the sport. This debate reached its nexus during the American Alpine Club's annual meeting in Denver, Colorado in 1992 when the club hosted "The Great Debate" between sport climbers and traditionalists. A rather tame affair, the debate that evening settled nothing. Over the course of the 1990s sport climbers clearly won the argument as more areas were developed using sport climbing methods and "hangdogging" became a widely accepted practice. For more on this debate, see Taylor, *Pilgrims*, 229-231.

¹⁰² Megan Walsh, "It Starts at Impossible: American Fork Canyon and the Birth of America's Steep Revolution," *Climbing*, last updated November 1, 2021, <https://www.climbing.com/places/it-starts-at-impossible-american-fork-canyon-and-the-birth-of-americas-steep-revolution/>.

in nearby Pinedale, Wyoming, led the way for other climbers when he moved to Lander in 1990.¹⁰³ Skinner, his wife Amy, and a growing cohort of local climbers found excellent single pitch climbing on the bone-white limestone in the hills above town where they could train for ascents in the greater ranges of the world. In 1994, they started a climbing festival, The International Climbers' Festival, which brought people from around the U.S. and beyond to this small Wyoming town.¹⁰⁴

As word got out about the steep pocketed cliffs, wealth of undeveloped rock, and the surprisingly agreeable climate, climbers began to move to Lander.¹⁰⁵ Reflecting on the history of the town, local climber and guidebook author Steve Bechtel wrote, "Lander has grown from a small ranching community and mining town into a center for outdoor recreation. Many full-time climbers moved here in the 'early' days of the 1990s, only to stay on and become business owners or professionals. Buy a beer, cash a check, or get pulled over by a cop, and it's likely you'll meet someone who came here to climb."¹⁰⁶ In many ways, climbers who moved to Lander during the 1990s resembled ski bums who moved to ski towns across the Rocky Mountains during the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁰⁷ Whereas Lander had not really been on the map for postwar climbers other than as a launch point for trips into the Wind River Range, it became a place people moved to climb in the 1990s. Other western towns and cities located near sport climbing

¹⁰³ Steve Bechtel, "Lander – Climbing Capital of the Rockies," *Wyofile*, January 18, 2010, <https://wyofile.com/wyofiles-wyoming-lander-climbing-capital-of-the-rockies/>.

¹⁰⁴ Bechtel, "Lander – Climbing Capital"

¹⁰⁵ Although Lander is located at an elevation of 5,550' above sea level in the Rocky Mountains and experiences brutally cold winters, south facing cliffs in Sinks Canyon act like solar collectors, allowing climbers to recreate outside every season of the year.

¹⁰⁶ Steve Bechtel, *Lander Rock Climbs: A Climber's Guide Featuring Wild Iris, Sinks Canyon, and More* (Lander, WY: Elemental Climbing, 2015), 7.

¹⁰⁷ On ski bums, see Annie Coleman, *Ski Styles: Sport and Culture in the Rockies* (Lawrence: University of Press of Kansas, 2004), 173-180.

areas experienced similar dynamics during these years. As climber's shifted their focus from summits and wilderness areas to smaller cliffs and boulders, new towns, cities, and locales emerged on the map of the Vertical West.

Climbing Goes Indoors: Climbing Gyms in the Urban and Suburban West, 1990s-2010s

While sport climbing spread across the region during the 1990s and some people moved to small western towns and cities to be closer to cliffs and mountains, another development affected who climbed and where. After the country's first sport climbing competition at Snowbird, Utah in 1988, entrepreneurs across the region became curious about the appeal of climbing on artificial walls in indoor environments. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, these entrepreneurs opened the nation's first indoor climbing gyms. Over time, indoor climbing gyms appeared in every major city in the West. Urban (and eventually suburban) gyms furthered interest in the sport as events like the X-games spread interest in adventure sports, including rock climbing, to a whole new generation of Americans. In the 1990s and early 2000s, many westerners were introduced to the sport through indoor gyms. Eventually, many of these people found their way to the region's cliffs, crags, and wilderness areas, further linking urban and rural areas in a geographic web of outdoor recreation.

When American alpinist, Jeff Lowe, approached Texas oilman, ski resort entrepreneur, and mountaineering enthusiast, Dick Bass, about hosting America's first international sport climbing competition at Bass's ski resort in the Wasatch mountains near Salt Lake City, the two made an unlikely duo. Lowe was best known for his cutting-edge alpine ascents and extreme ice climbing, while Bass had become famous as the first American to climb to the highest peak on

each continent.¹⁰⁸ In the 1970s, Lowe was shaggy-haired and bearded, whereas Bass, a Yale graduate, was often clean-shaven and well-groomed. While they may have seemed like an unlikely pair to organize and host the country's first sport climbing competition, the two came together to do just that in the early summer of 1988. They hired a team of architects and builders to design and construct a 115-foot climbing wall on Snowbird's Cliff Lodge, found a major TV network to televise the event, and invited the world's best climbers to compete for cash prizes.¹⁰⁹ Over the course of two days, from June 11-12th, 1988, Lowe and Bass helped cement the shift that was already underway in American climbing.¹¹⁰ Although they maybe had some idea that the event would excite interest in the growing sport, they likely had no idea how much the event would affect the development of indoor climbing walls and gyms across the West.

A year before the Snowbird competition, the country's first indoor climbing gyms opened in the Pacific Northwest. In Seattle, alpinist Rich Johnston had become curious about what his rock-climbing friends did to stay fit in during the region's long, wet winters. When he asked his friend, Dan Cauthorn, about his winter fitness routine and Cauthorn laughed, he realized there might be some demand for an indoor gym where climbers could train year-round regardless of the weather. Johnston recruited Cauthorn as a business partner, and with the help of local climbers who they employed to build the gym's wall, they opened the Vertical Club in Seattle,

¹⁰⁸ On Lowe's career as an alpinist and ice climber, see Daniel E. Slotnik, "Jeff Lowe, Pathfinder Up the Face of Mountains, Is Dead at 67," *The New York Times*, September 11, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/11/obituaries/jeff-lowe-dead.html>. On Bass's life and climbs, see Bruce Webster, "Richard D. Bass, Ski Resort Developer Who Climbed Tallest Peaks, Dies at 85," *The New York Times*, July 30, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/31/sports/international/richard-d-bass-ski-resort-developer-and-climber-of-tallest-peaks-dies-at-85.html>.

¹⁰⁹ See "Press Release: World-Class 'Rock' Stars Meet in Utah," Box 11, Folder 11, Jeff Lowe Papers, Jeff Lowe Papers USU_ORA 017 Special Collections and Archives. Utah State University Merrill-Cazier Library. Logan, Utah

¹¹⁰ David Roberts, "Showdown at the Wall," *Outside*, September 1988. Box 2, USU_ORA 017, USUSCA

Washington on December 1, 1987.¹¹¹ Around this same time, Portland, Oregon climber Gary Rall returned home after a climbing trip to England where he had visited and climbed on an indoor wall in the city of Sheffield near the Peak District.¹¹² Like Johnston and Cauthorn, Rall saw an opportunity for an indoor climbing space in his rainy city. After talking with local climbers about his idea, Rall opened Portland Rock Gym in early 1988.¹¹³ Although neither of these gyms was particularly profitable during their first years, they became cultural hubs for urbanites who came to the gyms to train but also to socialize.

In the West's fast growing metropolitan and suburban areas, other climbing gyms opened in the following years. In the early 1990s, Yosemite climber Peter Mayfield opened CityRock in Emeryville, CA across the bay from San Francisco, while in the Denver-metro area two gyms opened in the early 1990s, Paradise Rock Gym and Boulder Rock Club.¹¹⁴ After these initial gyms, others open across the region's metropolitan and suburban areas. In a 1996 interview with a local newspaper, Casey Newman, co-owner of Boulder Rock Club, estimated that there were more than two-hundred rock clubs in the United States, many of which were located in the American West.¹¹⁵ Whereas the first indoor climbing facilities were conceived as a solution to the typically tumultuous weather of the Pacific Northwest, these other gyms were located in

¹¹¹ Interview with Rich Johnston, Lynnwood, Washington, June 4, 2024. Interview in possession of the author. Alan Watts, "Keynote Talk," Climbing Wall Association Summit, Portland, OR, May 17, 2024. Unpublished speech in possession of the author.

¹¹² Seth Heller, "Meet the Man Responsible for America's Climbing Gym Craze," *Outside*, May, 8, 2017, <https://www.outsideonline.com/outdoor-adventure/climbing/guy-quit-his-job-and-became-climbing-gym-pioneer/>.

¹¹³ Alan Watts, "Keynote Talk," Climbing Wall Association Summit, Portland, OR, May 17, 2024. Unpublished speech in possession of the author.

¹¹⁴ For CityRock see Interview with Rich Johnston, Lynnwood, Washington, June 4, 2024. Interview in possession of the author and "The Natural," *Adventure Sports Journal*, February 1, 2013, <https://adventuresportsjournal.com/the-natural/>. For the Denver-metro area climbing gyms, see John Burgman, "The 'Indiana Jones of Climbing' – CBJ Podcast With John McGowan," *Climbing Business Journal*, December, 14, 2023, <https://climbingbusinessjournal.com/the-indiana-jones-of-climbing-cbj-podcast-with-john-mcgowan/>.

¹¹⁵ Jim Hughes, "Profits: Climb," *Boulder Planet*, October 2-8, 1996. VF – Hiking & Climbing, Carnegie Library for Local History, Boulder Public Library, Boulder, CO.

places with ready access to outdoor climbing. For example, climbers in the Bay Area had long gathered at Indian Rock in Berkeley, while climbers in Boulder had many options to choose from, including the Flatirons, Eldorado Canyon, and Boulder Canyon as well as nearby Clear Creek Canyon in Golden.¹¹⁶ Nevertheless, climbing gyms prospered in these places. More importantly, they spread to other places in the West where access to outdoor climbing was not so near at hand. Over time, climbing gyms became many westerners' introduction to the sport. By the first decade of the twenty-first century, most western climbers learned the ropes in indoor gyms before venturing out to the region's vertical environments. This was a radical shift from how Walt Bailey, Herb and Jan Conn, and Fred Beckey learned to climb in the 1950s.

Gyms represented the latest evolution in the Vertical West. If much of this chapter has been about accessibility, gyms represented the ultimate accessible climbing environment. Yet gyms did not become the end for most people in the 1990s and 2000s. Instead, they simply became the portal through which new groups of westerners came to know the region, its lands, and its peoples.

In the 2000s and 2010s, climbers continued to flock to outdoor climbing areas across the West. While you might imagine that the climbers spread out across the region seeking solitude in the region's wilderness areas and parks, in fact climbers tended to congregate at specific places that had become canonized destinations of vertical adventure and recreation. Like Sutter's nature tourists, most climbers traveled to the places they had read about in magazines, seen in films, or heard about through word-of-mouth. By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century,

¹¹⁶ For a brief history of climbing at Indian Rock, see Ally Markovich, "How Berkeley's famous boulders took rock climbing to new heights," *Berkeleyside*, December 7, 2023, <https://www.berkeleyside.org/2023/12/07/rock-climbing-indian-rock-mortar-rock>.

whether or not these places could sustain the increasing numbers of climbers remained an open question.

Conclusion

This chapter traces the evolution of the Vertical West from the years before World War II until the first decade of the twenty-first century. It argues that American climbers used new transportation technologies—primarily cars and airplanes—to access vertical environments across the region. These technologies, however, affected climbers' relationships with the region's high places. They began to frequent roadside areas in addition to backcountry and wilderness environments. Later in these decades, changes associated with the rise of sport climbing brought previously overlooked places to climbers' attentions. Sport climbing created a whole new geography of places for climbers to visit. Towns that had historically been ranching, mining, and resources communities, like Lander, Wyoming, became outdoor recreation hubs. Most recently, the rise of indoor gyms in urban and suburban areas has continued to make climbing more accessible. Most westerners now start climbing indoors before they venture outside. The effects of the rise of climbing gyms are continuing to unfold in our own time, though it's clear that these gyms have been instrumental in broadening climbing's appeal in the region. Whether by the road or deep in the backcountry, climbers became attached to these places both as sites of historical significance for their sport as well for the personal memories associated with them.

Over the course of these decades, climbing transformed from a niche recreational activity into a popular sport that captured the hearts and minds of many Americans. Many of the premier places to climb in the country were in the American West. As the number of places to climb multiplied, climbers spread out across the region driven by a desire to experience places that they

believed were unique and exceptional. Through climbing, they turned these vertical spaces into recreational places for themselves and fellow climbers. Recreation layered onto the meanings some of these places already had as sites of scientific knowledge production, national identity, and spiritual significance.

SELLING THE VERTICAL WEST: CATALOGS,
ADVERTISEMENTS, AND OUTDOOR
COMPANIES

By the end of World War II, Gerry Cunningham had grown frustrated with the army. He was originally assigned to the Tenth Mountain Division, the nation's mountain troops, because of his background as a skier and climber.¹¹⁷ Cunningham grew up in Utica, New York near the Adirondacks. Early on, his parents introduced him to the outdoors through hiking, mountain climbing, and skiing.¹¹⁸ As a high-schooler, Cunningham sewed his first backpack. Later, he made climbing skins for skis out of scrap pieces of pony hide that he got from a local farrier. He sold these skins to other skiers at his local ski hill, Gore Mountain, for eight dollars a pair.¹¹⁹ When he enlisted in the army, part of the appeal of the Tenth Mountain Division was the company's state-of-the-art climbing and outdoor equipment. Yet he soon discovered that the army's equipment had serious limitations. Reflecting on his service in 1970, Cunningham described carrying his army kit as "laboring like an elephant." He went on, "I received nothing in the Army which helped me in my business except inspiration."¹²⁰

After the war, Cunningham returned to Utica to chart his next steps. He was short on cash yet rich with ideas about how he could improve on the equipment he lugged around during the

¹¹⁷ For the Tenth Mountain Division, see Maurice Isserman, *Continental Divide: A History of American Mountaineering* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016), 260-268; Joseph E. Taylor III, *Pilgrims of the Vertical: Yosemite Rock Climbers and Nature at Risk* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 91-106; and Christian Beckwith, *Ninety-Pound Rucksack*, podcast, accessed November 13, 2024, <https://christianbeckwith.com/podcast-episodes/>.

¹¹⁸ "There really was a Gerry at Gerry," *OW*, May 2002, 8. Box 1, Folder 4, Gerry and Ann Cunningham papers USU_ORA 021. Special Collections and Archives. Utah State University Merrill-Cazier Library. Logan, Utah.

¹¹⁹ "Gerry Mountain Sports: A Climb To The Top," *Camping Trade Journal*, Winter 1970, 26. Box 1, Folder 6, USU_ORA 021, USUSCA.

¹²⁰ "Gerry Mountain Sports," 27. USU_ORA 021, USUSCA

war. Soon after his discharge, Cunningham purchased a Model A Ford and left New York with his wife, Ann, in search of a place to purchase some property, start a family, and open an outdoor equipment business.¹²¹ The Cunninghams could have driven east to the Green Mountains of Vermont, the White Mountains in New Hampshire, or the coast of Maine where outdoor entrepreneurs like L.L. Bean were already well-established.¹²² Instead, they pointed their car west. They intended to “visit all of the mountain states” until they found a suitable place.¹²³ They made it no further than Colorado.

Above the college town of Boulder, Gerry and Ann found a place that met all of their criteria. Nestled in the Rocky Mountains at 9,000-feet above sea level, Gerry and Ann purchased a small piece of land in the tiny town of Ward and set to work building their home and business. While Gerry built a sandstone workshop where he could tinker with materials and designs, the couple pitched their tent in an “aspen-shaded meadow amid the snow-capped peaks.”¹²⁴ In Ward, Gerry and Ann found a place where they could start a family, build their business, and continue to engage in the activities they loved: backpacking, hiking, climbing, and skiing.

In the Rocky Mountains, they also found an ideal place to build and test their new outdoor products. The rugged terrain and often violent weather of the Colorado Rocky Mountains proved to be the perfect testing ground for Gerry’s tents and equipment. Using nylon, a new material developed during the war, Cunningham sewed tents, parkas, and other goods that

¹²¹ Hal Higdon, “Man of the Mountains Sells to Men Who Climb the Peaks,” unpublished manuscript, February 23, 1965, 3. Box 1, Folder 5, USU_ORA 021, USUSCA.

¹²² For a discussion of L.L. Bean see, Rachel S. Gross, *Shopping All the Way to the Woods: How the Outdoor Industry Sold Nature to America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024), 165 and 190-191.

¹²³ Higdon, “Man of the Mountains,” 3. USU_ORA 021, USUSCA.

¹²⁴ Roger W. Benedict, “Climb To Success,” *Men: Your Goodyear Dealer’s Magazine* 13, no. 2, 1958, 6. Box 1, Folder 4, USU_ORA 021, USUSCA.

could withstand the ferocious winds and storms of the world's harshest environments.¹²⁵ After his tents stood up to a particularly horrendous storm on K2, the second-tallest mountain in the world, a group of American climbers headed for Makalu, another 8,000-meter peak in the Himalaya, specifically requested Gerry's tents.¹²⁶ In 1963, yet another team of top American climbers, this time bound for Mount Everest, also requested Gerry's tents.¹²⁷ Over the course of the 1950s and 1960s, Cunningham became known among the American mountaineering community for his rugged yet lightweight equipment. Living in Colorado's high peaks allowed Cunningham to create and test products that America's top mountaineers found indispensable.

¹²⁵ For nylon, see Higdon, "Man of the Mountains," 3. USU_ORA 021, USUSCA. Also, see Gross, *Shopping*, 81-82, 89, and 104-105 as well as Isserman, *Continental Divide*, 264.

¹²⁶ Benedict, "Climb to Success," 6. USU_ORA 021, USUSCA.

¹²⁷ FJ, "High Country Means Business to Gerry," *The Plainsman*, April-May 1965, 30-31. Box 1, Folder 4, USU_ORA 021, USUSCA.

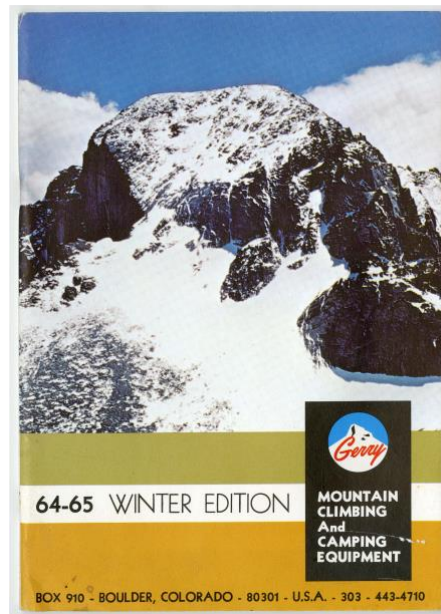


Figure 3.1. Gerry Mountaineering catalog from 1964-1965 featuring Longs Peak in Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado. Ann and Gerry Cunningham moved to Colorado from New York to open an outdoor equipment business after Gerry was discharged from the army at the end of World War II. In the Rocky Mountains, the Cunninghams found the ideal place to design, manufacture, and test their lightweight outdoor equipment. Photo courtesy Utah State University Digital Exhibits.

As word spread about Gerry's equipment, the business grew from a small, mail-order operation with a single employee into a multi-store operation with countless employees and a comfortable profit margin. In 1958, Cunningham moved his business from the small, sandstone workshop in Ward into the bustling college town of Boulder.¹²⁸ While he continued to sew products for America's top alpinists, more casual recreationists also sought out Cunningham's equipment. These were the years of the skiing, backpacking, and climbing boom. "It sometimes appeared, wrote Pacific Northwest historian and writer Harvey Manning, "that all 179,323,175 Americans ... were spinning their wheels at once, headed for campgrounds, trailheads and ski

¹²⁸ "Mountaineers Open Climbing-Gear Store," *The Denver Post*, July 2, 1958. Box 1, USU_ORA 021, USUSCA.

hills.”¹²⁹ As more Americans became interested in outdoor recreation, some purchased equipment that made their excursions into the wilderness more comfortable and, by extension, enjoyable.¹³⁰ Although army surplus was a favorite among certain groups because it was cheap and durable, other Americans began to discover the luxuries of lightweight equipment.¹³¹ Even though this equipment was more expensive, some believed the benefits outweighed the costs. By the mid-1960s, the Cunninghams had retail outlets in Boulder, Denver, and Estes Park as well as Ogden, Utah and Jackson Hole, Wyoming.¹³² By 1969, Gerry Mountain Sports was grossing approximately three million dollars a year.¹³³

While Cunningham may have been one of the first entrepreneurs to launch into the climbing and mountaineering market after World War II, he was not alone. Other men and women opened business in the 1950s and 1960s that catered to Americans’ burgeoning interest in outdoor sports, including climbing and mountaineering. Many of these entrepreneurs started their businesses in the West’s fast growing metropolitan areas where climbing and mountaineering were already established pastimes.¹³⁴ Places like Boulder, Seattle, Los Angeles, and San Francisco became the early centers of the postwar outdoor equipment industry because they already had populations of climbers and mountaineers. Most were members of western mountaineering clubs.¹³⁵ As rock-climbing and mountaineering grew into accepted, popular

¹²⁹ Harvey Manning, *REI: 50 Years of Climbing Together* (Recreational Equipment inc., 1988), 55.

¹³⁰ Gross, *Shopping*, 166.

¹³¹ For army surplus, see Gross, 91-114.

¹³² “Gerry Mountain Sports Plans Open House In New Location,” May 23, 1962, Box 1, USU_ORA 021, USUSCA.

¹³³ “There really was a Gerry at Gerry,” *OW*, May 2002, 8. Box 1, Folder 4, USU_ORA 021, USUSCA.

¹³⁴ For the relationship between western urban areas and these outdoor recreation companies, see Gross, *Shopping*, 120 and 145.

¹³⁵ For a short history of western mountaineering clubs, see Gordon Sayre, “Urban Climbers in the Wilderness: Mounts Hood, Rainier, and Shasta and the History of Popular Mountaineering,” in *Imagining the Big Open: Nature, Identity, and Play in the New West*, eds. Liza Nichols, Elaine M. Bapis, and Thomas J. Harvey (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2003), 92-110.

recreational activities, more climbers decided to get into the equipment and clothing business. Like other postwar Americans, climbers participated in the consumer economy and culture.¹³⁶ Over the course of the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, the industry spread to places like Salt Lake City, Utah and eastern Oregon.

As these businesses grew, they promoted western environments to a growing number of Americans who participated in outdoor sports. To market and sell their products, many companies used images from their local and regional climbing areas. In catalogs and advertisements, images of western nature appeared alongside sleek, innovative equipment and attractive human models. Many of these advertisements featured employees and athletes in stunning western environments. Companies like Gerry Mountaineering, Holubar Mountaineering, REI, Chouinard Equipment, and Black Diamond supplied climbers with the products they needed to safely ascend soaring big walls, snow-covered mountains, and frozen waterfalls, but they also supplied climbers with an endless stream of images of western environments that enticed them to buy their products and visit these iconic venues. By using images of western nature to market and sell their products, these companies furthered the idea that the West was the premier place for climbing and mountaineering in America. They implicitly suggested to customers that western vertical environments were, above all else, places for adventure and recreation. These advertisements and marketing materials captured the minds of climbers in America and around the world.

¹³⁶ On postwar consumers, see Gross, *Shopping*, 115-116. Also, see Paul S. Sutter, *Driven Wild: How the Fight Against Automobiles Launched the Modern Wilderness Movement* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), 26-27.

Like the boosters of old, these postwar mountaineering companies contributed to ideas about the region that had been circulating since the mid-nineteenth century. Beginning in these decades, many Americans came to associate the West with mythic ideas about nature and wilderness.¹³⁷ Developments in aesthetics like the grand landscape paintings of Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran as well as the photographs of William Henry Jackson brought the West to Americans living in the South, Midwest, and East.¹³⁸ During these same decades, the writings of American explorers and mountaineers like John C. Fremont, Clarence King, and John Muir popularized western mountain environments to a literary American public.¹³⁹ For scores of Americans, Teddy Roosevelt's writings on the strenuous life cemented the notion that the West was the place to encounter rugged nature and make oneself into a strong citizen.¹⁴⁰ When the railroads and national parks joined forces to package and sell the West's scenery as the quintessential American vacation, they simply added to the mythology surrounding western nature.¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" and Other Essays*, ed. John Mack Faragher (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1994), 31-60 and Kevin Blake, "Making Mythic Landscapes," in *North American Odyssey: Historical Geographies for the Twenty-first Century*, eds. Craig E. Colten and Geoffrey L. Buckley (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 251-271.

¹³⁸ Anne Farrar Hyde, *An American Vision: Far Western Landscape and National Culture, 1820-1920* (New York: New York University Press, 1991) and William H. Goetzmann and William N. Goetzmann, *The West of the Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009).

¹³⁹ For Fremont, see Andrew Menard, *Sight Unseen: How Fremont's First Expedition Changed the American Landscape* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012) and Isserman, *Continental Divide*, 51-55. For King and Muir, see Caroline Schaumann, *Peak Pursuits: The Emergence of Mountaineering in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 233-287.

¹⁴⁰ Theodore Roosevelt, "The Strenuous Life," *Voices of Democracy: The U.S. Oratory Project*, Department of Communication, University of Maryland, Accessed November 18, 2024, <https://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/roosevelt-strenuous-life-1899-speech-text/>. See also, Michael L. Johnson, *Hunger for the Wild: America's Obsession with the Untamed West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 204-213.

¹⁴¹ For more on railroads and national parks, see Marguerite S. Schaffer, *See America First: Tourism and National Identity, 1880-1940* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 7-129 and Alfred Runte, *National Parks: The American Experience*, 4th ed. (New York: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2010), 75-97.

The West as the nation's nature retreat was not a new idea at the end of World War II. In many ways, postwar outdoor equipment companies trafficked in similar tropes as these earlier boosters, yet they updated them for a newer clientele. Over the course of these decades, outdoor equipment companies sold more than just equipment. Together, they sold the idea that the West was *the* American region for outdoor play and adventure. By promoting the West as the place for mountain play and recreation, these companies affected how people thought about and interacted with the lands, nature, and peoples of the region. When climbers either travelled or moved West, they came with specific ideas already in mind. As these catalogs and advertisements argued, the West was a region of stunning natural beauty and strenuous physical play.

Holubar Mountaineering: Making Boulder, Colorado into a Climbing Town

Alongside the Cunninghams, other people opened climbing equipment businesses in Boulder, Colorado after the war. In 1947, LeRoy and Alice Holubar sent their first equipment catalog out to potential customers. This catalog was little more than a few pieces of typed paper stapled together. On the first page of the booklet, the Holubars explained their reason for business. They wrote, "We are making an effort to supply climbing equipment of quality, as economically as possible, and are offering here our price list. We like mountaineering; do it ourselves. With the recent rapid growth of the sport of climbing, we have been supplying reliable equipment [to climbers]." ¹⁴² Like Gerry and Ann Cunningham, the Holubars responded to the growing interest in climbing and mountaineering by offering climbers the equipment they needed

¹⁴² "First Holubar Catalog. 1947," Holubar Mountaineering Collection, Box 2, Folder 2-3, Carnegie Library for Local Research, Boulder Public Library, Boulder, Colorado.

to scale cliffs, boulders, and mountains. As active members of the Colorado Mountain Club, the Holubars had a sense of how the sport was growing as well as what equipment these men and women desired.¹⁴³

The first booklet was quite rudimentary. It was divided into different categories with lists of items for sale. Each product had a short description and price. Initially, the Holubars offered their customers a selection of boots, crampons, ice axes, ropes, karabiners, pitons, tents, winter hats, instructional booklets, stoves, packs, and sleeping bags for sale. Many of the items included in the catalog were Army surplus. The initial booklet contained no images or pictures.¹⁴⁴

By 1950, the Holubars had expanded their offerings and revamped their catalog. Instead of *a* small typed booklet, the Holubars opted for a larger format with photographs. The cover of the catalog featured a *photo* of a climber rappelling off The Maiden, a rock formation in the Flatirons south of Boulder, while the inside cover had a photo of the Holubars at camp in the Wind River Range in Wyoming. These photographs lent the Holubars authority as outdoor retailers. By including photographs of themselves (and others) in iconic Western landscapes, the Holubars established themselves as authentic mountaineers. In addition to the photographs, they wrote about their personal trips and climbing in a short note to their customers. In *a short note on the first page of the catalog*, they wrote, “We ourselves are devoted to mountaineering and pack into the many mountains here in Colorado at every opportunity. Within walking distance of our home, the foothills of the Front Range are a playground for hiker and rock climber. Our cover

¹⁴³ Gross, *Shopping*, 118-119.

¹⁴⁴ “First Holubar Catalog. 1947,” Holubar Mountaineering Collection, Box 2, Folder 2-3, Carnegie Library for Local Research, Boulder Public Library, Boulder, Colorado.

picture was taken on a climb of 'The Maiden,' an unusual rock a few miles to the south."¹⁴⁵

While the Holubars were in the business of selling gear to climbers, they also sold climbers on the idea that *the Front Range of Colorado* was an ideal place to be a climber. Although Colorado had been touted as one of nation's premier *mountain recreation destinations* since the turn of the twentieth century, the Holubars reminded customers that *Colorado* climbers enjoyed unparalleled access to vertical environments.

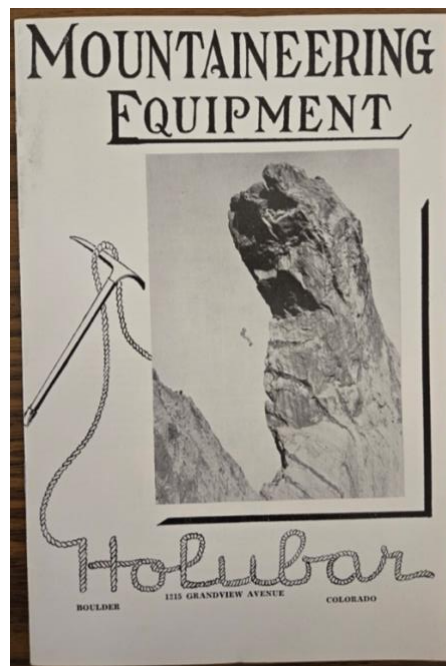


Figure 3.2. Holubar Mountaineering catalog from 1950 featuring a climber rappelling off "The Maiden" in the Flatirons south of Boulder, Colorado. The Holubars were among some of the first outdoor industry entrepreneurs in the West. They frequently used images of local climbing areas near their home in Boulder, Colorado in their catalogs. Photo courtesy Carnegie Library for Local History, Boulder Public Library.

¹⁴⁵ "Mountaineering Equipment—Holubar," Holubar Mountaineering Collection, Box 2, Folder 2-1, Carnegie Library for Local Research, Boulder Public Library, Boulder, Colorado.

Later catalogs also featured western landscapes and made similar rhetorical arguments. For example, a photo of American mountaineer Paul Petzoldt on Mount Owen in the Tetons, Wyoming graced the cover of the 1952 catalog.¹⁴⁶ In the photograph, Petzoldt is spread-eagled across a rock chimney, the climbing rope dangling from his waist. A piton hammer hangs from his right wrist while Petzoldt gazes intently upward. Sunlight touches the very top of Petzoldt's head while the right side of the chimney glows in what we can assume is early morning light. Before even opening the catalog, the reader has encountered a picture of one of America's best alpinists in an iconic western mountain environment.¹⁴⁷ That the photograph was taken by Elizabeth S. Cowles, another leading climber in the 1940s and 1950s, only adds to the Holubars' authority as purveyors of outdoor equipment.¹⁴⁸ The subtext of this catalog is clear: the best American climbers use Holubar gear and they live and play in the Rocky Mountains.

¹⁴⁶ "Mountaineering Equipment—Holubar," Holubar Mountaineering Collection, Box 2, Folder 2-1, Carnegie Library for Local Research, Boulder Public Library, Boulder, Colorado.

¹⁴⁷ For Paul Petzoldt's accomplishments, including his role in the American expedition to K2 in 1938, see Maurice Isserman, *Continental Divide: A History of American Mountaineering* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016), 161-162, 206, 244-251.

¹⁴⁸ For a brief history of Elizabeth ("Betsy") S. Cowles Partridge, see Janet Robertson, *The Magnificent Mountain Women: Adventures in the Colorado Rockies* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 143-151. Also, see "No Mountain Too High: The Climbs of Betsy Cowles Partridge," *Discover History: The blog of the American Heritage Center*, November 28, 2018, <https://ahcwyo.org/2018/11/28/no-mountain-too-high-the-climbs-of-betsy-cowles-partridge/>.

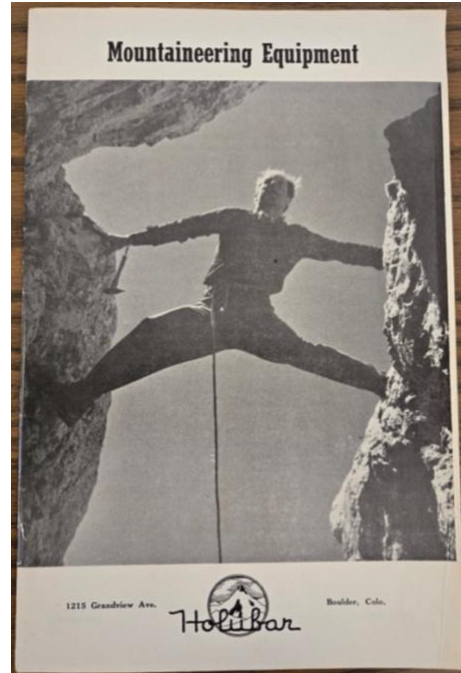


Figure 3.3. 1952 Holubar Mountaineering catalog featuring American alpinist Paul Petzoldt on Mount Owen in the Tetons. While the Holubars often featured Colorado landscapes, they also used images of climbers in other western mountain ranges in their marketing materials. Photo courtesy Carnegie Library for Local History, Boulder Public Library.

Together, the Holubars and Cunninghams helped place Boulder on the map for postwar climbers.¹⁴⁹ Although Colorado was already known as a state with excellent climbing by this time, these entrepreneurs furthered the association between Boulder and mountain climbing.¹⁵⁰ Not only did they sell ideas about western nature to their customers, but they also created places for climbers to gather. Their workshops and retail stores became magnets for climbers during these decades.¹⁵¹ As new climbers arrived in Boulder to attend the University of Colorado or live

¹⁴⁹ Rachel Gross makes a similar argument about the role of these companies played in the growth of the climbing community in Boulder, Colorado after World War II. See Gross, *Shopping*, 120.

¹⁵⁰ For histories of early mountaineering and rock-climbing in Colorado, see William M. Bueler, *Roof of the Rockies: A History of Colorado Mountaineering*, 3rd ed. (Golden, CO: The Colorado Mountain Club Press, 2000); Jeff Achey, Dudley Chelton, and Bob Godfrey, *Climb!: The History of Rock Climbing in Colorado*, 2nd ed. (Seattle: The Mountaineers Books, 2002), 10-23; and Ruth Alexander, *Democracy's Mountain: Longs Peak and the Unfulfilled Promise of America's National Parks* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2023), 14-68.

¹⁵¹ Gross, *Shopping*, 127-133.

close to the cliffs, canyons, and mountains of the Front Range, these couples gave many of these newly arrived transplants a place to meet like-minded individuals and build community.

Occasionally, they would also give them jobs. While the Holubars and Cunninghams helped put Boulder on the map as a climbing town, they followed the lead of another outdoor equipment outfitter who was already well-established in the West. In many ways, these two companies modeled themselves after an outdoor equipment retailer that had gotten its start in the Pacific Northwest during the lean years of the Great Depression.

Recreational Equipment Inc: How Seattle Became An American Climbing Capital

In the 1930s, mountaineers in Seattle struggled to get quality climbing equipment for affordable prices. When Lloyd Anderson wanted to upgrade from an alpenstock to an ice axe, he went to the two stores in the city that sold mountaineering equipment, The Out Door Store and Eddie Bauer.¹⁵² Both stores had ice axes, but they were too expensive for Anderson who had little money to spend during the tight years of the Great Depression. Feeling dejected, he visited a different store, Cunningham's Ski Shop, where the shop owner quoted him a price of seven dollars for an Austrian ice axe.¹⁵³ Anderson jumped at the offer—less than half of what the other stores quoted him—and placed an order with the shop owner. Throughout the winter, Anderson waited patiently for his axe to arrive. When it did eventually arrive, however, the shop owner demanded twelve dollars for the axe, which turned out to be a Japanese imitation of lesser

¹⁵² Manning, *REI*, 2.

¹⁵³ Lloyd Anderson, "The History of Recreational Equipment, Inc. – A Cooperative," unpublished manuscript, 1980, 5. Recreational Equipment, Inc. records, Box 3, University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, Seattle, Washington.

quality than Anderson had ordered. Begrudgingly, Anderson paid the shopkeeper the requested sum and sulked out of the store.¹⁵⁴

Feeling shaken down, Anderson decided there had to be a better way to get quality mountaineering equipment. With the help of Rudy Amsler, a climber who had recently moved to Seattle from Europe, Anderson sent away for a catalog from Sporthaus Peterlongo, an equipment company based in Innsbruck, Austria. When the catalog arrived, Anderson deciphered the equipment descriptions from German to English with the help of his wife Mary, converted the prices from schillings to dollars, and placed an order for another ice axe. The axe that eventually arrived in the mail exceeded Anderson's expectations. It was of much higher quality than his Japanese axe. Better yet, it only cost \$3.50. Pleased with their initial order, Mary and Lloyd placed a number of orders with Sporthaus Peterlongo from 1936 to 1938.¹⁵⁵ As word spread among Seattle's small yet vibrant mountaineering community about the Andersons' European connections, they began to place larger orders with Sporthaus Peterlongo and supply Seattle's climbers with quality gear at affordable prices. In 1938, the Andersons along with twenty-three other climbers formed a co-operative with the purpose of ordering and distributing climbing equipment to co-op members. These events marked the beginning of Recreational Equipment Cooperative, a company that eventually grew to become one of the largest outdoor equipment retailers in the United States.

That REI began in Seattle is not a surprise. In the 1930s, Seattle was one of the hubs of American mountaineering. With easy access to the Cascades and Olympics, middle and upper-class Seattleites took a keen interest in climbing and mountaineering in the first decades of the

¹⁵⁴ Manning, 2 and Anderson, "The History of Recreational Equipment," 5.

¹⁵⁵ These sentences come from Manning, *REI*, 3.

twentieth century.¹⁵⁶ In 1906, a group of individuals formed The Mountaineers, a club dedicated to promoting mountain recreation and exploration of the “mountains, forests and water courses of the Pacific Northwest.”¹⁵⁷ The club organized around the conservation of the region’s exceptional natural environments and cultivated an active community of outdoorsmen and women who found joy, inspiration, and community climbing with each other in the mountains.¹⁵⁸ They promoted “the spirit of good fellowship and comradery among the lovers of out-door life in the West.”¹⁵⁹ In this way, they were similar to other western mountain clubs that emerged at the turn of the twentieth century. The Sierra Club, the Mazamas, and the Colorado Mountain Club all formed to promote mountain recreation and conservation among their members.¹⁶⁰ By introducing newcomers to the satisfactions of mountain climbing and creating places for mountain enthusiasts to gather and socialize, these clubs fostered the early mountaineering culture in the West. In addition, they gave rise to people like Holubars and Andersons who founded companies that furthered interest in rock-climbing and mountaineering in the region.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁶ For the relationship between class and the Mountaineers, see Matthew Klinge, *Emerald City: An Environmental History of Seattle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 164-170.

¹⁵⁷ Jim Kjeldsen, *The Mountaineers: A History* (Seattle: The Mountaineers, 1998), 9.

¹⁵⁸ On the inclusion of women in The Mountaineers from the beginning of the club, see Kjeldsen, *The Mountaineers*, 14-16. For a broader perspective of women’s roles in early American mountaineering clubs, see Susan Schrepfer, *Nature’s Altars: Mountains, Gender, and American Environmentalism* (Lawrence: the University Press of Kansas, 2005).

¹⁵⁹ Kjeldsen, 9-10.

¹⁶⁰ For histories of these other clubs, see Michael P. Cohen, *The History of the Sierra Club, 1892-1970* (Sierra Club Books, 1988); Hugh E. Kingery, *The Colorado Mountain Club: The First Seventy-Five Years of a Highly Individual Corporation, 1912-1987* (Evergreen: Cordillera Press, 1988); and Sayre, “Urban Climbers,” 99-101.

¹⁶¹ Although Lloyd Anderson eventually became a leader in The Mountaineers, he did not initially seek the group out when he began climbing. Instead, he was involved with a group of climbers who eschewed the club’s protocols in pursuit of their own climbing goals and ambitions. Eventually, this group, known as the Climber’s Group, became part of The Mountaineers and held important board positions when they won elections in 1937. For more on the relationship between the Andersons and The Mountaineers, see Anderson, “The History of Recreational Equipment, Inc. – A Cooperative,” unpublished manuscript, 1-4; Manning, *REI*, 14-18; and Klinge, *Emerald City*, 168.

When the co-op began, it was a small operation tied largely to the Anderson family and The Mountaineers. The Anderson's stored much of the equipment in their basement until co-op members, many of whom were also members of The Mountaineers, came to retrieve it. After weathering the lean years of the Great Depression and World War II, the co-op exploded in popularity during the 1950s. In 1949, the co-op boasted 2,688 members, a sharp increase from the original twenty-three who originally formed the co-op in 1938. By 1956, the co-op had added another 6,842 members and had 9,530 total members.¹⁶² At the end of the decade, the co-op had a whopping 16,040 members.¹⁶³ The exponential rise in co-op membership can be explained, in part, by the rise of interest in mountaineering and backpacking that occurred across the Pacific Northwest after World War II. When renowned mountaineer Ome Daiber closed his retail store soon after the end of the war, the co-op became "the sole Seattle source of a full range of mountaineering gear," explained historian Harvey Manning.¹⁶⁴ In 1955, the co-op expanded into a larger retail space. After this expansion, climbers from around the Pacific Northwest made trips to the co-op's well-stocked shelves of climbing and camping equipment.¹⁶⁵ As much as The Mountaineer's headquarters, the store became a place where mountaineers from Seattle and surrounding areas gathered.

Other factors contributed to the co-op's explosive growth during these years. Most importantly, the co-op began mailing out a catalog to members in 1948.¹⁶⁶ The catalog was

¹⁶² Anderson, "History," 11.

¹⁶³ Manning, *REI*, 60.

¹⁶⁴ Manning, *REI*, 40.

¹⁶⁵ Manning, 61. See also, David Brewster, "Raking It In At the Co-op," Box 1, Folder: Publicity – Magazines, Newspapers, Recreational Equipment Inc. records, University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, Seattle, Washington; and Tom Stockley, "Seattle's Supermarket Of the Outdoor World," *Seattle Times*, November 26, 1967, Box 1, Folder: Publicity – Magazines, Newspapers, Recreational Equipment Inc. records, University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, Seattle.

¹⁶⁶ Anderson, "History," 10.

distributed across the United States. Early catalogs featured cartoons by Seattle mountaineer and co-op member Toly Kojev.¹⁶⁷ These cartoons explained the value of the co-op in humorous ways. For example, the back of the 1953 catalog featured a cartoon of two mountaineers walking somewhere in the mountains, presumably on their way to a climb in the Cascades. With pitons dangling from his waist, the lead climber takes big strides with a tidy backpack. Meanwhile, his companion, laden with a heavy backpack, struggles behind as sweat pours from his face and soaks his felt hat. The caption at the bottom of the cartoon declares: “You’ll Go Further, Lighter and Cheaper With The Co-op!”¹⁶⁸ Another catalog from this era features a cartoon of a climber hanging on a ledge as a mountain goat, an animal ubiquitous in the Cascades, glares at him with a threatening snarl. The caption for this cartoon reads, “Don’t Let Poor Equipment ‘Get Your Goat’ BUY CO-OP!!”¹⁶⁹ While the cartoons were certainly meant to make customers smile as they browsed the catalog’s pages for goods, the subtext of these cartoons was that mountaineers who knew what they were doing in the hills shopped at the co-op. Like the Holubars’ catalogs, the co-op’s catalogs helped distinguished the company as a place where people who were serious about outdoor play purchased their equipment. Climbers got the gist. The co-op’s business boomed. In 1950, annual sales were \$31,354. By 1959, this number had risen to \$299,013.¹⁷⁰ By the time Lloyd Anderson retired as co-op manager in 1970, the co-op was grossing over five million dollars annually.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁷ Manning, *REI*, 41.

¹⁶⁸ “Recreational Equipment Cooperative – Price List, February 2-,1953,” Lloyd Anderson Papers, Box 1, Folder: Recreational Equipment Co-Operative Catalogs 1938, 1940-45, 1950-56, 1963-67, University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, Seattle, Washington.

¹⁶⁹ “Recreational Equipment Cooperative – Price List, March 10, 1956,” Lloyd Anderson Papers, Box 1, Folder: Recreational Equipment Co-Operative Catalogs 1938, 1940-45, 1950-56, 1963-67, University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, Seattle, Washington.

¹⁷⁰ Manning, *REI*, 60.

¹⁷¹ See Manning, 93, 109-110

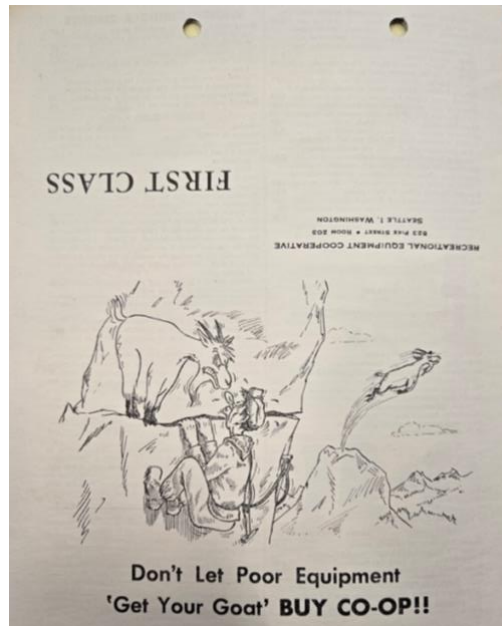


Figure 3.4. REI catalog from 1956. Early REI catalogs featured cartoons like this one by Seattle Mountaineer Toly Kojev. Later catalogs featured images of western mountain landscapes. Photo courtesy University of Washington Special Collections.

Beyond the growth of sales, the catalog spread the message of REI to climbers beyond the Pacific Northwest. The success of the mail-order catalog created a base of loyal customers across the nation—and world—who came to associate Seattle and the Pacific Northwest with mountaineering.¹⁷² Eastern, Midwestern, and Southern climbers envied Seattleite's access to quality mountaineering equipment as much as they envied their access to wilderness climbing areas like the North Cascades and Mount Rainier.¹⁷³ When climbers from beyond the Pacific Northwest visited the region, many made a pilgrimage to the co-op. Whether or not they needed any climbing equipment, they had to visit the co-op. As they browsed the shelves, thumbed the

¹⁷² For REI's distribution of customer in 1973, see Box 1, Folder: Membership By State, Recreational Equipment Inc. records, University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, Seattle.

¹⁷³ For an anecdote about a group of Harvard Mountaineering Club members who expressed their envy of a group of Northwest climbers they met in Canada, see Manning, *REI*, 47.

guidebooks, and ran their hands over the carabiners and ropes, they felt they had arrived at one of the centers of American climbing.

At times, the store seemed as much of a draw as the mountains themselves. The co-op's employees, including Jim Whittaker, the first American to summit Mount Everest in 1963, added to the store's appeal. Like Gerry Mountaineering and Holubar Mountaineering in Colorado, REI became a gathering place for climbers in the Northwest in the decades after World War II. All of these companies hired local climbers to work in their stores and created company cultures where recreation and business mixed. It was not uncommon for employees to climb together when they were not working. These companies helped grow their own local climbing communities, yet they also play important roles in the growth of the West as America's climbing capital in the second half of the twentieth century.

For all of their similarities, however, these entrepreneurs and their companies had different stories. REI continued to grow at an unprecedented pace throughout the second half of the century. The co-op opened stores across the West, expanded into other outdoor sports, championed environmental causes, and eventually became one of the best-known outdoor retailers in the United States. Meanwhile, the Cunninghams and Holubars were each out of the outdoor equipment business by the early 1970s. In 1968, the Holubars sold their company to a local businessman, Jim Kack, while Gerry and Ann Cunningham were completely out of the outdoor equipment business by 1971.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁴ For Kack's purchase of Holubar see, Pam Montgomery, "The Times They Are A-Changing," *Outdoor Retailer*, September 1987. Box 1, Folder 5 USU_ORA 021, USUSCA. See also, Gross, *Shopping*, 137. For the Cunninghams' exit from the outdoor industry, see "There really was a Gerry at Gerry," *OW*, May 2002, 8. Box 1, Folder 4, USU_ORA 021, USUSCA.

Although their stories are different, each of these companies demonstrate how supplying mountaineers and climbers had shifted from small-scale, personal business to a wide-spread industry in the decades after World War II. At the same time, they demonstrate how the center of the outdoor retail industry shifted West after World War II. By promoting the region's vertical environments and creating place for climbers to gather, these companies helped grow the mountaineering community in the region after the war. In the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, other entrepreneurs followed these companies' leads. Like these original companies, they used images of western nature to promote their products. As they did so, they created a powerful imaginary in which the West became synonymous with vertical adventure and strenuous outdoor play.

Chouinard Equipment, Patagonia, and the New West

Of all the climbers who started climbing equipment companies during the 1960s, one stood out above the others. Although short in stature, Yvon Chouinard came to tower over his peers as an entrepreneur and businessman. Yet in the early 1950s, Chouinard was little more than an eccentric young man from southern California with an interest in falconry and a yearning for exploration.

After one of the adults in his local falconry club, Don Prentice, taught him how to rappel, Chouinard began to practice his newfound skill on the sandstone cliffs of Stoney Point near Los Angeles.¹⁷⁵ At Stoney Point, Chouinard encountered a group of climbers from the Sierra Club who climbed on these small cliffs and boulders as practice for greater climbs in the Sierras and

¹⁷⁵ Chouinard, *Let My People*, 8.

other ranges.¹⁷⁶ This chance encounter sparked Chouinard's interest in mountains and mountaineering. That summer, as a sixteen-year-old, Chouinard drove a 1940 Ford he had built in his high school shop class from California to the Wind River Range in Wyoming. In Pinedale, a wind-swept town on the eastern edge of the mountains, Chouinard met up with Prentice and a small group of others to attempt a climb of Gannett Peak, the tallest mountain in the state.¹⁷⁷ Despite some hair-raising weather and some near fatal missteps on the steep summit snowfields, Chouinard succeeded in climbing the mountain. After this climb, he drove to the Tetons where he spent the rest of the summer scrambling, rock-climbing, and fishing.¹⁷⁸

His summer trip to Wyoming fed Chouinard's interest in climbing and mountaineering. When he returned to California at the end of the summer, Chouinard began to frequent Tahquitz Rock as well as Stoney Point. At Tahquitz, he met some of the leading climbers in Southern California, including TM Herbert, Royal Robbins, Tom Frost, and Bob Kamps.¹⁷⁹ These men took Chouinard on as an apprentice and taught him even more about rock-climbing and mountaineering. Eventually, Chouinard made his way to Yosemite Valley where he began to explore the big walls alongside his new friends and mentors. Beginning in the 1950s, this group of upstarts pioneered climbs in Yosemite that caught the attention of the global mountaineering community.¹⁸⁰ Although climbers from the Sierra Club had first explored Yosemite's spires and pinnacles in the 1930s, Chouinard and his cohort's climbs were more audacious than anything yet attempted in Yosemite. These climbs required serious imagination and vision.

¹⁷⁶ For more on the history of climbing at Stoney Point, see Cole Gibson, "Stoney Point: Portrait of an American Crag," *Climbing*, June 15, 2012, <https://www.climbing.com/places/portrait-of-an-american-crag/>.

¹⁷⁷ Chouinard, *Let My People*, 8.

¹⁷⁸ Chouinard, 8-9.

¹⁷⁹ Chouinard, 9.

¹⁸⁰ Steve Roper, *Camp 4: Recollections of a Yosemite Rockclimber* (Seattle: The Mountaineers, 1994), 11-12.

They also required new techniques and equipment. Necessity being the mother of invention, Chouinard began to forge pitons for himself and his climbing partners. The first pitons he forged came from “an old chrome-molybdenum steel blade from a harvester.”¹⁸¹ Yosemite climbers enthusiastically embraced Chouinard’s pitons because they could be placed and removed multiple times without deforming. This was a crucial attribute on climbs that required massive amounts of equipment to complete.¹⁸² Chouinard’s pitons were a significant upgrade from the Army surplus and European models that retailers like REI offered.

Word spread quickly about Chouinard’s new gear. Soon, he was also making carabiners on a drop forging die he purchased from the Aluminum Company of America in Los Angeles.¹⁸³ With the help of his father, Chouinard constructed a small workshop out of an old chicken coop in his parents’ backyard Burbank, California. Despite the growing interest in his equipment, Chouinard spent most of the year traveling and climbing. Like the Conns who worked odd jobs around the West to support their climbing habit, he was unwilling to sacrifice climbing (as well as surfing and fishing) for his business. From November to March, Chouinard made carabiners and pitons in his small workshop in Burbank. He split the rest of the year between Yosemite, Wyoming, Canada, and the Alps.¹⁸⁴ During these years, he sold his equipment out of the back of his car.

After reluctantly serving in the army in Korea, Chouinard returned to California in 1964 where he returned to climbing big walls and making climbing gear. As climbing and mountaineering became more popular, Chouinard’s business continued to grow. In 1966,

¹⁸¹ Chouinard, *Let My People*, 10.

¹⁸² Chouinard, *Let My People*, 10.

¹⁸³ Chouinard, 13.

¹⁸⁴ Chouinard, 13.

Chouinard recruited his climber partner, Tom Frost, and Frost's wife, Doreen, as business partners. While Chouinard and Frost focused on the design and manufacture of equipment, Doreen focused on the business and bookkeeping.¹⁸⁵ As the company's business grew, the trio decided to move the company from Burbank to the beach town of Ventura. Ventura appealed to Chouinard because it offered easy access to the ocean. He could surf before and after work—or whenever the surf was good. Although the Ventura was further away from the center of Los Angeles, Chouinard remained connected to the city's growing community of rock-climbers and mountaineers. Many of the company's early customers simply dropped by the workshop when they were in the neighborhood.¹⁸⁶ This casual business style only lasted so long. With the help of their neighbor in Ventura, Roger McDivitt, Chouinard and the Frost's opened a retail store next to the workshop and began a wholesale operation. Soon, Chouinard and Frost were sending their products to outdoor equipment suppliers in the U.S. and abroad.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵ Chouinard, 21. As we witnessed with the Cunninghams and Holubars, husbands and wives often worked together at these companies during this period. For more discussion on the roles that women played in these companies, see Gross, *Shopping*, 128-129.

¹⁸⁶ Chouinard, 23.

¹⁸⁷ Chouinard, 23-26.



Figure 3.5. Chouinard Equipment employees circa 1970s. Tom Frost is on the far left while Yvon Chouinard is third from the right. Chouinard Equipment became an important company in the postwar outdoor recreation industry particularly for their involvement in environmental causes. Photo taken from Yvon Chouinard, *Let My People Go Surfing* (Penguin Press, 2005).

Like the other outdoor retailers of this era, Chouinard started a mail order catalog in the 1964.¹⁸⁸ Initially just a typed list of goods for sale with prices, by 1970 Chouinard had expanded the catalog. The 1970 supplement to the catalog was a small pamphlet with more elaborate descriptions of the products, recommendations about how and where to use the equipment, and photographs of employees climbing.¹⁸⁹ In 1972, Chouinard and the Frosts released a catalog that revolutionized the genre. In the 1972 catalog, they placed equipment for sale alongside philosophical essays about the state of climbing and artistic photographs of climbers, mountains,

¹⁸⁸ Chouinard, 17. See also, “Chouinard, Great Pacific Ironworks & Other Gear Threads,” SuperTopo forum discussion, November 16, 2016, <http://www.supertopo.com/climbers-forum/2906806/CHOUINARD-GREAT-PACIFIC-IRONWORKS-Other-Gear-Threads>.

¹⁸⁹ “Chouinard 70,” Outdoor Recreation Catalogs collection, Special Collections and Archives, Utah State University Merrill-Cazier Library, Logan, Utah.

and gear.¹⁹⁰ This was a step up from the Holubars' or REI's annual catalogs. Because of the catalog's hybrid nature, it was reviewed as a book in the *American Alpine Journal* by California climber and photographer Galen Rowell.¹⁹¹

The 1972 Chouinard Equipment catalog popularized the idea of "clean climbing." This idea had been circulating in America since Royal Robbins visited Britain in the late 1960s and published two articles in *Summit* magazine about the topic.¹⁹² In the catalog, Chouinard and Frost alongside Doug Robinson, a fellow Yosemite climber, encouraged American climbers to replace their pitons and bolts with artificial chockstones and machine nuts because this equipment was less damaging to cliff environments. The 1972 Chouinard Equipment catalog marked the company—and its founders—as the aesthetic, stylistic, and spiritual leaders of the sport. In his review of the catalog, Galen Rowell commented that the catalog was "a work of art ... [with] more information on the ethics and style of modern climbing than any other publication in our language."¹⁹³ Gone were the Tyrolean hats, lederhosen, and piton hammers of the previous generation.¹⁹⁴ Real climbers now wore rugby shirts and carried a rack of hexcentrics and nuts around their necks. They climbed in Yosemite.

¹⁹⁰ "CHOUINARD," Outdoor Recreation Catalogs collection, Special Collections and Archives, Utah State University Merrill-Cazier Library, Logan, Utah.

¹⁹¹ Galen Rowell, "Chouinard Equipment," *The American Alpine Journal* 18, no. 2 (1973): 523.

<http://publications.americanalpineclub.org/articles/12197352200/Chouinard-Equipment>

¹⁹² For Robbins visit to Britain and his early interest in replacing pitons with nuts, see Royal Robbins, "A Visit To Britain," *Summit*, December 1966, 5; and Royal Robbins, "Nuts to You!," *Summit*, May 1967, 5-6. Both magazines in Patrick Callis's private collection.

¹⁹³ Rowell, "Chouinard Equipment," 523.

¹⁹⁴ On Tyrolean hats, see Gross, *Shopping*, 121-127.



Figure 3.6. Yvon Chouinard pictured in the 1972 Chouinard Equipment catalog. Chouinard's companies, Chouinard Equipment and Patagonia, influenced the development of the outdoor gear industry in the West after World War II. Although he was not the first postwar outdoor entrepreneur to equipment through a mail-order catalog, his catalogs became something more. By combining essays, quotations, and images with equipment, Chouinard created yearly booklets that resonated with many postwar climbers who embraced Chouinard's bohemian ideas adventure sports like rock-climbing and mountaineering. Photo from Chouinard Equipment catalog at Utah State University Special Collections.

For over a decade, Chouinard had been one of Yosemite's loudest boosters. In 1963, he authored an article in the *American Alpine Journal* about the state of Yosemite climbing. His article, "Modern Yosemite Climbing," discussed the particulars of climbing in Yosemite Valley, including his role as principal equipment maker and supplier.¹⁹⁵ He ended with a grand proclamation that the cutting-edge climbs of the future would be completed by climbers well-versed in the Yosemite style.¹⁹⁶ As a leading climber in Yosemite during these years whose

¹⁹⁵ See Yvon Chouinard, "Modern Yosemite Climbing," in *Ordeal By Piton: Writings from the Golden Age of Yosemite Climbing*, ed. Steve Roper (Stanford: Stanford University Libraries, 2003), 95-103.

¹⁹⁶ Chouinard, "Modern Yosemite Climbing," 103.

business was directly tied to Yosemite climbing, it makes sense that Chouinard trumpeted his home area as America's greatest climbing area. Likewise, given his history with Yosemite climbing, we can understand why he chose to regularly feature scenes from Yosemite in his company catalogs. Taken together, we witness how Chouinard promoted both Yosemite and his equipment to the wider American—and international—mountaineering community.

His promotional efforts paid off. In his own estimation, "By 1970 Chouinard Equipment had become the largest supplier of climbing hardware in the United States."¹⁹⁷ Yet the company was hardly turning a profit. When they began to sell clothing as well as equipment, however, the company's profits soared. The 1972 catalog offered a Scottish poncho called a cagoule, shorts and pants made of wool and corduroy, woolen mittens, and winter hats sewn by Emmy Spencer of Boulder, Colorado.¹⁹⁸ As the company expanded its clothing offerings in subsequent years—shorts and pants made from durable canvas, rugby shirts imported from the UK, and wool sweaters—the Frosts and Chouinard decided to split the company into two different divisions. Chouinard Equipment would continue to make climbing hardware while Patagonia would produce clothing and other soft goods.¹⁹⁹ When the Frost's eventually left in 1975 to open a photography supply business in Boulder, Colorado, Chouinard turned the operation of the business over to a long-time employee, Kris McDivitt.²⁰⁰ Under her direction, sales exploded. From the mid-1980s to 1990, sales grew from approximately \$20 million to \$100 million annually.²⁰¹ Chouinard's companies had grown from a small, single-man operation into an

¹⁹⁷ Chouinard, *Let My People*, 26.

¹⁹⁸ "CHOUNARD," Outdoor Recreation Catalogs collection, Special Collections and Archives, Utah State University Merrill-Cazier Library, Logan, Utah.

¹⁹⁹ On the expansion of the company's clothing offerings and splitting of the company, see Chouinard, *Let My People*, 33-36.

²⁰⁰ Chouinard, 37-39.

²⁰¹ Chouinard, 49.

influential national (and international) clothing and equipment company with appeal far beyond the outdoor community.

Chouinard Equipment and Patagonia helped define a postwar West of wilderness recreation and outdoor play.²⁰² Chouinard's companies promoted western lifestyles where play and adventure in nature were paramount. They sold the equipment people needed to participate in these sports as well as the clothing that would mark them as authentic, experienced practitioners.²⁰³ As a California company, they used images of their friends and employees in stunning—and oftentimes iconic—western environments to market their equipment and clothing.²⁰⁴ For example, Patagonia's Spring 1983 catalog featured a photograph of American alpinist George Lowe at 15,000' on Mount Foraker (Sultana) in the Alaska Range next to mittens, balaclavas, and other winter climbing equipment.²⁰⁵ Later in the same catalog, a photo of American rock-climbing star Lynn Hill at Suicide Rock, California appeared on a page advertising twill trousers.²⁰⁶ Other catalogs followed a similar marketing style.

²⁰² For Patagonia's role in the New West, see Michael Lundblad, "Patagonia, Gary Snyder, and the 'Magic' of Wilderness," in *Imagining the Big Open: Nature, Identity, and Play in the New West*, eds. Liza Nichols, Elaine M. Bapis, and Thomas J. Harvey (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2003), 73-91; and Andrew G. Kirk, *Counterculture Green: The Whole Earth Catalog and American Environmentalism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 198-203.

²⁰³ On the role Patagonia played in changing western style and dress, see Kirk, *Counterculture Green*, 203.

²⁰⁴ For Patagonia's use of friends and employees as catalog models, see "Capture a Patagoniac," *Patagonia – Spring 1984*, Catalogs, Henry S. Hall Library, American Alpine Club, Golden, Colorado.

²⁰⁵ "Patagonia Spring – 1983," 16-17. Gear Catalogs, Henry S. Hall Library, American Alpine Club, Golden, Colorado.

²⁰⁶ "Patagonia Spring – 1983," 46. Gear Catalogs, Henry S. Hall Library, American Alpine Club, Golden, Colorado.



Figure 3.7. Lynn Hill featured in the Spring 1983 Patagonia catalog at Suicide Rocks in California. Both Chouinard Equipment and Patagonia used images of well-known American climbers in western environments to market and sell their equipment and clothing. Photo courtesy American Alpine Club Library, Golden, Colorado.

Chouinard was not the first to use images of western nature to sell his outdoor equipment, yet his keen sense of style and design appealed to the postwar generation who had different ideas about nature, wilderness, and society than their predecessors. Chouinard understood the cultural shifts that were underway in the nation and region during these decades. As a dirtbag in Yosemite during the 1950s and 60s, he was keenly aware how postwar climbers had embraced bohemian attitudes and styles.²⁰⁷ To market and sell his equipment, he used images and text that appealed

²⁰⁷ On postwar bohemian attitudes, see David Burner, *Making Peace with the 60s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 113-133. For climber embrace of these bohemian attitudes, see Joseph E. Taylor, III, *Pilgrims of the Vertical: Yosemite Rock Climbers and Nature at Risk* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 133-217 and Isserman, *Continental Divide*, 300-329.

to the counterculture's desire for transcendence and authenticity which they found in wilderness areas and in adventure sports like rock-climbing. His companies reflected his engagement with the subset of the postwar counterculture that idealized nature and wilderness recreation as alternatives to conventional, middle-class American life.²⁰⁸

Yet a deep irony remained at the heart of Chouinard's businesses. As his companies became more successful, they turned activities that were reactions against conventional American values into consumable sports and lifestyles.²⁰⁹ Although rooted in a postwar western mountaineering culture that valued authenticity and nonconformity, Chouinard Equipment and Patagonia fueled the rise of an outdoor recreation culture in the West that increasingly revolved around consumer goods and tended to treat western nature as yet another commodity to be consumed.²¹⁰ Just as wearing a pair of canvas pants or shirt stitched with the Patagonia label marked someone as a real climber, so too did time spent in Yosemite, The Tetons, or The Wind River Range. Alongside carabiners, wool hats, and rugby shirts, Chouinard sold ideas about western nature to his customers. Through his companies, Chouinard promoted the West as a place where one could live close to nature through regular outdoor play like surfing, fishing, climbing, and mountaineering. American (and international) climbers understood Chouinard's message. During the second half of the twentieth century, they traveled or moved West in droves

²⁰⁸ For more on these social movements, see Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* 4th ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 251-254.

²⁰⁹ Lundblad, "Patagonia," 73-89.

²¹⁰ On the consumption of western nature, see Hal K. Rothman, *Devil's Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth-Century American West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998); Annie Gilbert Coleman, *Ski Style: Sport and Culture in the Rockies* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004); and William Philpott, *Vacationland: Tourism and Environment in the Colorado High Country* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013).

and stampedes, oftentimes clad in Patagonia clothing and carrying rucksacks full of Chouinard Equipment.²¹¹

Interlude: Jeff Lowe Goes Bust

Not every climber who opened an outdoor equipment company during these years proved a success. Jeff Lowe grew up in Ogden, Utah in a family that, like many other postwar western families, valued time spent in nature. At an early age, Lowe's father, Ralph, introduced him and his brothers to rock-climbing, mountaineering, and skiing. Under Ralph's tutelage, Jeff, his older brothers, Mike and Greg, and their cousin, George, became skilled mountaineers.²¹² When he was just seven years old, Jeff climbed the Grand Teton in Wyoming.²¹³ Together, the Lowes pioneered routes in Little Cottonwood Canyon, Utah south of Salt Lake City as well as in the Tetons and other places in the Rocky Mountains. As they became more skilled, they traveled and climbed in some of the great ranges of the world including Alaska, the Andes, the Canadian Rockies, and the Himalaya.²¹⁴

In many ways, the Lowes exemplified the new mountaineering culture that emerged in the West after World War II. They were urban westerners who lived in close proximity to cliffs and mountains. Rather than climb with an established mountaineering club, the Lowes preferred

²¹¹ As the historian Joseph Taylor pointed out in an article in the *Western Historical Quarterly* from 2003, the New West often looked a lot like the Old West just with different players. For more on these ideas, see Joseph E. Taylor, "The Many Lives of the New West," *Western Historical Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 141-165.

²¹² George Lowe, interview by Dave Krupa, "Denali Mountaineering," *Project Jukebox*, University of Alaska Fairbanks, May 31, 2000, <https://jukebox.uaf.edu/interviews/2911>.

²¹³ George Lowe, interview by Dave Krupa.

²¹⁴ The Lowe's lists of ascents are enough to make one's head spin. For a brief resume of Jeff's major climbs, see "Jeff Lowe CV," Box 2, Jeff Lowe Papers, USU_ORA 017 Special Collections and Archives, Utah State University Merrill-Cazier Library, Logan, Utah. For some of George Lowe's greatest climbs, see "Prestigious Award for Alpinist George Lowe," *Gripped*, October 16, 2023, <https://gripped.com/profiles/prestigious-award-for-alpinist-george-lowe/>.

to climb with their friends and started an informal climbing group they called the Steinfell Club.²¹⁵ With their friends, they climbed above their home in Ogden, Utah on small, quartzite cliffs in the spring, summer, and fall. In the winter, they scaled frozen waterfalls in nearby canyons.²¹⁶ On weekends, they would visit the Cottonwood Canyons near Salt Lake City or City of Rocks in nearby Idaho, which with the construction of the interstate highway system in the late 1950s and 1960s became easy drives. When they had more time, the Lowes drove to other regional areas like The Tetons and the Wind River Range. With easy access to many climbing areas, they progressed quickly. As their skills grew, they sought out more challenging routes and objectives. By the 1970s, they had become some of the country's most skilled alpinists.

Like others in their generation, the Lowes began to tinker with equipment designs and experiment with making their own gear. After sewing some backpacks in the family basement in the late 1960s, Greg and Mike decided to form a company in 1973.²¹⁷ Mike borrowed money to get the company started and decided to call the venture Lowe Alpine Systems. Soon after the company was incorporated, Mike bought most of Greg's interest in the venture and moved the company out of the family basement to Louisville, Colorado in close proximity to Denver and the Front Range.²¹⁸ Throughout the 1970s, Lowe Alpine Systems innovated a number of pieces of equipment essential to mountaineers. For example, the company created the first modular ice

²¹⁵ Dougald Macdonald, "Welcome to Paradise City," *Climbing*, September 25, 2013, <https://www.climbing.com/places/welcome-to-paradise-city-of-rocks/>.

²¹⁶ In 1971, Greg Lowe climbed Malan's Waterfall outside of Ogden. Many historians and journalists have pointed to this ascent as the beginning of a new era in ice climbing in the United States. See "Greg Lowe: The Man Who Changed Ice Climbing," in *Beehive Ice: A Guide to Utah's Ice and Mixed Climbs* (Pull Publishing, 2014), 54-55.

²¹⁷ "Trailblazers: Jeff Lowe and Brothers," *OutInUnder*, December 12, 2015, <https://www.outinunder.com/content/trailblazers-jeff-low-and-brothers>.

²¹⁸ "Trailblazers: Jeff Lowe and Brothers," <https://www.outinunder.com/content/trailblazers-jeff-low-and-brothers>.

axe where a dull ice pick could be replaced with newer, sharper picks as well as the first crampons with anti-snow plates, which they called footfangs.²¹⁹

During these years, Jeff worked as an instructor for Outward Bound, but maintained a connection to the company as a product tester.²²⁰ After he nearly succeeded in climbing the North Ridge of Latok I in the Himalaya in 1978 with his cousin, George, and fellow Americans Jim Donini and Michael Kennedy, Jeff convinced Mike to let him start an apparel and hardware branch of Lowe Alpine Systems. He named his new company after the Himalayan peak: Latok.²²¹ In 1983, Jeff took over the management of Latok. Similar to Chouinard Equipment, Latok offered a robust line of clothing and equipment targeted specifically to mountaineers. In 1984, Latok offered apparel as well as ropes, harnesses, rock climbing protection, carabiners, and other hardware.²²² Yet the company faced some issues immediately. In his notes from a December 1984 sales meeting held in Lyons, Colorado, Jeff noted that the public perception of the company was good despite some problems delivering goods to retailers.²²³ The company's issues only grew. Despite innovative products and Jeff's reputation as a cutting-edge alpinist, Latok struggled to remain viable. By the end of 1987, Latok had run out of money. That same

²¹⁹ "Lowe Alpine History," *Compass: Charting the Evolution of Outdoor Gear*, Accessed November 15, 2024, <http://www.outdoorinov8.com/lowehistory.html> and "A short history of Lowe Alpine," *Live for the Outdoors*, Updated November 24, 2022, <https://www.livefortheoutdoors.com/outdoor-features/discover/a-short-history-of-low-alpine-1934-2017/>.

²²⁰ "Trailblazers: Jeff Lowe and Brothers," <https://www.outinunder.com/content/trailblazers-jeff-low-and-brothers>.

²²¹ On the epic 1978 attempt on Latok I, see Michael Kennedy, "Latok I," *The American Alpine Journal* 22 (1979): 24-28, <https://publications.americanalpineclub.org/articles/12197902400>. For an article about the climb, see Geoff Powter, "Latok I: The Magnificent Failure," *Summit Journal*, July 4, 2024, https://www.summitjournal.com/blogs/scree/latok-i-the-magnificent-failure?srsltid=AfmBOoor_p9uR6L6_izIm177moPkEwomxWei0wj97iAh_yofol4rFpp6.

²²² For the companies offerings for 1984-1985, see "December 1984 Latok Sales Meeting," Box 2, Jeff Lowe Papers USU_ORA 017, Special Collections and Archives, Utah State University Merrill-Cazier Library, Logan, Utah.

²²³ "December 1984 Latok Sales Meeting," Box 2, USU_ORA 017.

year, Lowe Alpine Systems took over control of the company and paid all of the company's outstanding debts.

After his failure with Latok, Jeff continued his involvement with the growing climbing industry. He organized the first sport climbing competition in America in 1988, lobbied to get ice climbing included in the X-Games during the early 1990s, and directed the first Ouray Ice Festival in 1996.²²⁴ In 2000, Lowe started another apparel business, Cloudwalker, intent on capturing a piece of the high-end specialty outdoor market, which had only grown more lucrative in the years since the end of Latok in 1987. In his 1999 business plan for Cloudwalker, Lowe cited the revenue the of "specialty outdoor gear sales/services" at five billion dollars annually and noted that many "major players like The North Face and Lowe Alpine Systems [were] abandoning the hardcore specialty market."²²⁵ Betting on his name recognition as well as his connection to Lowe Alpine Systems, Lowe attempted to get back in on the outdoor apparel business. Cloudwalker, however, struggled from the start. Early in 2001, Lowe filed to dissolve the company in a Colorado court. He cited bankruptcy as his reason in the court documents.²²⁶

²²⁴ For sport climbing, see Box 11 and Box 12, USU_ORA 017. For Ouray Ice Festival, see Len Zanni, "Arctic Wolf Ouray Ice Festival," Box 6, Folder 29, USU_ORA 017. For X-Games, see Letter to Michael Ludemann, July 30, 1996, Box 4, Folder, 4, USU_ORA 017.

²²⁵ "Business Plan 2000, Cloudwalker LLC," Jeff Lowe Papers, Box 1, Folder 9, USU_ORA 017.

²²⁶ "Statement of Intent to Dissolve for a Limited Liability Company," Box 1, Folder 8, USU_ORA 017.



Figure 3.8. Marketing materials from Jeff Lowe's business plan for Cloudwalker in 2000. Despite his fame and recognition in the American climbing community, Lowe was unable to make this company successful. After less than a year in business, Lowe filed for bankruptcy. Photos from Jeff Lowe papers at Utah State University, Special Collections.

Jeff Lowe may have had a more impressive climbing resume than Yvon Chouinard, yet he proved not to be a businessman like Chouinard. While Patagonia ascended to the heights of American business culture, Latok and Cloudwalker barely made it away from the trailhead. Unlike Chouinard, Lowe was unable to turn his celebrity and notoriety into commercial success. Although the outdoor equipment industry boomed over the second half of the twentieth century, not everyone struck gold. Even if this was the New West, people and businesses still went bust in

dramatic ways.²²⁷ The outdoor equipment industry may have experienced exponential growth in the decades after World War II, but the ecosystem could only sustain so many companies. Unlike his peers, Lowe was never quite able to turn his career as one of America's most talented alpinists into business success.

"Go West, Young Man": Peter Metcalf and Black Diamond
Equipment

Not all postwar outdoor industry entrepreneurs were westerners by birth. Gerry and Ann Cunningham, for example, chose the West because of the region's exceptional outdoor recreation opportunities.²²⁸ As easterners who moved West after the war to pursue a life of outdoor recreation and adventure as well as start businesses, people like the Cunninghams contributed to the social and economic shifts that occurred in the region after the war.²²⁹ They furthered ideas of the West as the nation's outdoor retreat, mountain mecca, and playground by foregrounding images of western mountains in their company's marketing materials. The Cunninghams, of course, were not alone. Other easterners moved West after the war, motivated to start companies and recreate in the mountains.

Like Gerry and Ann Cunningham, Peter Metcalf was born and raised in New York. Metcalf was first introduced to the outdoors through Boy Scouts. As a teenager he discovered rock-climbing on a visit to the Shawangunks outside of New Paltz, New York.²³⁰ Metcalf felt an electric appeal to rock-climbing and immersed himself in the Shawangunks climbing community.

²²⁷ On the New West, see Taylor, "The Many Lives," *Western Historical Quarterly* (2004).

²²⁸ On the West as a voluntary region, see John Findlay, *The Mobilized American West, 1940-2000* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2023), 88, 94-107.

²²⁹ For more on how postwar migration to the West affected the social dynamics of the region, see Rothman, *Devil's Bargains* and Philpott, *Vacationland*.

²³⁰ Peter Metcalf, interview by the author, November 1, 2024. Recording in possession of author.

In the summer of 1971, Metcalf used five hundred dollars given to him after the passing of a great aunt to enroll in a National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) mountaineering course in the Wind River Range. Although Metcalf was only fifteen years old at the time and students were supposed to be sixteen years old to participate in the course, he lied about his age on the application form and was admitted onto the expedition.

His course in the Wind Rivers proved transformational. Because he was too young to drive, Metcalf flew from New York to Lander, Wyoming by airplane. He was picked up by his instructors from the small regional airport in Riverton, Wyoming and taken to the school's headquarters in the small ranching town of Lander, Wyoming. After packing his food and supplies for the month-long course, Metcalf set off into the wilderness alongside his fellow students and instructors. He had the fortune of being led by one America's most accomplished alpinists, Paul Petzoldt, who founded NOLS in 1965.²³¹ When the group went to climb Gannett Peak, they were joined by Don Peterson who had recently climbed Half Dome in Yosemite with Royal Robbins.²³² Surrounded by such legendary climbers, Metcalf dove headfirst into wilderness travel and expeditionary climbing.²³³ When the course concluded, Metcalf hitchhiked to the Tetons where he spent the rest of the summer climbing with a fellow student from the course.

Like Chouinard a decade before him, Metcalf's summer in Wyoming set the course for the rest of his life. He returned to New York to finish high school, yet spent as much time as possible climbing in the Shawangunks. During the early 1970s, many Shawangunk climbers took

²³¹ "Our Story," *NOLS*, Accessed November 15, 2024, <https://www.nols.edu/en/about/history/#>.

²³² Metcalf, interview.

²³³ Metcalf, interview.

extended trips out West in the summers to climb in the region's alpine arenas.²³⁴ Like a good student, Metcalf followed his mentors West. The summer after his NOLS course, Metcalf traveled to the Canadian Rockies to climb with Johnny Waterman, a former Shawangunks climber, who had moved West to pursue bigger and bolder climbs.²³⁵ Under Johnny's tutelage, Metcalf undertook a series of challenging climbs in the Canadian Rockies. His summer was capped off with an ascent of the Kain Face on Mount Robson, the tallest peak in the range.²³⁶

After a summer of climbing out West, Metcalf begrudgingly returned East to attend college. He tried a year at SUNY-Cortland and then Colby College, yet college did not stick with Metcalf. Rather than return to Colby after another season spent climbing in the West, Metcalf remained in Boulder, Colorado where he immersed himself in the Boulder climbing scene while working on a degree in political science at CU-Boulder. Although the Northeast had a vibrant climbing community, many serious young climbers in the 1960s and 1970s moved West because the mountains of Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, Utah, and Washington offered climbing opportunities that the Appalachians did not. In Boulder, Metcalf felt right at home surrounded by fellow easterners who had also moved West to be closer to rock-climbing and mountaineering.²³⁷

After finishing his degree and taking part in numerous expeditions, including a harrowing climb of the Southeast Spur of Mount Hunter (Begguya) in Alaska in 1980, Metcalf pondered his next steps.²³⁸ He wanted a career that would allow him to continue to climb yet also provide a

²³⁴ For Shawangunk climbers in the West, see Joe Kelsey, *A Place in Which to Search: Summers in the Wind Rivers* (Wilson, WY: Black Canyon Books, 2016). Also, see Metcalf, interview.

²³⁵ For more on the life of Johnny Waterman, see Michael Wejchert, "Before Nightfall," *Alpinist*, Winter 2015, 86-95. Metcalf, interview.

²³⁶ Metcalf, interview.

²³⁷ Metcalf, interview.

²³⁸ For the Southeast Spur of Mount Hunter (Begguya), see Pete Athans, "Hunter's Southeast Spur—Alpine Style," *The American Alpine Journal* 23, no. 55 (1981): 22-28 and Peter Metcalf, "Running on Empty," in *Contact*:

steady living. Metcalf applied for a number of sales rep positions at outdoor companies and eventually landed a position as the marketing and sales manager for Chouinard Equipment. Metcalf joined the company at a time when Yvon Chouinard wanted to spend more time focusing on his clothing brand, Patagonia, instead of running the equipment business.²³⁹

In 1982, Metcalf took over as the general manager of Chouinard Equipment. He worked closely with Maria Cranor, a climber from California who rejected her family's blue blood background to pursue a life of climbing.²⁴⁰ Together, Metcalf and Cranor improved the financial situation of the company. From 1982 to 1987, they helped Chouinard Equipment grow from less than a million dollars in annual sales to over seven million dollars in annual sales.²⁴¹ However, this was a tenuous moment in the history of the outdoor gear industry. Product-liability lawsuits as well as high insurance premiums made running an outdoor equipment company exceedingly expensive.²⁴² Even a successful company with a loyal following like Chouinard Equipment was not immune to these challenges. In early 1989, Chouinard filed for chapter 11 bankruptcy and asked Metcalf to explore ways to liquidate the company's assets. Rather than sell to an outside company, Metcalf rallied his fellow managers and employees as well as the company's network

Mountain Climbing and Environmental Thinking, ed. Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2008), 72-84.

²³⁹ Peter Metcalf, "Lessons Learned," April 1995, <http://www.cs.uci.edu/~wallingf/teaching/162/motivation/lessons.html>

²⁴⁰ Fort Maria Cranor, see Russ Clune, "A Climber We Lost: Maria Cranor," *Climbing*, Updated January 10, 2024, <https://www.climbing.com/people/remembering-maria-cranor/> and Julie Jag, "Maria Boone Cranor's death ripples through climbing, physics communities," *The Salt Lake Tribune*, January 27, 2023, <https://www.sltrib.com/sports/2023/01/27/maria-boone-cranor-black-diamond/>.

²⁴¹ For these numbers, see Peter Metcalf, "Lessons Learned," and Peter Metcalf, interviewed by Doug Wells, *The Bottom Line*, August 26, 2014, <https://kcpw.org/local-news/2014-08-26/bottom-line-peter-metcalf-black-diamond-ceo/>

²⁴² Peter Metcalf, "Lessons Learned." See also, Denise Hamilton, "Suits Force Mountain Gear Firm to File for Bankruptcy," *Los Angeles Times*, May, 11, 1989, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1989-05-11-we-3605-story.html>

of suppliers, distributors, and retailers to raise enough money to purchase the company from Chouinard.²⁴³

In December 1989, Black Diamond Equipment rose from the ashes of Chouinard Equipment. Rather than distance themselves from Chouinard Equipment, Metcalf and the other leaders of Black Diamond emphasized their connection to the iconic equipment maker.²⁴⁴ They kept Chouinard's trademark diamond for their own company brand. By emphasizing their connection to Chouinard Equipment, Metcalf, Cranor, and their employees positioned themselves to be the new leaders of mountaineering equipment in America.

As they set about creating their new company, they looked for a location where they could establish their brand and business. Whereas Chouinard had moved Chouinard Equipment to Ventura in order to be close to surfing, Metcalf envisioned Black Diamond as a brand for dedicated mountaineers, alpinists, and rock-climbers. Metcalf wanted the company to be located near quality rock-climbing, alpine climbing, and backcountry skiing. Like the Cunninghams who found Ward, Colorado to be an ideal place to design, produce, and test equipment, Metcalf wanted the company to be in a place where employees could remain active in their mountain activities and test the company's equipment. He believed that this arrangement would inspire product design and innovation—one of the company's core philosophies.²⁴⁵ Eventually, the search for a location came down to either the Front Range in Colorado or the Wasatch Mountains in Utah.²⁴⁶ After meeting with a developer in Park City, Utah, they chose Utah. When the deal with the developer for office and production facilities in Park City, Utah fell through at the last

²⁴³ Peter Metcalf, interview by the author, November 11, 2024. Recording in possession of author.

²⁴⁴ Metcalf, interview.

²⁴⁵ Metcalf, interview.

²⁴⁶ Metcalf, interview.

minute, Metcalf found a property in Salt Lake City, Utah that had been vacant for a number of years.²⁴⁷ In 1991, Black Diamond Equipment opened up its production facilities, offices, and retail store in Salt Lake City, Utah close to the foothills of the Wasatch Range.

In 1990, Black Diamond released its first catalog. Following in the style that Chouinard had introduced in the 1970s, Black Diamond's initial catalog included essays by leading climbers, information about how to use the equipment, and stunning photographs of mountain environments.²⁴⁸ Images of company employees hard at work and play graced the pages of the catalog. In other early catalogs, Black Diamond employees clung to vertical ice flows, squeezed themselves into rock chimneys, and flowed gracefully over stone.²⁴⁹ In each of these instances, the captions revealed the location to be somewhere in the American West. Like all of the other companies who had come before them, Black Diamond featured western environments in their promotional materials. Yet the company also featured iconic global mountain landscapes like the Himalayas, the Alps, and other far-flung destinations. By positioning western environments next to these historic and iconic climbing areas, Black Diamond furthered the idea that the West was the training ground for serious climbers and mountaineers in the United States.

²⁴⁷ Metcalf, interview.

²⁴⁸ See "Black Diamond Equipment, LTD – 1990," Gear Catalogs, Henry S. Hall Library, American Alpine Club, Golden, Colorado.

²⁴⁹ See "Black Diamond," *Outdoor Recreation Catalogs & Magazines*, Utah State University, University Libraries, Digital Exhibits, Accessed November 15, 2024, http://exhibits.lib.usu.edu/exhibits/show/outdoorcatalogs_a-f/company_gallery/black-diamond.

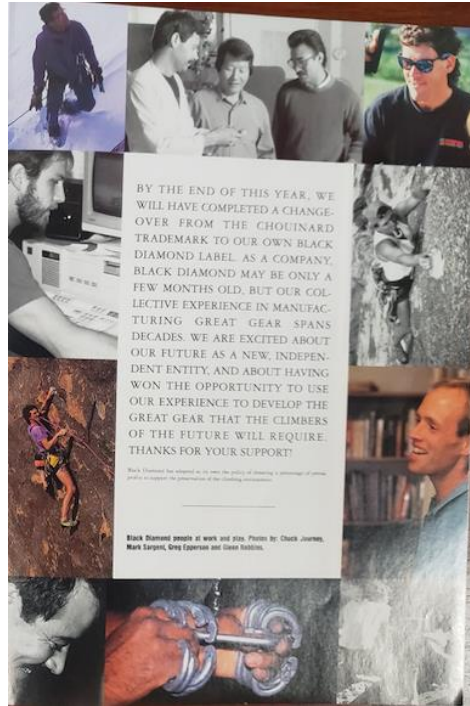


Figure 3.9. In their first catalog, Black Diamond Equipment featured images of employees both hard at work in the office and hard at play in the mountains. Like Chouinard Equipment, the company regularly featured images of employees climbing or skiing in Western environments in its catalogs and promotional materials. Photo courtesy American Alpine Club Library, Golden, Colorado.

Black Diamond's advertisements also emphasized western landscapes. An early advertisement in *Climbing*, the most influential American climbing magazine during this period, included a black and white photo of American climbing star Bobbi Bensman.²⁵⁰ In the advertisement, Bensman clips her rope to a carabiner with her left hand as she stretches out across the rock face, holding on with her right hand and foot. She is the epitome of grace under pressure. When the reader squints at the caption to figure out where Bensman is climbing, they discover a familiar place: the Flatirons outside of Boulder, Colorado. With an understanding

²⁵⁰ "Quicksilver Carabiners," *Climbing*, December 1990/January 1991, 95. Patrick Callis's private collection.

that certain places resonated more with climbers than others, Black Diamond featured a star athlete in a well-known western climbing area in one of their earliest advertisements.

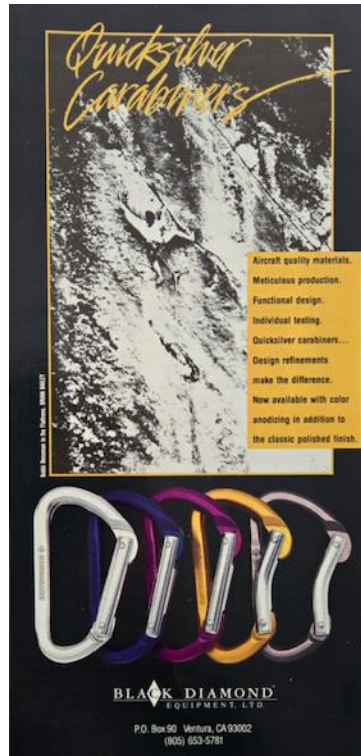


Figure 3.10. Black Diamond’s advertisement from *Climbing* in 1991 featuring American climbing star Bobbi Bensman climbing in the Flatirons outside of Boulder, Colorado. Black Diamond regularly featured climbers in iconic western environments in their advertisements. Photo from Pat Callis’s private collection.

Other advertisements followed this model. An advertisement in the November 1998 issue of *Climbing* declares that Black Diamond has been offering “Worldwide Protection Since 1987.”²⁵¹ While proclaiming the company’s status as a brand climbers can trust in the greater ranges of the world, the advertisement showcases a climber in another quintessential western

²⁵¹ “World Wide Protection Since 1987,” *Climbing*, November 1, 1998, 15. Patrick Callis’s private collection.

climbing area: The Diamond on Long's Peak in Rocky Mountain National Park.²⁵² Although the climber in this photo, Loren Glick, did not have the same star power as Bensman, the photo nonetheless depicted a skilled alpinist in an iconic western alpine environment. Other advertisements featured climbers in western places like Joshua Tree National Monument, California; Zion National Park, Utah; The Needles in Southern California; and Red Rocks, Nevada. In their catalogs and advertisements throughout the 1990s, Black Diamond portrayed western climbing areas that struck a chord with American (and international) climbers.

Over the 1990s and 2000s, Black Diamond became a powerful leader in the outdoor industry. By 1995, Black Diamond had two hundred employees and grossed more than twenty million dollars in revenue.²⁵³ In 2014, Metcalf's last year at the company, Black Diamond generated over two hundred million dollars in revenue.²⁵⁴ This was the same year that Black Diamond became a publicly traded company. By the turn of the twenty-first century, Black Diamond had a major share of the climbing and mountaineering market in America.

²⁵² For a history of climbing on the Diamond, see Alexander, *Democracy's Mountain*, 148-163; 178-197; and 209-217. See also, Achey, Chelton, and Godfrey, *Climb!*, 38-48; 103-105; 141-143; 157-162; 182-189; and 230-235.

²⁵³ Metcalf, "Lessons Learned."

²⁵⁴ Metcalf, interview by Doug Wells.



Figure 3.11. Black Diamond Equipment advertisement from *Climbing* in 1998 featuring Loren Glick on the Diamond on Longs Peak. Photo from Pat Callis's private collection.

As a nationally and internationally recognized company with a reputation for making quality gear, consumers paid attention to Black Diamond's marketing. In their advertisements and catalogs, Black Diamond emphasized iconic western climbing areas. Although we can only speculate about the impressions these advertisements made on individuals, the company's sustained growth throughout the 1990s suggests that their marketing appealed to climbers living in different regions of the country. Black Diamond's advertisements and catalogs regularly featured images of western landscapes. In doing so, they hinted at the potential that existed across the region for vertical adventure and a leisure-oriented way of life. In their own way, they encouraged Americans and international climbers to migrate to the region. These new transplants, however, moved West not to farm, ranch, or work in the other resource industries

that had historically been the backbone of the region.²⁵⁵ Instead, they headed West to take part in outdoor adventure and vigorous play. Images of mountains, cliffs, and crags flashed in their minds as they packed up their vehicles and hit the road West.

“Riding the Sport Climbing Wave”: Metolius Mountain Products

When Doug Phillips started climbing in the 1970s, making your own equipment was part of the deal. Most American climbers purchased specialty products like carabiners, pitons, nuts, friends, ropes, and shoes from outdoor companies like Chouinard Equipment, Jardine Enterprises, and European suppliers but sewed their own harnesses from webbing they purchased in bulk.²⁵⁶ Like other early outdoor entrepreneurs, Phillips began tinkering with equipment because he felt limited by the current gear available. An Oregonian by birth, Phillips grew up in the college town of Corvallis and climbed regularly at Smith Rock before it became an international mecca. In the early 1980s, he began prototyping a small, adjustable nut that would fit into the thin fissures found on basalt columns. After working on the design with the input of friends in his garage, Phillips began to sell his new product, “The Slider,” out of the back of his car after climbing days at Smith Rock. Like Chouinard, Phillips’ tinkering with equipment eventually led to a career in the outdoor industry as the founder and owner of Metolius Mountain Products, a small yet influential climbing equipment company based in central Oregon.²⁵⁷

Before starting Metolius, Phillips worked in the construction industry. He owned a small contracting business but struggled to find work in the early 1980s when high interest rates

²⁵⁵ For western boosterism, see David Wrobel, *Promised Lands: Promotion, Memory, and the Creation of the American West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002).

²⁵⁶ Doug Phillips, interviewed by the author, November 7, 2024. Interview notes in possession of author.

²⁵⁷ Phillips, interview. See also, Doug Phillips, “Metolius Origins,” *Metolius*, Accessed November 11, 2024, <https://www.metoliusclimbing.com/metolius-origins.html>.

crippled the American housing market.²⁵⁸ Phillips looked for smaller remodeling jobs, but even these types of jobs proved scarce during these lean years.²⁵⁹ Out of necessity for work, Phillips began to spend more time and energy working on designing and manufacturing climbing equipment. With approximately two thousand dollars, Phillips started Metolius Mountain Products in 1983.

As a company based in central Oregon, Metolius took inspiration from the sport climbing revolution underway at Smith Rock. Phillips' designs for the Slider and other equipment came directly from his experiences climbing in the park. In addition to manufacturing climbing hardware, Metolius created training products for climbers interested in pushing the technical and physical limits of the sport. The difficult routes being done at places like Smith Rock, American Fork, Rifle, and the Virgin River Gorge required strengths that were best developed by using specific training tools. After Metolius employees returned from a trip to France in the mid 1980s with a wooden training board used to strengthen finger tendons, Phillips and his partners created some of the first training boards in America.²⁶⁰ Eventually, Metolius manufactured plastic holds that climbers could use to build home training gyms. As Smith Rock locals, Phillips and his partners were at the epicenter of the sport climbing revolution in America during the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Metolius used images of Smith Rock to market and sell their products. For example, a full-page advertisement for a new line of climbing specific clothing in the November 1998 edition of *Climbing* featured numerous shots from Smith Rock. In advertisement, athletic men

²⁵⁸ Phillips, interview.

²⁵⁹ Phillips, interview.

²⁶⁰ Phillips, interview.

and women climb well-known Smith Rock's routes like "Kings of Rap" and "Latest Rage."²⁶¹ In the topmost photo of the advertisement, the spires of the Smith Rock group frame the climber who clings to small edges and nubbins. Other photos in the advertisement feature climbers in places at Smith Rock like Aggro Gully and The Office. As Smith Rock became a well-known climbing destination in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Metolius emphasized their connection this influential and iconic place.

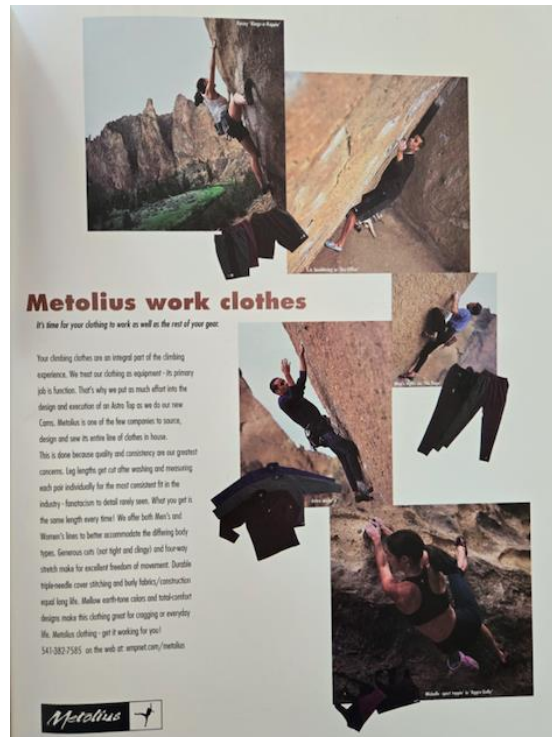


Figure 3.12. Metolius advertisement from November 1998 issue of *Climbing*. Like other companies during this period, Metolius featured western climbing areas in the marketing materials. As a company based in central Oregon, Metolius emphasized their connection to Smith Rock, a place well-known by American climbers. Photo from *Climbing* November 1998 courtesy Pat Callis Private Collection.

²⁶¹ For "Kings of Rap" and "Latest Rage," see Alan Watts, *Rock Climbing Oregon's Smith Rock State Park: A Comprehensive Guide to More Than 2,200 Routes* (Lanham: FalconGuides, 2023), 70, 98.

Other advertisements also featured western climbing areas. For example, an advertisement for a Metolius harness in *Climbing* from April/May 1992 showcased East Coast transplant, Scott Franklin.²⁶² The caption read: “Scott Franklin coolin’ in Cali.”²⁶³ Unlike other companies, Metolius tended to create marketing materials that emphasized the technical sophistication of their equipment rather than western landscapes. However, when they included images of places, they were almost always western.

Conclusion

By following postwar outdoor equipment entrepreneurs through the decades, we witness the rise of the outdoor industry in America after World War II. At the same time, we notice the important role the American West played in the growth of the industry. If the outdoor retail industry began in the East in the late decades of the nineteenth century and originally catered to aristocratic sportsmen, after World War II the American West became the place where men and women opened up climbing equipment and outdoor businesses.²⁶⁴ The first postwar companies began in places with access to major urban centers like Denver, Seattle, and Los Angeles, though climbers eventually opened companies in smaller cities like Salt Lake City and places further afield like central Oregon. Inspired by mountain sports and sustained by middle-class Americans’ interest in outdoor activities like backpacking, hiking, mountaineering, and rock-climbing, some of these companies became iconic retail brands with dedicated followings. By the end of the

²⁶² For Scott Franklin’s climbing history including his early years in the Shawangunks, see “Flashback: Scott Franklin,” *Rock & Snow*, Accessed November 13, 2024, <https://037200b.netsolhost.com/blog-page.php?Flashback-Scott-Franklin-42>.

²⁶³ “Metolius Harness,” *Climbing* 131, April/May 1992, 47. Patrick Callis’s private collection.

²⁶⁴ For the westward migration of the outdoor industry after World War II, see Gross, *Shopping*, 120-121.

century, the outdoor industry had shed its humble beginnings and become a powerful contributor to local and regional economies.

Beyond their economic contributions, these companies crafted narratives of the West as a region for strenuous physical recreation in stunning environments. An advertisement by American rope manufacturer BlueWater from the May 1993 issue of *Climbing* perfectly captures how these companies crafted an imagined region based around rock-climbing and mountaineering. Unlike other advertisements we have looked at in this chapter, this advertisement does not feature an image of a climber in an iconic western mountain landscape. Instead, BlueWater appealed directly to the viewer's sense of imagination. In the advertisement, two tire tracks cut through a field of wheat stretching all the way to the horizon. Above the field, in the middle of a cloudless sky, a black box with white lettering reads: "Because Your World Isn't Flat." Beneath this image, a caption informs the reader, "While the heartland of America trundles their way from A to B, you've set your sights on something slightly more vertical."

While most companies we've examined in this chapter showcased climbers in specific western environments in their marketing materials, BlueWater chose a different tact. Rather than provide an image of a western environment for the reader to drool over, they let the viewer to choose from among the many places he or she would have been familiar with as a reader of *Climbing* magazine. Whether the viewer imagined The Flatirons, The Tetons, Yosemite, Mount Rainier, Longs Peak, or Smith Rock, the reader likely imagined a western climbing area.



Figure 3.13. In this BlueWater advertisement from *Climbing* in May 1993, the viewer is left to imagine their preferred climbing environment. Rather than provide an image of a climber in a western landscape, this advertisement appealed directly to readers' sense of imagined geography. Photo courtesy Pat Callis's private collection.

Through their catalogs and advertisements, outdoor equipment companies promoted the West's cliffs, crags, mountains, and canyons as climbing sites. Over time, American and international visitors alike came to associate western landscapes with strenuous outdoor activities. Places like the Flatirons, Mount Rainier, Grand Teton, and Yosemite as well as Smith Rock became synonymous with American climbing as companies like Gerry Mountaineering Equipment, Co., Holubar Mountaineering, REI, Chouinard Equipment, Black Diamond Equipment, Metolius, and others promoted these places in their catalogs and advertisements. While other regions had their own histories and cultures of climbing, to be a climber in America meant visiting—or better yet, moving to—one the West's climbing meccas.

Over the course of the second half of the century, equipment companies sold ideas of western nature to a new group of Americans. Although the West had long been imagined as the nation's outdoor playground, nature preserve, and wilderness escape, many climbers in the late twentieth century were likely unfamiliar with earlier promotional campaigns by landscape painters, railroad promoters, and other western boosters. As they promoted western places to enthusiasts, amateurs, and hardcore climbers, these companies created an imagined region that appealed to many suburban and urban American's desire for authentic experiences in wild nature. Outdoor recreation activities like backpacking, hiking, rafting, backcountry skiing, and, of course, rock-climbing and mountaineering became the primary way that many middle-class Americans knew nature during the second half of the twentieth century. Catalogs and advertisements fed their belief that the West offered unparalleled opportunities to engage in these activities. From gothic mountains and glaciated peaks to sun-drenched desert environments and quiet, forested crags, postwar western outdoor companies sold Americans on the idea that the West was a region full of wild nature and endless possibilities. Even if it was an incomplete and misleading narrative, the story these companies spun about the West appealed to many Americans' long held beliefs about the region. Eventually, this idea that the West was the place for outdoor play in America brought climbers into conflict with other westerners who had different histories, relationships, ideas, and visions for the region's iconic rock towers, spires, and summits.

A SOCIAL HISTORY OF CLIMBING IN THE NORTH
AMERICAN WEST

As Janis French huddled in a snow cave beneath the summit of the Grand Teton, she felt mixed emotions. The twenty-nine-year-old mother of three from Gunnison, Colorado had almost no winter mountaineering experience, yet she had signed up for a winter ascent of the Grand Teton with the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS). On New Year's Day, in bitter cold conditions, French summited alongside her teammates. Writing about her experience, French said: "The fear I felt in the predawn climb to the Upper Saddle Jan. 1 was something positive for me ... I discovered that I could appreciate the incredible view that sunrise brought and be a little sick over it at the same time."²⁶⁵

On a NOLS course in the Wind River Range a few summers previous, she had developed an affinity for wilderness trips. While in the mountains, she "rediscovered basic pleasures, such as allowing the sun to create the time in [her] life, eating simple foods with a cup and a spoon, and falling asleep to the sound of the wind." Because she had enjoyed her summer expedition, she thought "a winter climb would be an exciting extension of [her] summer experiences."²⁶⁶ The climb, however, exposed her to the harsh realities of winter in the Tetons. With avalanches, extreme cold, and uncertain climbing conditions, the expedition proved even more intense than French had envisioned. Nevertheless, she learned that she "could climb well in spite of being afraid."²⁶⁷ She forged deep bonds with her teammates and gained more appreciation for her

²⁶⁵ Janis French, untitled article written for UPI. Box 2, Folder 12, Tom Hough Papers, Western History Center, Casper College, Casper, Wyoming.

²⁶⁶ French, untitled article.

²⁶⁷ French, untitled article.

family and life back in Gunnison. “The fine spirit de corps of a group such as this,” she wrote, “is something everyone—even normal, middle class housewives—ought to experience.”²⁶⁸

Although the climb was challenging and, at times, frightening, French left her trip feeling empowered and grounded. “Next year,” she concluded, “I think I’ll try the mountain again.”²⁶⁹

French’s winter ascent of the Grand Teton serves as a window into the culture of mountaineering that emerged in the West after World War II. As one of two women on this expedition, she disrupts interpretations of mountaineering in America as an exclusively male activity. In fact, women had climbed mountains and scaled cliffs for leisure, play, and adventure since the turn of the twentieth century. Furthermore, as a self-described “middle-class housewife,” French demonstrates the appeal that outdoor recreation, including risky activities like winter mountaineering, had for both men and women in postwar American society. Like other Americans who backpacked, hiked, and canoed as well as climbed mountains, French found satisfaction in wild places.

French’s story makes us pause and think about the broad appeal of outdoor recreation in postwar American society.²⁷⁰ These activities became popular, in part, because they offered Americans who had grown increasingly disconnected from the natural world ways to interact

²⁶⁸ French, untitled article.

²⁶⁹ French, untitled article.

²⁷⁰ For works that explore postwar outdoor recreation in America and the West, see Rachel Gross, *Shopping All the Way to the Woods: How the Outdoor Industry Sold Nature to America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024), 91-228; Ruth Alexander, *Democracy’s Mountain: Longs Peak and the Unfulfilled Promises of America’s National Parks* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2023), 123-228; Phoebe S.K. Young, *Camping Grounds: Public Nature in American Life from the Civil War to the Occupy Movement* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2021); William Philpott, *Vacationland: Tourism and Environment in the Colorado High Country* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013); Joseph E. Taylor III, *Pilgrims of the Vertical: Yosemite Rock Climbers and Nature at Risk* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 107-278; Annie Gilbert Coleman, *Ski Style: Sport and Culture in the Rockies* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 117-214; Hal K. Rothman, *Devil’s Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth-Century American West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 143-251.

directly—and deeply—with nature.²⁷¹ Wilderness expeditions, like French’s Grand Teton climb, allowed busy, modern Americans the opportunity to live, for a brief period of time, a simple life grounded in the rhythms of the natural world. These types of trips let people reflect on their lives, build strong bonds with others, discover previously unknown skills and strengths, and create lasting personal connection with spectacular, wild places. The individual connections that people built with the West’s vertical environments through climbing proved to be powerful and enduring.

This chapter traces the social history of rock climbing and mountaineering in the American West from the end of World War II into the early decades of the twenty-first century. It has two purposes. First, to explain how rock climbing and mountaineering grew during these decades from a small, relatively fringe activity into popular sport with a wide following and diverse group of participants. Second, it tells how American climbing culture changed over the course of seven decades as college mountaineering clubs and outdoor education schools emerged in small cities and towns across the region, countercultural bohemians rejected traditional club culture, more women started to climb, and BIPOC and LGBTQ+ climbers created spaces of belonging across the West. As more Americans found meaning and purpose through the sport, the culture of climbing changed. Yet throughout all of these developments and transformations, climbers continued to foreground the West’s vertical environments in their conceptions of the region and themselves. For many, climbing became a key aspect of their personal identity and orientation. In this case, identity was forged in connection with the region’s high places and vertical environments.

²⁷¹ Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 4th ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 141-160.

Rock climbing and mountaineering became steadily more popular during the second half of the twentieth century. Although hard numbers are difficult to come by, Christian Beckwith, a climbing journalist and historian who writes about the Tenth Mountain Division, estimates there were approximately twelve thousand climbers in America in the years immediately before World War II.²⁷² Ray Jacquot, a lifelong climber and amateur climbing historian, supports this assessment anecdotally. He says, “In the mid 1950s there were few people engaged in mountaineering and rock climbing as an avocation, probably a hundredth of the number today and there were no ‘professional climbers’ other than a few summer guides who had other winter occupations, mostly as teachers.”²⁷³ Whatever the actual numbers during these years, the point stands that climbing was an activity with a small following in the years both immediately before and after World War II. In contrast, by the turn of the twenty-first century, ORCA, the trade association for the outdoor industry, estimated there were approximately 5.7 million rock climbers in the United States.²⁷⁴ By 2014, these numbers had grown to over six and a half million Americans.²⁷⁵ While these numbers are actually quite small when compared to other outdoor sports during these years, a shift from twelve thousand to more than six million climbers is a significant increase.

²⁷² Christian Beckwith, “State of the Art: Episode 02, Part 2,” October 16, 2022, in *Ninety-Pound Rucksack*, podcast, <https://christianbeckwith.com/the-state-of-the-art-climbing-part-2/>. Beckwith comes to this number by adding up the membership totals of the nation’s mountaineering clubs and organizations, including college outing clubs and other, smaller organizations.

²⁷³ Raymond G. Jacquot and David E. Reynolds, *CC on the Rocks The Story of the Wyoming Mountaineers of Casper College 1955-1959*, 2nd ed. (Self-published, 2013), 2. Book in the author’s private collection.

²⁷⁴ “Trend Spotting,” in *State of the Industry Report 2000*, ORCA. Michael Hodgson and Therese Iknoian outdoor industry collection USU_ORA 005, Box 1, Folder 3, Special Collections and Archives, Utah State University Merrill-Cazier Library, Logan, Utah.

²⁷⁵ Maurice Isserman, *Continental Divide: A History of American Mountaineering* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016), 1.

How can we explain this growth? Certainly, part of the answer lies in postwar economic growth and prosperity as the increase in wealth across American society allowed more Americans to pursue leisure and recreation, including outdoor activities and sports. So, too, advances in transportation technologies and equipment made accessing outdoor spaces easier and being in the outdoors more comfortable.²⁷⁶ However, part of the answer also relates to shifting ideas about nature and outdoor spaces.²⁷⁷ More Americans during these decades, especially urban Americans, saw value in outdoor, nature-based recreation. With the time and money to participate in leisure activities and a growing interest in wilderness recreation, rock climbing and mountaineering boomed during these decades, especially in the West with its diverse climbing environments and growing population.

Although elite, white American men enjoyed these activities, Americans from diverse gender, racial, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds did too.²⁷⁸ Women were always present in the mountains and at crags and cliffs even though they sometimes faced criticism and discrimination from some of their male counterparts.²⁷⁹ Figures like Mary Murane, Ramona

²⁷⁶ I make the argument about transportation networks and access in Chapter One of this dissertation. For scholars who make arguments about the history of outdoor gear, comfort, and participation in outdoor activities, see Rachel Gross, *Shopping all the Way to the Woods*. See also Sarah Pickman, “The benefit of chocolate and cold tea: equipping early British Everest expeditions,” in *Other Everests: One Mountain, many worlds*, edited by Paul Gilchrist, Peter H. Hansen, and Jonathan Westaway (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2024), 79-93.

²⁷⁷ For discussions of how postwar changes in wealth and leisure affected outdoor recreation, see Paul Sutter, *Driven Wild: How the Fight against Automobiles Launched the Modern Wilderness Movement* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002) and John Findlay, *The Mobilized American West, 1940-2000* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2023).

²⁷⁸ On this diversity of socioeconomic backgrounds in Western mountaineering, see Gordon Sayre, “Urban Climbers in the Wilderness,” in *Imagining the Big Open: Nature, Identity, and Play in the New West*, edited by Liza Nichols, Elaine M. Bapis, and Thomas J. Harvey (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2003), 92-110. For a discussion of race and skiing in the West, see Annie Coleman, “The Unbearable Whiteness of Skiing,” *Pacific Historical Review* 64, no. 4 (November 1996): 583-614.

²⁷⁹ On discrimination against women in Yosemite, see Taylor III, *Pilgrims of the Vertical*, 141-144 and 218-223. For women’s histories of Yosemite, see Lauren DeLaunay Miller, *Valley of Giants: Stories from Women at the Heart of Yosemite Climbing* (Seattle: Mountaineers Books, 2022). Also, for a history of women climbing in the Tetons, see Julie Ellison, “Onward & Upward: A Century of Women Climbing in the Tetons,” *Alpinist*, Autumn 2023, 82-93.

Hungary, Arlene Blum, Elaine Matthews, Maria Cranor, and Lynn Hill are examples of women who climbed during this period, though countless other women whose stories are less well-known were enthusiastic mountaineers during these years. Non-white men and women also participated in these sports. For example, Charles Crenshaw developed a passion for mountaineering after moving to the Pacific Northwest to work for Boeing. In 1964, he became the first African American to summit Denali as a member of an expedition organized by The Mountaineers.²⁸⁰ In addition to Crenshaw, other BIPOC individuals, like Ramona Hungary, point to a more complicated social history of these activities. Although people from diverse backgrounds climbed during the mid-century, these individuals tended to be outliers within the broader culture of American rock climbing and mountaineering. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, however, new groups have emerged who have demanded even greater racial and gender representation in the sport.²⁸¹ BIPOC and LGBTQ+ groups and individuals have shifted the culture of climbing in both the West and nation. These recent developments are important to consider in the context of the past fifty years because this history helps us better understand how race and gender affected who participates in outdoor recreation as well as how climbing culture in America has continued to transform since the turn of the twenty-first century.²⁸²

A closer examination of western climbing culture over the past seventy years reveals people and stories that offer nuance to simplistic narratives about American mountaineering

²⁸⁰ James Edward Mills, *The Adventure Gap: Changing the Face of the Outdoors* (Seattle: Mountaineers Books, 2024), 80-89.

²⁸¹ Ruth Alexander mentions some of these groups in her recent book about Longs Peak. See Alexander, *Democracy's Mountain*, 211.

²⁸² Other scholars have written about these topics in other regions of the United States as well as the West. See Brian McCammack, *Landscapes of Hope: Nature and the Great Migration in Chicago* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017); Susan R. Schrepfer, *Nature's Altars: Mountains, Gender, and American Environmentalism* (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 2004); and Alexander, *Democracy's Mountain*.

culture. Yes, “climbers [in the 1970s] were predominantly white, male, and young,” as Russ Clune notes in his recent memoir.²⁸³ But white women climbed as members of supportive groups, clubs, and communities—sometimes without men—and Indigenous women, African Americans, and queer people climbed, too. While climbing could be competitive, hypermasculine, and exceedingly white, it also appealed to people who did not identify in these ways.²⁸⁴ In fact, it is not difficult to find people who disrupt such simplistic narratives about the sport, you simply need to look below the surface of standard narratives and accounts. With a bit of reading and archival scrutiny, women, Native peoples, African Americans, and others rise to the surface. Western mountains and high places have long inspired Americans with diverse identities and backgrounds, not just white male adventurers.²⁸⁵ These people expanded the set of Americans who found value in outdoor recreation and participated in place-making at vertical western environments. Across diverse identities and orientations, Americans found the high places of the West to be meaningful sites of personal identity and memory.

Students: The Wyoming Mountaineers of Casper College and the
National Outdoor Leadership School

Before we look to the more recent past, a quick overview of the history of mountaineering in America is in order. As a recreational activity, mountaineering began in the

²⁸³ Russ Clune, *The Lifer: Rock Climbing Adventures in the Gunks and Beyond* (Houston: Di Angelo Publications, 2023), 17.

²⁸⁴ On hypermasculinity and mountaineering, see Peter L. Bayers, *Imperial Ascent: Mountaineering, Masculinity, and Empire* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2003); Michael S. Reidy, “Mountaineering, Masculinity, and the Male Body in Mid-Victorian Britain,” *Osiris* 30, no. 1 (January 2015): 159-181. <https://doi.org/10.1086/682975>; and Anna Saroldi, “Rewriting Irvine into Everest: Audrey Salkeld and Julie Summers,” in *Other Everests: One Mountain, Many Worlds*, eds. Paul Gilchrist, Peter H. Hansen, and Jonathan Westaway (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2024), 147-162.

²⁸⁵ For the relationship between American colonial and imperial visions and mountaineering in the West, see William Goetzmann, *Exploration and Empire: The Explorer and the Scientist in the Winning of the American West* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 2000).

nation's urban centers at the end of the nineteenth century. Mountaineering clubs were the first organizations to promote mountain recreation and advocate for the protection of western mountain environments. These clubs promoted mountain recreation and conservation among middle-class and upper-class white men and women. In 1902, the well-known mountaineer and conservationist, John Muir, founded the Sierra Club in San Francisco.²⁸⁶ Although a contemporary of the explorers and surveyors of the West, including his noted rival, Clarence King, Muir approached mountaineering differently than these men.²⁸⁷ He saw mountaineering as an activity with certain health benefits—both psychic and physical—for a rapidly urbanizing population. Famously, Muir fought to preserve mountain landscapes across the region from industrial development so urban Americans might enjoy these places and find spiritual renewal.²⁸⁸

Following the lead of the Sierra Club, other groups formed in the West. A group of men and women from Portland, Oregon founded the Mazamas on the summit of Mount Hood in July 1894.²⁸⁹ This club inspired a group of Seattleites to organize their own mountain club after they joined a Mazamas trip to Mount Rainier (*Tahoma*) in 1897. They gave their group a fitting, descriptive name: The Mountaineers.²⁹⁰ Further east, a group of professionals in Denver formed

²⁸⁶ The Sierra Club was not the nation's first mountain club. This distinction belongs to the Alpine Club of Williamstown, Massachusetts which got started in the small college town in the Berkshires in 1863. This club as well as two others were the precursors to the Appalachian Mountain Club in Boston, which was founded during a meeting at MIT in January 1876. For this history of America's early mountain clubs, see Laura Waterman and Guy Waterman, *Forest and Crag: A History of Hiking, Trail Blazing, and Adventure in the Northeast Mountains* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019), 183-192.

²⁸⁷ On the rivalry between King and Muir, see Caroline Schaumann, *Peak Pursuits: The Emergence of Mountaineering in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 260-262.

²⁸⁸ On John Muir's philosophy of mountain climbing, see Schaumann, *Peak Pursuits*, 260-263, 279-282, and 285-286. Michael P. Cohen, *The Pathless Way: John Muir and American Wilderness* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), 65-88.

²⁸⁹ Sayre, "Urban Climbers," 99.

²⁹⁰ For the Mountaineers, see Sayre, "Urban Climbers" and Jim Kjeldsen, *The Mountaineers: A History* (Seattle: The Mountaineers, 1998).

the Colorado Mountain Club in 1912.²⁹¹ Alongside the American Alpine Club, an organization based in New York but with members scattered throughout the country, and Ivy League climbing clubs, these groups were the main conduits of climbing culture in the West through the end of World War II.

These western clubs followed the lead of already established eastern mountain clubs. Like the eastern clubs, the western clubs admitted both men and women. Many club members were white middle-class professionals who joined seeking camaraderie, conviviality, and adventure in mountain landscapes.²⁹² In addition to outings to local and regional mountains, these clubs participated in the growing conservation movement in America. Both western and eastern clubs advocated for national parks and forest reserves where people might escape urban environments for fresh air, exercise, and rejuvenation in nature. As part of the progressive era reform movements, these clubs became part of a larger movement to create and promote healthful environments and habits in the early decades of the twentieth century.²⁹³

During the second half of the century, the social landscape of climbing in the region shifted. While these original mountain clubs continued to serve as the places through which some westerners learned how to climb, they were joined by new groups and institutions. Clubs at smaller, less prestigious colleges and outdoor schools unaffiliated with these historic organizations emerged. These new groups expanded the entry points for people interested in these activities. The college clubs tended to prioritize social relationships and technical skills, while outdoor schools, like the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS), saw rock climbing

²⁹¹ For the history of the Colorado Mountain Club, see Hugh E. Kingery, *The Colorado Mountain Club: The First Seventy-Five Years of a Highly Individual Corporation, 1912-1987* (Evergreen, Colorado: Cordillera Press, 1988).

²⁹² Sayre, "Urban Climbers"

²⁹³ On this relationship between health and conservation, see Schrepfer, *Nature's Altars*.

and mountaineering as part of a larger education in outdoor skills and ecological knowledge. Regardless of their subtle nuances and differences, these groups offered new ways for Americans to interact and experience the high places of the West. Together, they helped grow a culture of rock climbing and mountaineering in the region in the decades immediately after World War II.

The Wyoming Mountaineers of Casper College

As you approach Casper, Wyoming, the city does not strike you as a climbing town. Unlike Boulder, Colorado, Seattle, Washington, or Salt Lake City, Utah, which are all framed by towering peaks and have hillsides dotted with cliffs and other rock formations, Casper lacks the obvious visual cues of these other western climbing towns. The city is nestled beneath Casper Mountain, yet a quick look at the forested slopes of this “mountain,” which looks more like a long ridge, does not reveal any obvious cliffs, canyons, or other places to climb. Besides the opportunity to stretch the legs and have a meal on the way to somewhere else, the city seems to offer little that would attract a serious mountaineer. Hidden by the forested slopes, however, are small canyons with short but steep cliffs. In the 1950s, a group of rock climbers trained extensively in these canyons. In this relatively unlikely setting, the Wyoming Mountaineers of Casper College (WMCC) honed their skills and techniques, which they later applied to other high places across the West including Shiprock, Longs Peak, Devils Tower, and the Wind River Range.

Unlike other collegiate clubs who climbed in the West, the WMCC were a home-grown bunch.²⁹⁴ Many of the members of the WMCC came from local families and modest means.

²⁹⁴ For discussion of Ivy League climbers, see Maurice Isserman, *Continental Divide: A History of American Mountaineering* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016), 228-235.

Most, if not all, had little to no mountaineering experience before they joined the club and had to work summer jobs to pay for school expenses, including club trips.²⁹⁵ They certainly did not have the money to spend summers in the Alps climbing with hired guides like their Ivy League counterparts. Despite their humble roots, the WMCC produced talented, technically sophisticated mountaineers. They excelled at rock climbing.

The Wyoming Mountaineers demonstrate how mountaineering spread from the region's major urban areas to smaller cities and towns in the years after World War II. Up to this point, mountaineers tended to concentrate in major urban areas like Boston, New York, Chicago, Denver, Seattle, San Francisco, and Los Angeles or college towns like Boulder, Colorado or Iowa City, Iowa.²⁹⁶ After the war, as interest in outdoor sports grew, mountaineering clubs in smaller cities, like Casper, appeared. Gradually, these clubs left their mark on the regional and national scene. These new clubs were influenced by the already established clubs as many club leaders were members of other mountaineering clubs. For example, Walt Bailey, the faculty leader of the WMCC, was a member of both the American Alpine Club (AAC) and Colorado Mountain Club (CMC).²⁹⁷ He had climbed throughout the American West as well as in Europe and modeled the Casper College group after these other mountain clubs.

Like other western clubs, the WMCC blended socializing and climbing.²⁹⁸ Outings were always social affairs as members traveled together, shared meals and tents, and roped up in small teams and pairs. Back in town, the club hosted dinners and other special events. For example,

²⁹⁵ Ray Jacquot and Dave Reynolds, *CC on the Rocks The Story of the Wyoming Mountaineers of Casper College, 1955-1959*, 2nd ed. (Self-published, 2013), vii-xi.

²⁹⁶ Rachel Gross discusses this geography of mountaineering organizations. See Gross, *Shopping*, 120 and 145.

²⁹⁷ Jacquot and Reynolds, *CC on the Rocks*, 8.

²⁹⁸ On the social nature of the Sierra Club during the interwar period, see Taylor, *Pilgrims*, 62-90.

each Spring Walt Bailey purchased a steak dinner for any club member who successfully climbed a one-hundred-foot traverse in upper Garden Creek Canyon that he named the Steak Traverse.²⁹⁹ Other club events included regular fundraisers and co-sponsored events with the University of Wyoming's mountaineering club, including meet-ups at local climbing areas. Through climbing outings and other club events, club members forged long-lasting relationships.



Figure 4.1. Yearbook photo of WMCC for 1957-1958 academic year. This photo helps give a sense of the gender makeup of the group. Young women and men climbed together. This was common in both the early mountain clubs and postwar college outing groups. Photo courtesy Western History Center at Casper College.

From the beginning, the WMCC was co-ed. Although photos of the club in the school's yearbook and from the annual graduation climb of Devils Tower reveal that young men always outnumbered women, women were involved from the start. A few women, like Mary Murane, played pivotal roles in the club. In 1956, Murane took the lead in organizing the "Mountaineers

²⁹⁹ Jacquot and Reynolds, *CC on the Rocks*, 26-27.

Week” at nearby Devils Tower National Monument to celebrate the monument’s fiftieth anniversary as the nation’s first national monument. From July 14-22nd, the club invited regional and national mountaineering organizations to join them at the Tower to climb, socialize, and present climbing techniques to the non-climbing public.³⁰⁰ The Mountaineers Week garnered significant press coverage, including a full-spread in *Life* magazine. Thousands of tourists flocked to the Tower during this week. Because of the Murane’s role in organizing this event, Milward Simpson, the governor of Wyoming at the time, honored the Murane and the club with a special ceremony at the state capitol in Cheyenne.³⁰¹ In a photo from this meeting, Murane stands in front of the statehouse beside a beaming Walt Bailey. In her hands, she holds a framed proclamation written and signed by the governor thanking her and the other members of the club for helping to bring positive attention—and tourist dollars—to the state and its unique natural environments.

³⁰⁰ “Mountaineers Week,” Files + Documents, Box 1, Wyoming Mountaineers of Casper College Archives, Western History Center, Casper College, Casper, Wyoming.

³⁰¹ For the *Life* spread, see “A Crowd of Climbers on a Big Rock,” Wyoming Mountaineers of Casper College—Scrapbook, Box 1, Western History Center, Casper College, Casper, Wyoming.



Figure 4.2. Walt Bailey and Mary Murane stand outside the statehouse in Cheyenne, Wyoming and hold the proclamation from governor Simpson declaring July 14-22, 1956 “Mountaineers Week” at Devils Tower National Monument. Photo courtesy Western History Center at Casper College.

Other photos from the club’s scrapbooks and files reveal different women members in action. An article from *The Casper Tribune-Herald & Star* pasted in the club’s scrapbook shows Karen King leaning over the side of First National Bank of Casper smiling at the camera as she holds a climbing rope threaded through a homemade webbing harness and around her back. A photo from March 1957 depicts King climbing a pinnacle in Wind River Canyon alongside Ray Jacquot. In addition, there are photos of Cecilia Lalonde climbing the Third Flatiron above Boulder, Colorado as well as photos of Ramona Hungary, a Native student from the Northern Arapaho Tribe, on the summit of Bears Lodge (Devils Tower) and climbing in the canyons above Casper.³⁰²

³⁰² See Ted Kyle, “First Indian Girl to Climb Devils Tower Is C.C. Coed,” *Casper Tribune Star*, undated. Files + Documents, Box 1, Wyoming Mountaineers of Casper College, Western History Center, Casper College, Casper Wyoming.



Figure 4.3. Ramona Hungary on the summit of Bears Lodge (Devils Tower), Wyoming in May 1958. Hungary was an outstanding student at Casper College in the late 1950s. In addition to her studies, Hungary was a part of the WMCC. It is believed that she was the first Indigenous person--man or woman--to climb Devils Tower. It is not clear whether or not Hungary continued to rock climb after she graduated Casper College. Photo courtesy Western History Center at Casper College.

The club was a democratic, egalitarian group. In addition to being co-ed, Bailey made sure that interested students could attend trips and activities regardless of their economic standing and income.³⁰³ Although the club was largely made up of able-bodied, young white men, it remained a welcoming space for interested students regardless of their race, class, or gender. Alongside other groups and organizations, the Wyoming Mountaineers of Casper College helped create, promote, and grow a culture of mountaineering outside of the region's urban centers. Like college climbing clubs at Stanford, University of Wyoming, and elsewhere, the

³⁰³ Jacquot and Reynolds, 67.

WMCC introduced young people to strenuous play in the mountains. They created new pathways into the sport for younger westerners, both men and women.

The National Outdoor Leadership School

New Years Day 1970 dawned cold and bright in Wyoming.³⁰⁴ As the rest of the state woke from holiday celebrations, Paul Petzoldt was camped beneath the Grand Teton with a group of twenty-two students. With the wind chill, the temperatures on the mountain hovered around negative sixty degrees Fahrenheit.³⁰⁵ Despite the arctic weather, Petzoldt reported to rangers and newspapers reporters listening on a radio call that “everyone was in fine condition.”³⁰⁶ He informed them that his group would try to summit the 13,766-foot mountain again the following day, but would return to the valley if that attempt proved unsuccessful. The students and clients had paid good money to climb the peak as part of Petzoldt’s National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS), and he wanted to make sure they got their money’s worth. As long as everyone was safe and warm, he saw no reason to descend quite yet.

The group Petzoldt had assembled for this expedition was an eclectic bunch. There were young men, like twenty-five-year-old Jack Riley from Casper, as well as Alison Higby, the youngest climber in the group, a sixteen year old student at the Interlochen Arts Academy in Michigan.³⁰⁷ In addition to these two, Nikki Nixon, Miss Indiana 1968, and her husband, Joe

³⁰⁴ “Windy,” *The Wyoming Eagle*, January 1, 1970. Box 2, Folder 11, Tom Hough Papers, Western History Center, Casper College, Casper, Wyoming.

³⁰⁵ “Grand Teton Climbers To Try Again for Peak,” *The Denver Post*, January 1, 1970. Box 2, Folder 11, Tom Hough Papers, Western History Center, Casper College, Casper, Wyoming.

³⁰⁶ “Grand Teton Climbers,” *Denver Post*, Tom Hough Papers.

³⁰⁷ For Jack Riley, see “Looks Forward to Winter Ordeal,” *Casper Star Tribune*, December 22, 1969. Box 2, Folder, 11, Tom Hough Papers, Western History Center, Casper College, Casper, Wyoming. For Alison Higby, see “Grand Teton Climbers,” *Denver Post*, Tom Hough Papers.

Nixon, joined the trip as part of their honeymoon.³⁰⁸ Newspaper articles reported that the other climbers came from Kansas, Montana, Pennsylvania, California, Indiana, and New Jersey.³⁰⁹

The regional diversity of this group speaks to the fact that more Americans had become curious about wilderness activities, including mountaineering, in the twenty years since the end of World War II. Mountaineering was no longer an activity practiced solely by dedicated club members who lived in urban areas. Alongside college mountaineering clubs, outdoor schools like NOLS introduced Americans from different areas of the country to the sport. They also introduced scores of people—both western and not—to the beauty and grandeur—as well as the harsh realities—of western mountains. As NOLS helped popularize mountain climbing, it also helped create a population of Americans who primarily thought of western mountains as places for adventure, play, and recreation.

Paul Petzoldt was well into middle-age when he founded NOLS.³¹⁰ Years past his climbing prime, Petzoldt nevertheless recognized young Americans' growing interest in wilderness activities. He thought his life-long experience in the mountains could benefit young people who were increasingly seeking out wilderness areas for recreation, play, and adventure as well as personal enlightenment and spiritual transformation. Though he admired what youth groups like the Boy Scouts and YMCA offered young people, he thought they were not doing enough to feed young Americans' desire for adventure.³¹¹ In the summer of 1965, Petzoldt and

³⁰⁸ "Grand Teton New Year Climbers Start Today," *Sunday Star-Tribune*, December 28, 1969. Box 2, Folder 11, Tom Hough Papers, Western History Center, Casper College, Casper, Wyoming.

³⁰⁹ "22 Join Holiday Assault on Teton," *Casper Star-Tribune*, December 21, 1968. Box 2, Folder 11, Tom Hough Papers, Western History Center, Casper College, Casper, Wyoming.

³¹⁰ Carson, "Paul Kiesow Petzoldt," *The American Alpine Club*

³¹¹ Howard, "Last Mountain Man?," 55.

his staff welcomed the first group of NOLS students to the small ranching town of Lander, Wyoming on the southern edge of the Wind River mountains.³¹²

Early on, the school created programs specifically for young women. In an article about the school for *The Salt Lake Tribune Home Magazine*, Raye Price noted the breadth of mountaineering training young women received on a NOLS course,

Each student loops a rope over her shoulder and carries an ice axe; she learns to make steps in the slick slope by jabbing with her boot edges; she learns to slip to her stomach, while falling, and ram her ice axe into the snow for a “self-arrest”; as a steep ascent is made, one girl puts a companion “on belay” by securing a rope around her axe so that, should the leader fall, her slide will be arrested.³¹³

As they traversed the high country of the Wind River Range, these young women learned and practiced techniques on smaller slopes and cliffs before applying them to bigger peaks in the range. By the end of their course, these women had a solid foundation on which to build their skills. Yet the school emphasized more than just mountaineering. “Map reading, first aid, rope splicing and knot tying, horse packing, trout fishing, use of big game firearms, and advanced camping techniques,” accompanied lessons on rock climbing and mountaineering, wrote Price.³¹⁴ Beyond training in specific mountain climbing techniques, NOLS students left their course with a well-rounded education in wilderness travel and living.

³¹² “National Outdoor Leadership School Lander, Wyoming,” Box 5, Folder 3, Orrin and Lorraine Bonney Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming.

³¹³ Raye Price, “Girls Head For Adventure In The High Country,” *The Salt Lake Tribune Home Magazine*, May 14, 1967, 4. Box 5, Folder 2, Orrin and Lorraine Bonney Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming.

³¹⁴ Price, “Girls Head for Adventure,” 5.

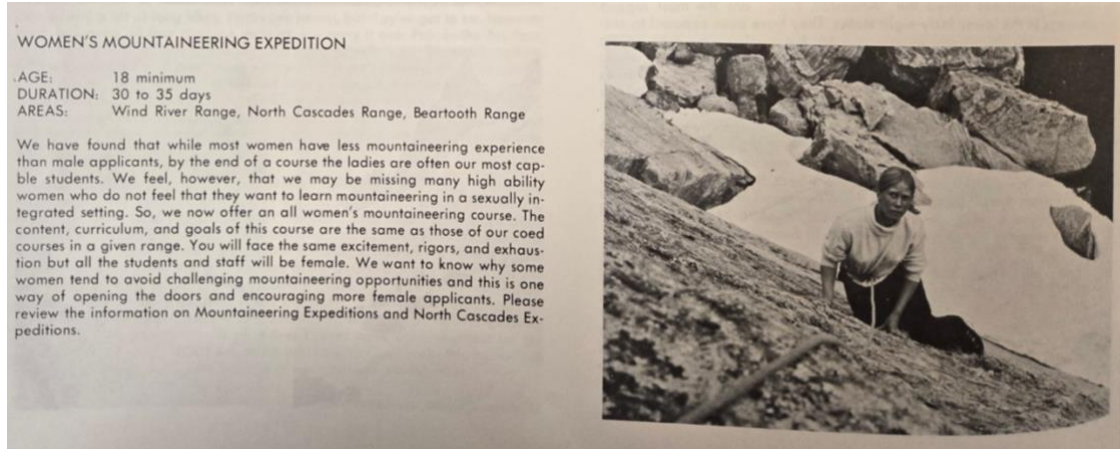


Figure 4.4. In the mid-1960s NOLS began offering women only mountaineering courses. This course description for a “Women’s Mountaineering Expedition” comes from an undated NOLS brochure. As the brochure states, one of the goals of the women’s specific course was to encourage more women to participate in mountaineering as a recreational activity. Photo courtesy Orrin and Lorraine Bonney Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

As word spread about the school’s unique curriculum, young people from across the country traveled to Wyoming to participate the school’s expeditions. Unlike the Wyoming Mountaineers of Casper College who tended to be from Casper or surrounding areas, NOLS students came from all over the country. On the all-women’s course Price reported on, students came from “Wisconsin, Oregon, California, New York, and Connecticut, as well as Wyoming.”³¹⁵ Al Vesper, who published a diary chronicling his NOLS expedition in *The IOCA Bulletin* in 1968, drove with a friend from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to join a course. In his diary, he made note of the different places that his course companions came from.³¹⁶ He wrote about tenting and cooking with a guy from Washington, D.C. who was a student at Columbia

³¹⁵ Price, 7

³¹⁶ “Al Vesper’s Diary at NOLS,” *The IOCA Bulletin*, Winter 1968, 6-10. Box 5, Folder 3, Orrin and Lorraine Bonney Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming.

University as well as climbing with someone from Duke University.³¹⁷ In the 1960s and 1970s, NOLS attracted young people from every corner of the country to the mountains of Wyoming.

Whether from the West or not, for many students, this was their first experience of western mountains. Many were blown away. “Jagged peaks, vertical cliffs, and mountains looking as if they’d been chewed by a giant with missing teeth, combine with the largest snowfields and glaciers in the United States,” wrote Raye Price of her experience of the Wind River Range.³¹⁸ Al Vesper wrote similarly about his ascent of Fremont Peak (13,730’) in the Titcomb Basin region of the Wind Rivers: “The view from the top was fantastic—right below us was the largest glacier in the 48 states (not including Alaska)...(or Hawaii)-white for miles and miles.”³¹⁹ NOLS provided the opportunity for young people to become intimately familiar with the Wind River Range, and, as they expanded their course offerings, other areas in the region. For some, like Peter Metcalf and Nancy Wise, their time with NOLS inspired them to eventually move West.³²⁰

Petzoldt intended NOLS to be a force for good in American society. In a memo he wrote to prospective students and families in 1968, he stated the school’s purpose and mission: “The National Outdoor Leadership School is a non-profit corporation dedicated to the service of American use and the conservation of our outdoor recreation areas.” He went on: “The National Outdoor Leadership School takes as a fundamental premise the fact that youth demands adventure, that adventure is part of the growing up process, and if adventure is not planned in our

³¹⁷ “Al Vesper’s Diary,” 6-10.

³¹⁸ Price, “Girls Head for Adventure,” 4.

³¹⁹ “Al Vesper’s Diary,” 8.

³²⁰ Peter Metcalf interview. For Nancy Wise, see Nancy to Lorraine, undated letter. Box 5, Folder 2, Orrin and Lorraine Bonney Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming.

educational process, youth will create his own adventure often in unacceptable or illegal activities.”³²¹ As far as Petzoldt was concerned, it was better to teach students how to rock climb, traverse glaciers, and feel the thrill of summiting a mountain than get their kicks in other ways.

Yet teaching students to climb mountains did not necessarily mean they would commit themselves to a life of upstanding citizenship. Indeed, many of the students who joined NOLS courses during these decades did so because they wanted to take part in the “rucksack revolution” of the 1960s and 1970s.³²² For example, an operating guide for the 1971 season acknowledged that although NOLS students were generally “the very top percentage of college and high school youth in intelligence, achievement, and energy,” their “mod hairdos, beards, and dress” might draw unwanted attention from local ranchers and outfitters in Lander, Wyoming and surrounding areas who associated such things with “hard-core drug addicts, drop-outs, freaks, and unpatriotic Americans.”³²³ Clearly, there was a clash of cultures occurring in the region during these decades, and the NOLS students tended towards the countercultural rather than the conservative.

For his part, Petzoldt cared less about how students looked than how they acted. From the start, his vision for the school was to provide young Americans from different walks of life the opportunity to experience a wilderness expedition. This went beyond offering women’s specific courses. In a 1968 article in *Time* magazine, Petzoldt said, “I wish we could give more scholarships, so more poor kids and black kids could come ... We do give a few scholarships—

³²¹ “National Outdoor Leadership School – General Information,” Box 5, Folder 3, Orrin and Lorraine Bonney Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming.

³²² On the “rucksack revolution,” see Maurice Isserman, *Continental Divide*, 269-337. See also Dougal McCarty and Pat Callis, interview by author, September 16, 2024. Interview recording in the possession of author.

³²³ “General Outline, Plans, Procedures and Philosophy – 1971,” 8. Box 2, Folder 12, Tom Hough Paper, Western History Center, Casper College, Casper, Wyoming.

some to kids who are getting out of penal institutions.” He elaborated: “The school is a great transition place for the return of criminals to society—for them just as for kids from rich prep schools in New England.” Petzoldt concluded his thought: “All that counts is what you *do*, not what you were.”³²⁴ For Petzoldt, NOLS courses benefited American youth, no matter their race, gender, or socioeconomic background. In fact, he saw these courses as a way for young people from diverse backgrounds to meet, bond, and develop mutual understanding, if not close friendships.

His vision of mountaineering more similar to Bailey’s than the Sierra Club, Mazamas, or Colorado Mountain Club.³²⁵ In some ways, Petzoldt was more than likely responding to the social movements of the 1960s that demanded a more just and equal American society. Whatever his reasons, Petzoldt believed that rock climbing and mountaineering taught young people perseverance, self-worth, and resiliency—life skills they could carry with them long after they had completed their course and left Wyoming. Moreover, a month spent outdoors made students more aware of the rhythms and processes of the natural world. For these reasons, Petzoldt wanted young Americans from diverse backgrounds to participate in the school’s programs. Although the school largely catered to well-to-do, white students, Petzoldt’s original vision for NOLS was democratic and inclusive.

Unfortunately, this vision of an inclusive outdoor culture in America would take more than three decades to come true. In the meantime, the cliffs and crags of the West became primarily places where young white men with long hair, beards, and a penchant for anti-

³²⁴ Howard, “Last Mountain Man?,” 55-56. Orrin and Lorraine Bonney Papers.

³²⁵ Ruth Alexander discusses the Colorado Mountain Club’s general lack of diversity throughout the twentieth century in *Democracy’s Mountain*. See Alexander, *Democracy’s Mountain*. For similar critiques of America’s early mountaineering clubs, see Isserman, *Continental Divide*, 226-228.

establishment points of view sought belonging, freedom, and an escape from an increasingly confusing and confused world.

The Dirty Sox Club, The Vulgarians, and The Stonemasters: Male
Countercultural Groups, 1960s-1980s

In 1958, Jack Kerouac released his novel, *The Dharma Bums*, to American audiences. More than anything, the novel captured young Americans' interest in mountains. Though an easterner by birth, Kerouac and his cohort of writers, poets, mountaineers, and outcasts oscillated between the West's urban areas and wild places. They were at home in the alleyways, bars, bookstores, and coffeehouses of Denver, San Francisco, and Portland, yet they also lit out for the mountains on extended trips. The mountains that spoke to Kerouac and his friends were the Cascades and Sierra Nevada, not the White Mountains or Adirondacks. Kerouac's novels, especially *The Dharma Bums*, caught the energy and enthusiasm some Americans—especially young white men—had for the nation's wilderness areas in the postwar era. When he wrote about an ensuing "rucksack revolution" in which "thousands or even millions of young Americans wandering around with rucksacks, going up to the mountains to pray" would inundate the West, he had his finger directly on the pulse of a strong undercurrent in American culture.³²⁶

During the three decades after the end of a World War II, groups of young men emerged in the West (and elsewhere in the country) who valued risky outdoor activities like rock climbing, mountaineering, backcountry skiing, and whitewater rafting. Instead of hunting, fishing, and camping, these young Americans' sought adventure and self-discovery through

³²⁶ Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums* (New York: Penguin Books, 1958), 97. Quoted in Isserman, *Continental Divide*, 301-302.

wilderness sports tinged with danger and risk. Such sports appealed to young people who felt alienated by postwar American society. Although some of these young men got their start climbing on NOLS courses or with college mountaineering clubs, as they matured they tended to shy away from formal clubs and groups. More often, they gathered together in loose cliques with other like-minded men.

These new groups were like outdoor fraternities. They were primarily spaces of male companionship and belonging full of larger-than-life characters and outlandish antics. Members in these groups were more interested their own attempts at difficult, dangerous climbing routes than creating welcoming spaces for novices and building inclusive communities. Some climbing areas, like Yosemite, became hypermasculine spaces during these decades.³²⁷ Even still, some women became members of these groups, especially those who proved they could hang with the boys. Elaine Matthews, Maria Cranor, Lynn Hill, and others all found their place in these largely homosocial groups, though many women did not. Tracing the histories of these groups helps us understand a moment in American climbing in which men—particularly young white men—created and led the culture of climbing.

The Dirty Sox Club: Montana's Postwar Mountain Men

On New Years Eve of 1972, Doug McCarty and Brian Leo were bivouacked on the summit of Granite Peak (12,799'), the highest point in the state of Montana. The two freshmen at Montana State University in Bozeman had arrived at their perch after scratching and clawing their way up the mountain's steep and imposing north face. As they shifted in their snow cave,

³²⁷ On hypermasculinity in Yosemite during these decades, see Taylor, *Pilgrims of the Vertical*, 190-232.

trying to stay warm, McCarty's toes froze in his boots.³²⁸ The two young men were miles away from their vehicle and far from any sort of rescue. It was up to them to figure out how survive the night and find a way off the mountain. If they didn't, their names would be added to the small yet growing list of young Montana climbers who had perished in the mountains.

Tragedy works in funny ways. Three years before McCarty and Leo found themselves struggling to stay warm on the top of Granite Peak, a group of five young Montana climbers had been buried in an avalanche while attempting the West Face of Mount Cleveland in Glacier National Park. Local newspapers carried stories about the missing boys, including the tragic realization that they had all been swept away by an avalanche. Some young Montanans, like McCarty, followed the story intently. Instead of being dissuaded by the accident, however, they were inspired by what they viewed as a heroic attempt to climb Mount Cleveland.³²⁹ This accident catalyzed a new generation of Montana climbers in the 1970s who became known by a funny name: The Dirty Sox Club.

The Montana climbing scene prior to the in the 1960s and 1970s was almost non-existent.³³⁰ Although Native peoples certainly climbed peaks in the region well before Euro-American fur trappers, soldiers, explorers, surveyors, and settlers took an interest in the state's mountainous regions, Montana did not develop a culture of mountaineering until after World War II. In the early twentieth century, groups like the Mazamas and the Mountaineers as well as individual climbers like Norman Clyde visited the state's mountainous areas to bag first

³²⁸ Douglas McCarty, "Strange Music," *Alpinist*, Autumn 2018, 104.

³²⁹ For an in depth chronicle of the accident and its effects on the Montana climbing community see Terry Kennedy, *In Search of the Mount Cleveland Five: The Aftermath of Montana's Worst Mountaineering Tragedy on Glacier Park's Highest Mountain* (Helena, MT: Farcountry Press, 2021). See also, McCarty, "Strange Music," 105.

³³⁰ For an overview of Montana's postwar climbing scene, see McCarty, 104-105.

ascents.³³¹ Local interest, however, was slow to catch on. Some Montanans, like forester Elers Koch, climbed mountains for adventure and fun, but they were the exception rather than the rule.³³² In these decades, most Montanans preferred to hunt and fish rather than spend their time toiling up mountains and clinging to cliff faces.³³³

In the 1960s and 1970s, things began to change. While the lack of formal clubs and groups made learning how to climb more difficult, small groups eventually formed in different places across the state. Missoula, Billings, and the small cities around Glacier National Park—Columbia Falls, Whitefish, and Kalispell—all developed small groups of mountaineers after war.³³⁴ Bozeman, however, became the central hub for climbers in the state. Montana State University attracted faculty members and instructors with experience and skill, like Pat Callis and Peter Lev, as well as rambunctious students like McCarty and Leo who wanted to learn the ropes.³³⁵

The Dirty Sox Club emerged out of the small yet enthusiastic Bozeman climbing scene in the early 1970s. As the story goes, the young men who passed away on Mount Cleveland had formed a small group they called the Wool Socks Club. After their passing, McCarty learned about the group's name from Lindalee Kanzler, the wife of climber Jim Kanzler, and became so excited that he thought they should carry on the group's name as a tribute. Linadalee, however, insisted that the name Wool Socks Club be retired because of the tragic circumstances surrounding the young men's passing. Instead, she suggested that they call their new group the

³³¹ McCarty, 104-105 and Todd Bauer, "Hiking Into the Past," *Going to the Sun Journal* 54 (2023): 13-15. Author's private collection.

³³² Elers Koch made the first known ascent of Granite Peak in 1923. For Elers Koch's account of his ascent of Granite Peak, see Elers Koch, *Forty Years a Forester* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 149-160.

³³³ McCarty, 105.

³³⁴ Kennedy, *In Search of the Mount Cleveland Five* and McCarty, "Strange Music," 104-105.

³³⁵ McCarty and Callis interview.

Dirty Sox Club, likely because of the stench and general demeanor of the young men who frequented her house after spending the day in the hills around Bozeman with her husband.³³⁶ McCarty, of course, thought this name was hilarious. He and Davy Vaughnn began to print small club membership cards in their high school art class. They gave membership cards to any person interested in joining the group. As McCarty explains it, the Dirty Sox Club was, more or less, one big joke.³³⁷

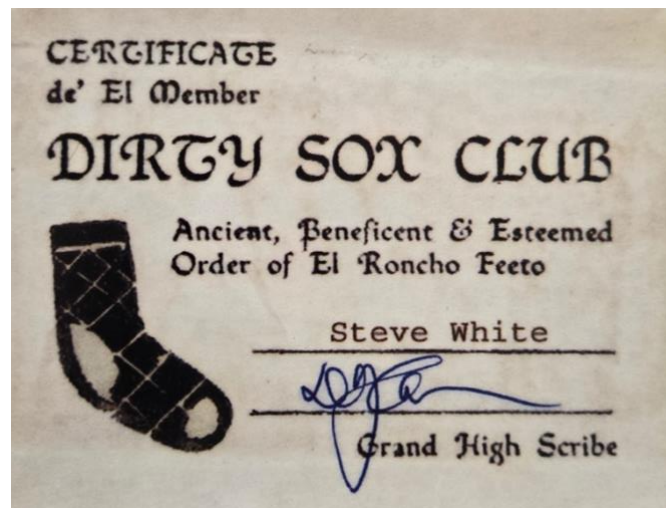


Figure 4.5. The Dirty Sox Club was an influential climbing group in Montana in the 1970s. This countercultural group had an off-beat sense of humor as evidenced by this membership card. Photo from Charles Bolte's "The Dirty Sox Club: Select Pages Exhibition" courtesy Doug McCarty.

Whether a joke or not, the Dirty Sox Club formed a tight knit group in the 1970s. Although they spent a considerable amount of time hanging onto vertical cliffs and frozen waterfalls, activities which require massive amounts of dexterity and strength, they did not think of themselves as athletes like later generations would. They saw themselves as outsiders. Instead

³³⁶ McCarty and Callis interview.

³³⁷ McCarty and Callis interview.

of training, they tended towards partying, hi-jinks, and shenanigans. Fringe activities with a hint of danger, like rock and ice climbing, fit their countercultural ethos. They styled themselves after the hard-drinking and hard-climbing Scottish mountaineering group Greagh Dhu Club, whose members came from working-class backgrounds during the Great Depression of the 1920s and 1930s.³³⁸ “I don’t know if I would have been drawn to [climbing] if I’d started at some popular sport crag,” wrote McCarty.³³⁹ For most of the club’s members, climbing was attractive precisely because it was not mainstream. Unlike earlier generations who tended to be respectable citizens, business professionals, and community leaders, these young men did not want to fit in with American society. They enjoyed being in wild places where they were free to act as they pleased away from societal structures, rules, and expectations.



Figure 4.6. Photo of Dirty Sox Club members in Red Lodge, Montana in March 1979. Like other countercultural groups during these decades, the Dirty Sox tended towards male companionship and camaraderie. Photo from Charles Bolte’s “The Dirty Sox Club: Select Pages Exhibition” courtesy Doug McCarty.

³³⁸ McCarty and Callis interview. For a bit on the Creagh Dhu Club, see Natalie Berry, “John Cullen: Creagh Dhu Climber,” *UKClimbing*, October 3, 2017.

https://www.ukclimbing.com/articles/features/john_cullen_creagh_dhu_climber-9547

³³⁹ McCarty, “Strange Music,” 104.

Women were not excluded from the group as a rule, but they were not recruited to join the club either.³⁴⁰ Unlike the WMCC where young women climbed alongside young men or NOLS where women participated in all-female expeditions or as members on co-ed expeditions, the Dirty Sox tended towards male camaraderie and partnerships. A photo of some group members at a house in Red Lodge, Montana underscores this point. In the photo, bearded and mustachioed young men stand close together on a porch. Many hold beer cans and smile at the camera. This cast of characters seems like they would be right at home at a Grateful Dead concert or cruising the streets of the Haight Ashbury. Nothing about them seems particularly serious or athletic. More to my point, there are no women present in the photo.

The Vulgarians: New Yorkers in the West

Elsewhere in the country, similar sorts of groups took shape in the 1960s and 1970s. The Shawangunks, an escarpment of rock near the town of New Paltz, New York in the Hudson Valley, has little in common with major western climbing destinations.³⁴¹ The cliff is relatively short and compact, rising to only a couple hundred feet at its highest point. Unlike the dry, spare environments of the West where sagebrush and other hardy plants thrive, the Shawangunks are shaded by deciduous trees—oaks, maples, beeches, and others—that become a riotous patchwork of yellows, oranges, and reds in autumn. Most seasons of the year, the cliff is humid. Spring can be wet while the summer heat can be stifling. You quickly become drenched in sweat while climbing.

³⁴⁰ McCarty and Callis interview.

³⁴¹ Joe Kelsey, *A Place in Which to Search: Summers in the Wind River Range* (Wilson, WY: Black Canyon Books, 2016), 8.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the Shawangunks, like the mountains of Montana, harbored a group of renegade climbers. Similar to the Dirty Sox Club, the Vulgarians were a loose group of individuals who were connected through their shared love of climbing and their general disregard for rules. Although a number of Vulgarians were first trained by the Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC), they eventually balked at the club's hierarchical structure and perceived rigidity.³⁴² The Vulgarians saw climbing as an extension of a non-conformist way of living. Their antics included all-night raves, indecent exposure, impromptu car races, and unknown quantities of drugs and alcohol.³⁴³ In general, however, the group's reputation was worse than its actual behavior. The Vulgarians were, explains ex-Vulgarian Joe Kelsey, "mostly city kids happily aware of underground currents sneaking into urban life: Kerouac, Kesey, Dylan. *Vulgarian* was synonymous with another pejorative: *Beatnik*."³⁴⁴

Although New Yorkers by birth and residence, many Vulgarians took an interest in the mountains, canyons, and cliffs of the American West. In 1959, a group of Vulgarians traveled to the Bugaboos, a range of granite spires in western British Columbia, after Dave Craft, one of the original Vulgarians, returned to New York with tales of large, unclimbed granite walls.³⁴⁵ On this trip, Vulgarians Art Gran, Dave Craft, Peter Geiser, Roman Sadowy, and Claude Suhl met Washington climbers Ed Cooper and his former partner turned rival, Fred Beckey.³⁴⁶ The

³⁴² "The Original Vulgarians," *The Vulgarian Chronicles, 1957-2016*, Accessed March 4, 2025, <http://www.vulgarianchronicles.net/vulgarianchronicles.net/Home.html>. See also, Joe Kelsey, "Climbing with Vulgarians," *Alpinist*, Winter 2020-2021, 63-64.

³⁴³ For these antics see Laura Waterman and Guy Waterman, *Yankee Rock and Ice: A History of Climbing in the Northeastern United States* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1993), 158; Chris Jones, *Climbing in North America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 217; and "The Original Vulgarians."

³⁴⁴ Kelsey, *A Place in Which to Search*, 15.

³⁴⁵ Peter Geiser, "The Vulgarians go to the Bugaboos," *The Vulgarian Chronicles*, Accessed March 6, 2025, <http://www.vulgarianchronicles.net/vulgarianchronicles.net/Bugaboos.html>.

³⁴⁶ Jones, *Climbing*, 251. See also, Geiser, "The Vulgarians."

Vulgarians teamed up with these Washington aces and put up some impressive new routes. After the Bugaboos, the group headed to the Tetons where they rendezvoused with a group of Californians that included Yvon Chouinard and Ken Weeks. In the Tetons, they also became friendly with Pete Sinclair, Dave Dornan, and Sterling Neal who had been hired by the Park Service to patrol the mountains and assist in rescues on the precipitous spires.³⁴⁷

After this trip, regular summer excursions to the West's climbing meccas ensued. Because many Vulgarians were students at colleges in the New York metro area, they waited until the end of the school to pack up their cars and hit the road West. In June 1966, Joe Kelsey and his friend John Hudson drove nonstop from Delaware, where Kelsey was attending graduate school, to Yosemite.³⁴⁸ In Yosemite, the pair connected with other Vulgarians and continued on to the Bugaboos. The next summer, Kelsey and Hudson went to the Canadian Rockies where they climbed Mount Robson and a new route on Mt. Geikie before heading back to Yosemite.³⁴⁹ Kelsey and Hudson were not alone. Other Vulgarians also made regular excursions out West. Although they were mainly rock climbers, some Vulgarians made expeditions to remote alpine areas in the West. For example, Al DeMaria, Claude Suhl, Aaron Schneider, Pete Geiser, John Hudson, and George Bloom visited the Kichatna Spires in Alaska in June 1965.³⁵⁰ Not being mountain climbers, they struggled with the fickle conditions presented by Alaskan mountains and only managed to climb three minor summits during their trip.³⁵¹ While they may not have been seasoned mountaineers, the Vulgarians continued to travel West each summer.

³⁴⁷ Geiser, "The Vulgarians."

³⁴⁸ Kelsey, "Climbing," 65.

³⁴⁹ Kelsey, 65.

³⁵⁰ See Katie Ives, *Imaginary Peaks: The Riesenstein Hoax and Other Mountain Dreams* (Seattle: Mountaineers Books, 2021), 179-187.

³⁵¹ Ives, *Imaginary Peaks*, 186.

Over the course of the 1960s and 1970s, a revolving cast of Vulgarians became regular fixtures in western climbing centers. “A Vulgarian arrival in Camp 4 [Yosemite] was cause for a bonfire,” Kelsey reminisced. In addition to Yosemite, the Vulgarians frequented the Tetons and the Cascades as well as the Canadian Rockies and the Bugaboos. Eventually, group members began to also make visits to less-travelled places, like the Wind River Range in Wyoming. These trips began after John Hudson visited the Deep Lake area with Yvon Chouinard, Art Gran, and Fred Beckey in 1961.³⁵² As word spread about these quiet, secluded mountains with tall, clean granite walls, others began to make their own trips into the wildflower strewn parks and glacial valleys of the Wind Rivers.

The West fascinated the Vulgarians. “Each spring,” explains Kelsey, “acquaintances [in the Shawangunks] exchanged a standard pleasantry, ‘Going to the mountains this summer?’”³⁵³ The mountains, of course, meant places beyond the Mississippi River not the Adirondacks, White Mountains, or Maine. For Kelsey and others who were used to the Shawangunks, “*The mountains* sounded magical.”³⁵⁴ The reality of western mountains did not disappoint. “The torments of long straight interstates were made instantly worthwhile by the first sight of the West,” explained Kelsey. “Late on the second afternoon of the nonstop drive, groggy after 2,000 miles, we crossed Togwotee Pass, and before us spread one of America’s classic views, the Teton skyline.”³⁵⁵ Raised on the relatively small mountains of the Northeast, the Vulgarians were enamored with western mountains and landscapes.

³⁵² Kelsey, *A Place*, 27 and Ives, *Imaginary Peaks*, 177.

³⁵³ Kelsey, 17.

³⁵⁴ Kelsey, 17.

³⁵⁵ Kelsey, 18.

Their West was a never-never land of sorts full of fun and adventure. The West, like the Shawangunks, became a place where these misfits, oddballs, and eccentrics could behave as they wanted. “Vulgarians climbed when they felt like it,” wrote Kelsey, “raised hell or lounged by a lake as the spirit moved them. They traveled as compadres, not an expedition. With no obligations, you were free to climb with your traveling companions, join others, or continue to other mountains.”³⁵⁶ The Vulgarians approached their Western summers with a live-and-let-live attitude. The West epitomized freedom, leisure, adventure, and good times. They knew the West through extended vacations, which colored the way they thought about the region. Myth, legend, and lore were central to their understanding of the people, landscapes, and history of the region.

A myth central to the Vulgarians’ understanding of the region concerned gender. In 1971, Jim McCarthy, one of the foremost Vulgarians of this period, wrote an article in *Summit* magazine in which he compared postwar climbers with the fur trappers of the early nineteenth century. In the article, titled “The Last Mountain Men and the Last Frontier,” McCarthy wrote about the “mountain men” who were

wild, free spirits ... drawn to the mountains seeking a freedom that could not be found east of the Mississippi in the early 1830’s. They were the first and opened the way west. I suggest that climbers active in this country prior to, say, 1965, were in many interesting ways similar to the first mountain men.³⁵⁷

McCarthy goes on to explain how climbers during the 1950s and 1960s were similar to these earlier eccentric individuals. “It was our good fortune,” he writes, “to be free to explore the great walls of Yosemite, pioneer the faces and ridges of the Cascades and Tetons and to develop the

³⁵⁶ Kelsey, 22.

³⁵⁷ Jim McCarthy, “The Last Mountain Men and the Last Frontier,” *Summit*, November-December 1971, 8. Author’s personal collection.

rock climbing areas of the Shawangunks and Tahquitz.”³⁵⁸ By likening postwar climbers, including the Vulgarians, to nineteenth century fur trappers, McCarthy made climbers the inheritors of a wild, free, and open West.

This sort of narrative rested on assumptions about race, gender, and region. Despite the region’s cultural, racial, and gender diversity, McCarthy’s story was about white men discovering the region and having wild adventures in the West. Women did not factor into this story, nor did Indigenous peoples, African Americans, Chinese laborers, or other non-white peoples. For postwar climbers, as for the nineteenth century mountain men the West was a place for “wild, free spirits.” In other words, white men like themselves. Scholars of Western history have spilled considerable ink critiquing mythic interpretations of the West like this, yet in McCarthy’s article we witness the enduring power of the masculine, Euro-American frontier myth to shape postwar experiences of the region.³⁵⁹

While the Vulgarians were a mostly male cast, there were a few female members of this raucous group who add some nuance and complexity to a totalizing narrative about gender in American climbing in the 1960s and 1970s. Elaine Matthews, for example, became acquainted with the Vulgarians after her first visit to the Shawangunks in 1965.³⁶⁰ Although there were other female Vulgarians during this period, Matthews stands out because she wanted to lead rather than

³⁵⁸ McCarthy, “The Last Mountain Men,” 8.

³⁵⁹ For critiques of the frontier myth, see Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1987); Richard White, “It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own”: *A New History of the American West* (Norman: Oklahoma University Press, 1991); Patricia Limerick, Clyde A. Milner II, and Charles E. Rankin, eds., *Trails: Toward a New Western History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991); and David M. Wrobel and Michael C. Steiner, eds., *Many Wests: Place, Culture, and Regional Identity* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997)

³⁶⁰ “Flashback: Elaine Matthews,” *Rock & Snow Blog*, Accessed April 17, 2025, <https://037200b.netsolhost.com/blog-page.php?Flashback-Elaine-Matthews-38>.

just follow routes.³⁶¹ Like all climbers, Matthews had ups and downs in her early career. Unlike her male counterparts, however, Matthews sometimes faced discrimination from male climbers, especially those who wanted to downgrade routes that she had led.³⁶² Despite the skepticism and criticism she faced, Matthews maintained relationships with the Vulgarians and has fond memories of her time with these men. In general, these were not toxic, hyper-masculine men. In fact, “Everyone was very accepting,” said Matthews. “Everything went and everyone was tolerated and embraced.”³⁶³ Matthews reminds us that even though young white men dominated climbing culture in the 1970s, for the most part, these men tended towards openness and acceptance rather than bigotry and hatred. More to the point, Matthews demonstrates that women continued to climb during these decades despite the relative lack of opportunities during these decades. It turns out, other women did, too.

The Stonemasters: California’s Hippie Rock Stars

As high school students in Upland, California in the early 1970s, John Long and his friend, Erick “Ricky” Accomazzo, spent most of their time daydreaming about climbing.³⁶⁴ When they weren’t in school, they practiced their ropework and skills on the small cliffs and boulders scattered around Southern California. They tore through mountaineering classics like Herman Buhl’s *Nanga Parbat Pilgrimage*, Gaston Rebuffat’s *Starlight and Storm*, and W.E. Bowman’s satirical *The Ascent of Rum Doodle*.³⁶⁵ Eventually, the two met Richard Harrison, a high school dropout, while searching for boulders in the canyons above Upland. In an apocryphal

³⁶¹ “Flashback,” *Rock & Snow Blog*.

³⁶² “Flashback,” *Rock & Snow Blog*.

³⁶³ “Flashback,” *Rock & Snow Blog*.

³⁶⁴ John Long, “A Short History of the Stonemasters,” in *The Stonemasters: California Rock Climbers in the Seventies* (Stonemaster Books, 2024), 25.

³⁶⁵ Long, “A Short History,” 26.

story, Long says that the Stonemasters were born during a late-night session in Harrison's basement in the foothills of the San Gabriel mountains. As "strains of Curtis Mayfield's *Superfly* mingl[ed] with clouds of weed smoke and tangy incense," someone coined the term and the name stuck.³⁶⁶

While the Stonemasters were scrambling around rocks in the San Gabriel mountains and getting high in Richard Harrison's basement, Southern California was well into its tenure as one of the places defining the larger culture of the region and nation. Leisure-oriented ways of living emerged in California at the turn of the nineteenth century and took off after World War II. "Southern California," says historian Lawrence Culver, "offer[ed] leisure as a permanent way of life."³⁶⁷ Although the Stonemasters had little interest in resorts, suburbs, and other middle-class spaces of leisure and recreation, they were shaped by this culture of leisure. As children during 1950s and 1960s, they came of age during a moment when more Californians and westerners had access to nature and outdoor recreation as well as the time to explore their interests.³⁶⁸ Many of the early Stonemasters were raised in the suburbs of California with access to outdoor spaces. Although they may have thought of themselves as outsiders and eccentrics for spending their free time monkeying around on boulders instead of playing organized sports, in reality theirs was a moment in which outdoor sports, like skiing, mountain biking, surfing, whitewater kayaking, and climbing, were becoming more popular across the West.³⁶⁹ The Stonemasters were not the first

³⁶⁶ Long, 29.

³⁶⁷ Lawrence Culver, *The Frontier of Leisure: Southern California and the Shaping of Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3.

³⁶⁸ On the culture of postwar outdoor recreation in the West, see John Findlay, *The Mobilized American West, 1940-2000* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2023), 94-108.

³⁶⁹ Gross, *Shopping All the Way*.

California climbers to pursue rock climbing full-time, but they knew how to put the style into lifestyle.³⁷⁰

Like the Vulgarians and Dirty Sox Club, the Stonemasters reveled in the countercultural elements that coursed through American society in the three decades after the end of World War II. Their name, explains historian Joseph Taylor, was a “double entendre about their free-climbing and recreational prowess.”³⁷¹ Similar to other young people during this period, the Stonemasters experimented with drugs. In particular, they were drawn to hallucinogens like marijuana, psilocybin mushrooms, and LSD. With these preferences, the Stonemasters were like other California hippies during the 1960s and 1970s. They differed, however, in their embrace of athletic pursuits. As much as they partied and got stoned, they also trained for rock climbing with an obsessive fervor and intensity. With minds opened by hallucinogens and bodies honed by pullups, weight lifting, and other physical activity, the Stonemasters ruled the boulders, cliffs, and big walls of California in the 1970s and into the 1980s. From Tahquitz, Suicide Rocks, and Joshua Tree to Yosemite Valley and Tuolumne Meadows, the Stonemasters set the standard for others both in terms of climbing and in terms of lifestyle.

In 1975, Billy Westbay, Jim Bridwell, and John Long climbed *The Nose* on El Capitan in Yosemite National Park, a 3,000’ route of steep, punishing granite, in a single day. The ascent demonstrated their unique blend of physical strength, speed, and extreme risk taking.³⁷² It was a statement about their prowess and abilities; they proved that they were better than everyone else. In a staged photo taken the day after the climb, the three men stand together in El Cap Meadow,

³⁷⁰ For an early generation of California climbers that pursued rock climbing as a way of life, see Taylor, *Pilgrims of the Vertical*, 107-174.

³⁷¹ Taylor, *Pilgrims of the Vertical*, 198.

³⁷² Taylor, *Pilgrims of the Vertical*, 211-212.

their arms resting on each other's shoulders.³⁷³ Westbay wears a psychedelic patterned tunic and a hat that Dennis Hopper could have worn in the classic counterculture film "Easy Rider."

Bridwell stands beside him in a paisley vest, his long hair flowing from a headband, a cigarette dangling from his upper lip. Next to Bridwell, Long poses with a hand on his hip, his brightly colored paisley shirt open to reveal his muscular chest. He, too, dangles a cigarette from his mouth, his long hair wrapped up in a patterned scarf. The picture captures the energy, style, and attitude of the group. They were modern day rock stars with attitudes and egos that matched the height of Yosemite's greatest walls.

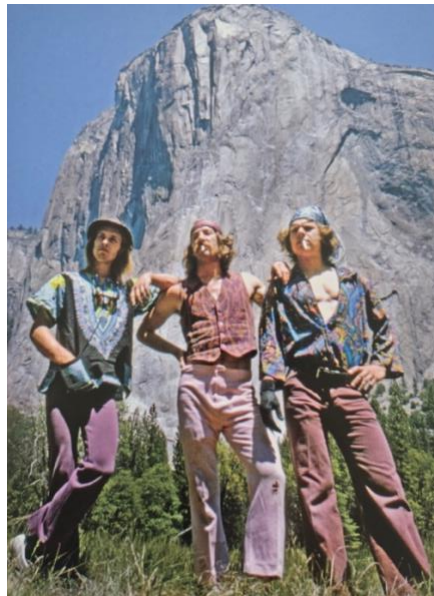


Figure 4.7. Billy Westbay, Jim Bridwell, and John Long after making the first one day ascent of El Capitan in Yosemite National Park in 1975. The Stonemasters embraced the California hippie culture of the 1960s and 1970s. In this iconic photo documenting their historic ascent as well as the culture of rock climbing in Yosemite during this period, their masculine energy is palpable. Photo by Mike White in *The Stonemasters: California Rock Climbers in the Seventies* by John Long and Dean Fidelman.

³⁷³ See Chris van Leuven, "Now Available: Posters of First NIAD (Nose in a Day)," *Gripped*, November 25, 2024, <https://gripped.com/profiles/now-available-posters-of-first-niad-nose-in-a-day/>.

Their masculine energy is palpable. With their psychedelic shirts and cigarettes, they mix Jimi Hendrix and Marlon Brando in a swirl of countercultural cool. However, white men doing cutting cutting-edge climbs in Yosemite was nothing new in 1975. For more than two decades, white men had dominated the Yosemite climbing scene.³⁷⁴ The Stonemasters were simply the most recent group to hold court in Camp 4, the historic climber campground in the park.³⁷⁵ While the Stonemasters may have been macho-men, they did not categorically exclude women from their ranks. Maria Cranor and Mari Gingery joined the Stonemasters in the 1970s. They were soon joined by Lynn Hill who became central fixture of the group and took the sport of rock climbing to new heights in the 1980s and 1990s.



Figure 4.8. Maria Cranor was a member of the Stonemasters and leading female climber in the 1970s. Despite the lack of opportunities for women to pursue the sport in the 1970s, Cranor pursued her passion for climbing. She helped carve out a place for herself and other women in the male dominated scene. In the 1980s, she worked alongside Peter Metcalf at Chouinard Equipment and was a key component in the success of Black Diamond Equipment in the 1990s. Photo from Black Diamond Equipment.

³⁷⁴ For Yosemite's gender dynamics, see Taylor, *Pilgrims of the Vertical*.

³⁷⁵ For more on Camp 4, see Andy Kirk and Charles Palmer, "When Nature Becomes Culture: The National Register and Yosemite's Camp 4," *Western Historical Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 496-506.

Maria Cranor was raised in the San Francisco in the 1950s. Although she spent some time in her youth scrambling on the rocks above China Beach with her siblings, she was not particularly fond of the outdoors until a family trip to Yosemite in her twenties.³⁷⁶ After this trip, Cranor and her friend, Nancy Henderson, set out on a climbing road trip in Cranor's small hatchback. "We'd picked out some routes we thought we could do," Cranor wrote in a 2010 Patagonia catalog, "and we were primed for our first trip to the Valley—girls on the loose with rope, rack, and, we hoped, the chops to hold our own at the epicenter of the climbing universe."³⁷⁷ In Yosemite, Cranor and Henderson met Stonemasters Jim Bridwell, Dale Bard, John Long, and Mike Graham and struck up a friendship.³⁷⁸ In 1976, Cranor was the first woman to climb *Valhalla* at Tahquitz, a notoriously difficult slab of rock with few hand and footholds.³⁷⁹ Reflecting on her aunt's climbing life, Cranor's niece, Alastair Boone, wrote, "She spent the requisite time living in the parking lot of Yosemite's legendary Camp 4 and climbing the crags of Joshua Tree devoting the daylight hours to the wall and making lifelong friends at night."³⁸⁰ Cranor proved she could hang with the Stonemasters. More importantly, she inspired other women to take up the sport in the male-dominated scene of the 1970s and 1980s and served as a mentor for these women.³⁸¹

³⁷⁶ Alastair Boone, "Maria Cranor, 1946-2023," *The American Alpine Journal* 65, no. 97 (2023): 355. <http://publications.americanalpineclub.org/articles/13201216534>.

³⁷⁷ Maria Boone Cranor, "Sandbagged by the Stonemasters," in *Valley of Giants: Stories from Women at the Heart of Yosemite Climbing*, ed. Lauren DeLaunay Miller (Seattle: Mountaineers Books, 2022), 105.

³⁷⁸ Boone Cranor, "Sandbagged," 106.

³⁷⁹ Boone, "Maria Cranor" For more on *Valhalla*, see John Long and Dean Fidelman, *The Stonemasters: California Rock Climbers in the Seventies* (Stonemaster Books, 2024), 33-34 and 49-56.

³⁸⁰ Boone, "Maria Cranor"

³⁸¹ See Russ Clune, "A Climber We Lost: Maria Cranor," *Climbing*, January 19, 2023, <https://www.climbing.com/people/remembering-maria-cranor/>.

If Cranor created the space for other women to climb, Lynn Hill demonstrated just how exceptional female climbers could be. Like Long, Accomazzo, Harrison, and the other Stonemasters, Hill grew up in the suburbs of Southern California.³⁸² A former gymnast, Hill took quickly to the sport and became known for her exceptional grace, balance, and strength. “Her diminutive body could not reach the same holds as tall climbers,” wrote Yosemite climbing historian Joseph Taylor, “but her thin fingers gained proportionally better purchase on the hardest routes’ tiny cracks and nubbins. Her strength-to-weight ratio enabled her to move with unusual grace.”³⁸³ John Long remembered the crowds that gathered below cliffs where Hill climbed. “Everyone used to stop and watch when Lynn went to work,” explained Long.³⁸⁴ She was an exceptional athlete in a group of extremely talented climbers.

A chance encounter with the Stonemasters altered the course of Hill’s life. After meeting Long and some other Stonemasters in Joshua Tree, Hill became swept up by this group of oddballs, daredevils, and misfits. “I was thrilled to join this group of friends who were actively pushing the standards of free climbing every weekend or holiday possible,” She wrote. “I felt a part of a special clan of people in which climbing was our sacred ritual.”³⁸⁵ Like the other Stonemasters, she developed an affinity for Yosemite. “During that period [1978 to 1982],” she wrote in a retrospective essay, “I spent most of my summer vacations climbing in Yosemite Valley [with] Jim Birdwell, Ron Kauk, and John Yablonsky, or Yabo as he was known. We were

³⁸² Lynn Hill, “The Stone Masters,” *Lynn Hill Climbing*, Accessed March 12, 2025, <https://lynnhillclimbing.com/media/essays/the-stone-masters/>.

³⁸³ Taylor, *Pilgrims of the Vertical*, 234.

³⁸⁴ John Long, “Little Lynnie,” in *The Stonemasters: California Rock Climbers in the Seventies*, eds. John Long and Dean Fidelman (Stonemaster Books, 2024), 105.

³⁸⁵ Hill, “The Stone Masters.”

bonded by our desire to master every form of rock climbing around from the boulders of Camp 4, to the classic Valley free routes, to the big wall routes on El Capitan.”³⁸⁶

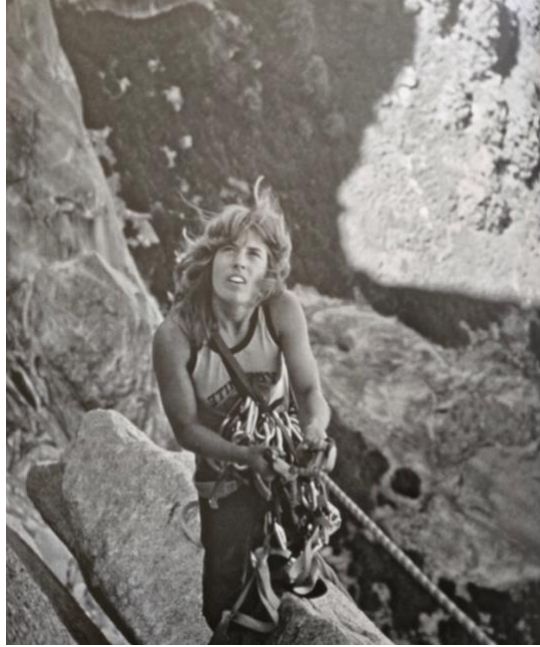


Figure 4.9. Lynn Hill on Half Dome in Yosemite National Park. Hill became one of the best climbers in America during the 1980s and 1990s, completing the first free climb of El Capitan in 1993. Hill got her start with the Stonemasters in California. Photo by Charles Row in *The Stonemasters: California Rock Climbers in the Seventies* by John Long and Dean Fidelman

Eventually, Hill left California for other places, including a stint in the Shawangunks during the 1980s and Smith Rock in the 1990s. Along the way, she began to compete in climbing competitions, first in Europe then in America.³⁸⁷ In 1993, Hill returned to Yosemite to make the coveted first free ascent of *The Nose* on El Capitan.³⁸⁸ With British climber Simon Nadin, Hill succeeded in being the first person—man or woman—to free climb *The Nose*. It was a

³⁸⁶ Hill, “The Stone Masters.”

³⁸⁷ Lynn Hill, “Catching a Thermal,” *Lynn Hill Climbing*, Accessed March 13, 2025, <https://lynnhillclimbing.com/media/essays/catching-a-thermal-climbing-magazine-dec-1987/>.

³⁸⁸ Hill, “The Stone Masters.”

monumental achievement. She capped off the ascent with a now famous quip: “It goes boys!”³⁸⁹

Although Hill may not have eradicated sexism from the sport, she demonstrated to other American women in the 1980s and 1990s that women belonged in these places, too.³⁹⁰

* * *

These sections highlight how climbing culture in the West—and nation—changed during the 1960s, 1970s, and into the 1980s. Most notably, groups consisting primarily of young white men interested in alternative lifestyles came to the forefront of the sport during these decades. Although these groups and individuals have been the focus of numerous histories and retrospectives of the sport, both popular and scholarly, women continued to climb at high levels.³⁹¹ Although white men led the sport during these years,. As noted, a few outstanding individuals, like Elaine Matthews, Maria Cranor, and Lynn Hill, climbed in these mostly male groups. While these women made space for themselves and a few others in these mostly male groups, other women climbed in all-female teams during these decades. In general, these women have been overlooked in histories of the sport, even though they offer important counterpoints to the culture of male climbing that has often been the focus of mountaineering writers, scholars, and historians.

³⁸⁹ Cody Cottier, “‘It goes boys’: Lynn Hill reflects on four decades of climbing as Mountain Story keynote speaker,” *Jackson Hole News and Guide*, January 14, 2020, https://www.jhnewsandguide.com/scene/events/it-goes-boys-lynn-hill-reflects-on-four-decades-of-climbing-as-mountain-story-keynote/article_75883b7c-9ec3-58a6-bd37-5d20f9a50786.html

³⁹⁰ For sexism, see Taylor, *Pilgrims*, 234.

³⁹¹ For a popular history, see Chris Jones, *Climbing in North America*. For more scholarly histories that have a similar focus, see Isserman, *Continental Divide* as well as Taylor, *Pilgrims of the Vertical*, though Taylor tends to be more critical of this homosocial culture than Isserman.

Counterpoint(s): The Denali Damsels and Other “Manless”
Ascents in the 1970s

The advertisement Arlene Blum received in the mail said she could join the upcoming expedition to Denali as a cook but not as climber. Feeling insulted, she loaded her backpack with bricks and went for a training run in the hills of Berkeley, California where she was attending graduate school.³⁹² Blum was resolute about what she wanted: “To Denali I would go,” she later wrote in an article for *Summit* magazine. After exchanging letters with Grace Hoeman, a doctor from Anchorage, Alaska, the two began to recruit team members for an all-women’s ascent of Denali for the spring of 1970. They recruited Margaret Young and Dana Isherwood, two California climbers with big mountain experience, along with Faye Kerr and Margaret Young from New Zealand. The six-women team gave themselves a memorable name: “The Denali Damsels.”

In June 1970, the Damsels met in Fairbanks, Alaska to get their expedition underway. After some testing at the Institute of Arctic Biology in Fairbanks, Don Sheldon flew the women—and their massive pile of food and equipment weighing over nine hundred pounds—onto the Kahiltna glacier. From late June to early July, the Damsels ferried their supplies up the mountain, establishing camps and acclimatizing to the high-altitude and arctic weather as they went. Like most Denali aspirants, they faced extreme heat as well as extreme cold, arduous trail breaking with heavy backpacks, route-finding challenges, and issues related to altitude. The women, however, persevered. By the early days of July, they had positioned themselves to make a bid for the summit of North America.

³⁹² Arlene Blum, “The Damsels and Denali,” *Summit*, May 1971, 19. Author’s personal collection.

On July 6th, the women rose early to make their summit push. As they ascended, “The rock crystals stood out vividly in the clean air. Everything was sharp and more clearly defined than lower down,” wrote Arlene Blum. “The snow crystals sparkling white, the sky a deep dark blue, the neighboring peaks now benignly magnificent.”³⁹³ After considering turning around because of high winds, the women pushed ahead along the long summit ridge and eventually arrived, together, at the highest point on the continent. Although they were tired, they posed for summit photos with the “Denali Damsels” flag Isherwood had sewn for the group.³⁹⁴ As experienced mountaineers, they knew the most challenging part of the climb lay ahead of them. Wisely, they did not linger long on the roof of North America.



Figure 4.10. The Denali Damsels on the summit of Denali, the tallest mountain in North America, in 1970. This photo was also the cover of *Summit* magazine in May 1971. The Damsels were the first all-female team to climb Denali. They offer an important counterpoint to the masculine climbing groups that dominated American climbing during the 1960s and 1970s. Photo of *Summit* magazine cover from the author’s private collection.

³⁹³ Blum, “The Damsels,” 21.

³⁹⁴ Blum, 21, 26.

Their descent proved to be anything but simple. Grace Hoeman had been feeling the effects of altitude and collapsed soon after leaving the summit. The rest of the Damsels constructed a makeshift stretcher out of a packframe and climbing rope and carried her down the mountain. Fortunately, the weather remained clear and once Hoeman was below 18,000 feet she regained her strength and was able to continue down under her own power. After getting Hoeman down from the summit, the women faced a prolonged storm at 10,000 feet in which they worked tirelessly to keep their tents from “being buried or blown away.”³⁹⁵ As the storm raged, they discussed “climbing in warm, sunny places while eating popcorn and cheesecake.”³⁹⁶ When the storm finally abated, they made their way to basecamp and eventually back to Talkeetna. After arriving back in Talkeetna, the Damsels returned to Fairbanks where they eventually went their separate ways. “The train to Fairbanks was full of tourists taking photos of what they thought was Mt. McKinley,” wrote Blum. “Denali was actually well-hidden by clouds, but I knew what it looked like, so I just sat there and smiled.”³⁹⁷

The Damsels were the first all-female team to climb Denali. Although mountaineer Miriam O’Brien Underhill had encouraged other women to take part in “manless alpine climbing” in an article for *National Geographic* in 1934, all-women mountaineering teams remained uncommon in the 1970s. When the Damsels traveled to Denali, “there was an attitude that climbing was something that men did together and that women ... didn’t fit in,” explained Arlene Blum.³⁹⁸ Yet this was a moment of change in American society. As women’s liberation

³⁹⁵ Blum, 26.

³⁹⁶ Blum, 26.

³⁹⁷ Blum, 26.

³⁹⁸ “Legacy Series, Episode 7: Arlene Blum,” *The American Alpine Club*, Accessed April 12, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gw0lNmhKiMY&list=PL6Kr757l-kx1SCwSwWgphd0WXnZ2Pfxaq&index=5>.

and feminism swept college campuses, American women began to think differently about their roles in society, including their participation in sports like mountaineering. As the Damsels proved, women were capable of climbing mountains without the support or assistance of men. The mountains offered opportunities for women to build relationships with one another, just as it had for American men.

Like the Damsels, other women climbed together during these years. Sibylle Hechtel and Bev Johnson had been regulars in Yosemite National Park when they decided to make an attempt on El Capitan together in 1973. Like the Damsels, Hechtel and Johnson faced a number of hardships during their ascent, including a smashed finger, hauling heavy loads, and precarious sleeping ledges and stances.³⁹⁹ Despite these challenges and setbacks, the two forged ahead. Over the course of seven days, Hechtel and Johnson became the first all-women team to successfully climb El Capitan, a prized accomplishment for climbers all over the world. Like the Damsels, Hechtel and Johnson demonstrated that women were capable climbers who did not need the support of men in the mountains.

³⁹⁹ Sibylle Hechtel, "Walls Without Balls," in *Valley of Giants: Stories from Women at the Heart of Yosemite Climbing*, editor Lauren DeLauny Miller (Seattle: Mountaineers Books, 2022), 62-66. Hechtel originally wrote an article for the *American Alpine Journal* in 1974 about her and Johnson's ascent but the editors change Hechtel's original title, which they thought was too racy for the journal.



Figure 4.11. Photo of Beverly Johnson on the summit of El Capitan in Yosemite National Park after making the first all-female ascent of three-thousand-foot-tall big wall in 1973. This ascent, which she completed with her partner, Sibylle Hechtel, in 1973, can be considered an alternative to the male dominated narratives of climbing. Photo by Sibylle Hechtel in *Valley of Giants: Stories of Women at the Heart of Yosemite Climbing* by Lauren DeLaunay Miller.

Though these ascents may have been the exception rather than the rule during these years, they offer important counterpoints to consider. Taken together, they demonstrate an alternative to traditional narratives of rock climbing and mountaineering that tend to foreground white men as the leaders of climbing culture. As these two teams demonstrate, some women were interested in cultivating an alternative, women's focused climbing culture during these decades. Although women had long participated in the sport, these all-women teams were different because they climbed without men.

Today, all-female teams in the mountains are common as are books, articles, and accounts of women climbing. Together, they have begun to offer histories of the sport that foreground women and their accomplishments. For example, the *American Alpine Journal* published an article in 2020 in which they highlighted past achievements by female climbers that had been

overlooked during their time.⁴⁰⁰ Other articles and books have explored the history of women climbing in major American climbing areas like Yosemite and the Tetons.⁴⁰¹ While I acknowledge that women played influential roles in the history of the sport, I do not want to incorrectly overemphasize their role during these decades. Yes, women climbed during the 1960s and 1970s, but they remained a minority during these decades. Nevertheless, exploring the stories and experiences of women mountaineers offer important counternarratives to the typical stories told about American climbing.

BIPOC and LGBTQ+ Climbers, 1980s-2010s

Although women like Blum, Hechtel, and Johnson created space for later women like Elaine Matthews, Maria Cranor, and Lynn Hill, the sport remained the domain of white men into the early 1980s. In the 1980s, however, shifts within the sport contributed to more gender and racial diversity by the early decades of the twenty-first century.⁴⁰² Most histories of the sport in the 1980s have focused on the rift over technology and ethics that occurred between traditionalists and sport climbers, while most mountaineering historians have yet to seriously consider the impact of climbing gyms on the sport. Rather than rehash the debates between traditionalists and sport climbers, I focus on how sport climbing and gyms were instrumental in expanding who climbed in America.

⁴⁰⁰ Sarah Hart, “State of the Art: Expanding the Coverage of Women’s Climbing in the AAJ,” *American Alpine Journal* 62, no. 94 (2020): 48-61.

⁴⁰¹ For older works that foreground women, see Schrepfer, *Nature’s Altars* and Robertson, *Magnificent Mountain Women: Adventures in the Colorado Rockies* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990). For more recent works that focus on women’s histories, see Miller, *Valley of Giants* and Ellison, “Onward & Upward.”

⁴⁰² Of course, shifts in larger American society also affected the increased diversity of the sport. As mountaineering historian Maurice Isserman reminds us, “... American climbers ... were and are the products of their own eras, and the reasons why they climb, as well as the ways that they climb, can help map a larger cultural, political, and social terrain.” Isserman, *Continental Divide*, 2. We might include “who” to Isserman’s list of “why” and “how” Americans have climbed in the past and present.

The story of the shift from traditional climbing to sport climbing in America is well traveled terrain. However, before we proceed, a short review is in order.⁴⁰³ To put it briefly, beginning in the 1980s technological changes accompanied changes in style and attitudes in American climbing. Local developments at places like Smith Rock as well as visiting European climbers spurred groups of climbers across the West to explore and ultimately embrace the use of bolts to protect difficult rock climbs. Although traditionalists like John Bachar, Henry Barber, and others pushed back against sport climbers and what they saw as cheating, the widespread appeal of sport climbing overwhelmed the traditionalists' tirades.⁴⁰⁴ By the early 1990s, sport climbers had developed new cliffs and areas that became popular with American and international climbers. A whole new geography emerged in the West. Craggs like Wild Iris, American Fork Canyon, and the Virgin River Gorge became as popular as some of the nation's older, historic climbing areas like the Tetons and High Sierras. With its relative lack of risk and danger, sport climbing appealed to more Americans than traditional climbing ever did. This shift from "traditional" climbing to sport climbing is one reason the number of climbers in America grew so much over the course of the second half of the century.

⁴⁰³ For academic writing on this topic, see Taylor, *Pilgrims of the Vertical*, 229-232. For popular accounts, see Jeff Smoot, *Hangdog Days: Conflict, Change, and the Race for 5.14* (Seattle: Mountaineers Books, 2019) and Don Mellor, *American Rock: Region, Rock, and Culture in American Climbing* (Woodstock, VT: The Countryman Press, 2001), 32-37.

⁴⁰⁴ On the Great Debate, see Taylor, 229.

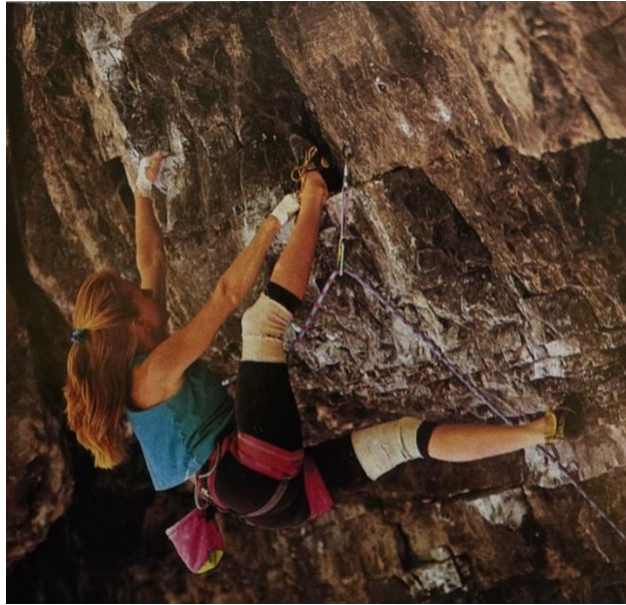


Figure 4.12. The acceptance of sport climbing in the 1990s at places like American Fork Canyon, Utah (pictured here) made rock climbing safer and more appealing to Americans. With the focus on gymnastic movements rather than boldness and risk, more people—both men and women—found rock climbing to be a fun, recreational activity. The numbers of climbers in America exploded during the 1990s and 2000s as sport climbing and climbing gyms made the sport more accessible. Photo by Brian Bailey from *Climbing* magazine article about American Fork Canyon, Utah from December 1990/January 1991 issue.

While sport climbing helped grow the sport in the 1990s, the construction of indoor climbing gyms in America in the 1990s and 2000s cemented climbing as an accepted, popular recreational activity. Around the time the first climbing competition in America occurred at Snowbird, Utah in 1988, climbers began to envision and build the first indoor climbing gyms in the Pacific Northwest and Northern California.⁴⁰⁵ Though the first gyms were initially places for

⁴⁰⁵ For climbing gyms in the Pacific Northwest, see “Climbing The Walls,” *GQ*, November 1988, 215-216; Jon Krakauer, “Fitness: Climbing the Wall,” *Playboy*, February 1995, 30; “Indoor rock climbing—and skiing—in Portland, Seattle,” *Sunset*, November 1988, 5; and Andy Dappen, “Social Climbers: Northwest rock jocks take it undercover,” *Pacific Northwest*, October 1988, 12-13. All articles from Rich Johnston’s personal collection. For Peter Mayfield’s City Rock climbing gym in the San Francisco Bay area, see Bruce Hildenbrand, “Meet the Guy Who Invented the Belay Test—and the Modern American Climbing Gym: The Story of California’s City Rock,” *Climbing*, March 18, 2025, <https://www.climbing.com/people/peter-mayfield-belay-test-modern-american-climbing-gym-history/>.

hardcore climbers to train when the weather was inclement, over time climbing gyms became more beginner-friendly and family-friendly. As climbing gyms became ubiquitous in urban and suburban areas, they became places where families, youth, and young professionals got together, socialized, and tried out climbing. In the 1990s and 2000s, indoor gyms introduced countless people to the sport, many of whom lived far from the outdoor crags, cliffs, canyons, and mountains where previous generations of climbers had congregated.



Figure 4.13. Climbing gyms, like the Vertical Club in Seattle, Washington, became social hubs for the sport in the 1990s. These gyms introduced countless new people who lived in urban and suburban areas to the sport in the 1990s and 2000s. Eventually, climbing gyms led to more diversity in the sport as BIPOC and LGBTQ+ climbers started climbing urban and suburban gyms before venturing to outdoor crags and cliffs across the West. Photo from Rich Johnston's personal collection.

The emergence and growth of gyms transformed who climbed in the 1990s and 2000s. Urban gyms became gathering places where BIPOC and LGBTQ+ climbers gathered and organized in the 2000s. If women (primarily white and often, though not always, heterosexual) had always been present, if sometimes marginalized, in climbing and mountaineering spaces

throughout the twentieth century, the American climbing scene became even more diverse in the 2000s. As Colorado historian Ruth Alexander notes in her recent book about Longs Peak, in the first decades of the twenty-first century, “climbing organizations that inspire and train climbers from diverse backgrounds have emerged all over the country.”⁴⁰⁶ As we’ve seen, efforts to introduce inner-city youth from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds to rock climbing and mountaineering began long before the first decades of the twenty-first century; however, in the twenty-first century groups led by historically marginalized peoples have burst onto the scene. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, “Black, Brown, Asian, and Native women and men are participating enthusiastically in climbing,” writes Alexander.⁴⁰⁷ So, too, are LGBTQ+ climbers. As Alexander reminds us, “climber demographics and identity are in flux” in our present moment.⁴⁰⁸

As the identities of climbers have shifted, so has the culture of the sport. BIPOC and LGBTQ+ climbers have challenged historic climbing organizations like the American Alpine Club, the Access Fund, the American Mountain Guides Association, NOLS, Outward Bound, and regional clubs like the Mazamas, Mountaineers, and Colorado Mountain Club to recognize diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) as core tenants of their organizations.⁴⁰⁹ Many have responded affirmatively to these calls for greater accessibility and representation. Most, if not all,

⁴⁰⁶ Alexander, *Democracy’s Mountain*, 211.

⁴⁰⁷ Alexander, 211.

⁴⁰⁸ Alexander, 209.

⁴⁰⁹ For examples of how these groups have embraced Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, see “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion,” *American Mountain Guides Association*, accessed April 20, 2025, <https://amga.com/diversity-equity-inclusion/>; “Access Fund Gives \$10K to Advance Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in Climbing,” *Climbing*, July 18, 2024, <https://www.climbing.com/news/access-fund-justice-equity-diversity-and-inclusion-in-climbing/>; “Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion,” *National Outdoor Leadership School*, accessed April 20, 2025, <https://www.nols.edu/en/about/diversity-equity-and-inclusion/>; and “Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging,” *Mazamas*, accessed April 20, 2025, <https://mazamas.org/dei/>.

have critically examined the histories of their organizations and have sought to create initiatives and programs to better support climbers from historically marginalized groups. For example, the American Alpine Club has created a program called Climb United that supports groups who seek to make the sport more welcoming and accessible to people from historically marginalized backgrounds.⁴¹⁰



Figure 4.14. Photo from a Brown Girls Climb Meetup event in New York City in December 2023. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and women's specific climbing organizations and groups have pushed for greater diversity in American rock climbing and mountaineering. Many of these groups have used climbing gyms to recruit interested members as well as host regular events. Photo from Brown Girls Climb Instagram page.

At the same time, other groups have formed who are creating spaces for people who have historically been left out of American climbing culture. Organizations like Flash Foxy, Brown Girls Climb, NativeOutdoors, and others have become influential in the outdoor recreation industry. These organizations support female, BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and adaptive climbers through

⁴¹⁰ See "Climb United," *American Alpine Club*, accessed April 20, 2025, <https://americanalpineclub.org/climb-united>.

education, festivals, and media campaigns. Many have created affinity groups where people who share similar identities and orientations meet and recreate with one another. These groups have also challenged popular and successful outdoor companies like Patagonia, The North Face, and Black Diamond to consider who they feature in advertisements and support as athletes and brand ambassadors. Whereas women, BIPOC, and LGBTQ+ individuals were uncommon figures in climbing advertisements, accounts, and articles before the 1990s, since the turn of the twenty-first century they have become regular figures in climbing media. Articles, blog posts, and short films about historically underrepresented peoples have become more common in the past two decades.⁴¹¹



Figure 4.15. Lor Sabourin, an athlete for Patagonia and the subject of a 2021 short film titled "They/Them," which documents Sabourin's experiences as a transgender climber in the American West. Sabourin is one example of how LGBTQ+ and BIPOC climbers are more regularly featured in climbing media and advertisements since the turn of the twenty-first century. Photo from Patagonia online article about "They/Them" from 2021.

⁴¹¹ For examples of films like this, see "They/Them," *Patagonia* (2021), accessed April 20, 2025, <https://www.patagonia.com/stories/they-them/video-102573.html> and "Black Ice," *Reel Rock* (2021), accessed April 20, 2025, <https://www.redbull.com/us-en/episodes/reel-rock-s7-e9>.

While drawing any definitive conclusions about the effects these individuals, organizations, and groups have had on American climbing culture may be premature at this point, one thing is clear: social justice is now a part of American outdoor recreation culture. The energy and enthusiasm of women, BIPOC, and LGBTQ+ individuals and organizations have had demonstrable effects on the outdoor industry and the wider culture of outdoor recreation in America. Today, urban climbing gyms are places where diverse individuals and groups meet for exercise and community. Outdoor climbing areas across the West are much more diverse today than they were thirty years ago. At popular climbing areas like Smith Rock, Oregon; Eldorado Canyon, Colorado; Little Cottonwood Canyon, Utah; Hyalite Canyon, Montana; Index, Washington; and elsewhere, climbers from diverse backgrounds recreate alongside one another. If these places were historically the domain of white men (and women), today they are places that better reflect the racial and gender diversity of the region and nation.

Conclusion

Since the end of World War II, the social landscape of climbing in America has undergone dramatic shifts. While these shifts may not be tectonic in nature, they have resulted in significant alterations to the social landscape of the sport. Opportunities to participate in these sports have expanded as new spaces, organizations, and groups have proliferated. College outing clubs, outdoor programs, and affinity groups have created more ways people to learn the ropes and experience the deep satisfaction that climbing can provide. More recently, indoor climbing gyms in urban, suburban, and rural areas have allowed people without easy access to outdoor areas to try out the sport. As ways to participate in climbing have grown, the sport has become both more popular and more diverse.

Over the past seventy years, men, women, BIPOC, and LGBTQ+ climbers have sought out the West's cliffs, mountains, and summits. Sometimes they have done this together in co-ed and multicultural groups. At other times, they have done this in the company of others with whom they share certain identities and affinities. In ways both subtle and overt, these historical realities challenge simplistic narratives of rock climbing and mountaineering that have tended to foreground mostly white men and their experiences. More importantly, these narratives reveal the powerful role that outdoor recreation played in postwar American's conceptions of themselves. Climbing grounded people's identities in particular sites and landscapes.

HIGH PLACES: CONTESTED HISTORIES OF CLIMBING IN THE NORTH AMERICAN WEST

In a May 12, 1971 letter, Charles S. Damon, Director of the Navajo Parks and Recreation Department, reminded Steve Roper, the editor of the Sierra Club's mountaineering journal *Ascent*, of a recent change in tribal policy. He wrote:

Many requests come to the Navajo Tribe for permission to climb one or more of the monoliths on the reservation. It is the policy of the Tribe to prohibit anyone from climbing any of these monoliths: Shiprock, Rainbow Bridge, the Totem Pole, Spider Rock, and any and all others.⁴¹²

The opening of Damon's letter was unambiguous: rock climbing was not allowed on the reservation.

Damon gave two reasons for the decision. First, he explained, "A practical and easily understandable reason is the nature of the rocks themselves, which cannot withstand unnecessary attrition to any degree. This has been argued by various would-be climbers, but the Tribe is making no exceptions."⁴¹³ Damon's first reason suggests how rock climbing had grown as a recreational activity in the West since the end of World War II as well as Euro-American climbers' fascination with the high places of the Navajo reservation. It was unclear whether the soft sandstone could withstand countless ascents. Damon recognized this point was debatable, but he held firm to his position. "A second reason and one that admits of no argument," wrote Damon, "is that the monoliths of the Navajo reservation are considered sacred places."⁴¹⁴ His second point drove to the heart of the matter. The towers and spires that Euro-American climbers

⁴¹² Charles S. Damon to Steve Roper, May 12, 1971, "Desert Pioneers," American Alpine Club, <http://exhibits.americanalpineclub.org/clubhouse/desert-pioneers/>.

⁴¹³ C.S. Damon to Roper, May 12, 1971, American Alpine Club.

⁴¹⁴ C.S. Damon to Roper, May 12, 1971, American Alpine Club.

found enchanting were central to Navajo spirituality and culture.⁴¹⁵ “To climb them is to profane them,” he wrote.



Figure 5.1. Spider Rock (Tsé Na’ashjé’ii) in Canyon de Chelly on the Navajo Reservation. Spider Rock is the home of Spider Woman who taught the Navajo how to weave. It is a sacred site for the Navajo. This was one of the spires Navajo Director of Parks and Recreation, Charles S. Damon, reminded Steve Roper was off-limits in an official letter in 1971. Photo from *Summit* magazine. Author’s private collection.

Damon ended his letter on a conciliatory note. “Come and visit us,” he concluded, “look and photograph as much as you like; you will be welcome. But please respect our prohibitions and let us keep the wonderful Navajo reservation as beautiful as it is.”⁴¹⁶ Damon encouraged visitation and engagement with Navajo lands, but prohibited climbing. Viewing this moment alongside other land use conflicts between Native peoples and climbers in the West highlights

⁴¹⁵ For the importance of these sites in Navajo culture and spirituality, see Laurance D. Linford, *Navajo Places: History, Legend, Landscape* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2000), 51, 264-265, 295-298, and 303-304.

⁴¹⁶ C.S. Damon to Roper, May 12, 1971, American Alpine Club.

unique tensions that emerged as outdoor recreation became increasingly popular in the region during the second half of the century.⁴¹⁷ The clashes on the Navajo reservation in the 1970s and at Devils Tower National Monument (*Mato tipila*) in northeastern Wyoming in the 1990s provide a set of narratives suitable for comparative analysis. These case studies reveal two important things about the postwar West: the shifting dynamics between Native peoples and outdoor recreationists as well as the importance of land ownership and management in settling these disputes.

Euro-American climbers' attitudes and ideas regarding Native sovereignty shifted over the course of these decades. Whereas they reacted strongly to the Navajo ban, they generally proved understanding of Native peoples' positions during later conflicts. Over time, many, though certainly not all, became sympathetic of Native sovereignty efforts. These developments reveal how climbers' ideas and opinions regarding Native lands and peoples underwent a transformation during the twentieth century.

At the same time, these case studies reveal the importance of land ownership in deciding access to and use of particular sites. They remind us that the West is a patchwork of private, state, federal, and tribal lands. Because the Navajo controlled land on the reservation, they were able to restrict access to the towers and spires. However, at sites managed by the federal government, of which there are many in the West, Native peoples and recreationists had to

⁴¹⁷ For other examples of other struggles between outdoor recreationists and Native peoples struggles in the West, see Erica Marie Bsumek, "Glen Canyon Dam, Rainbow Bridge, and Hole-in-the-Rock: Diversifying Environmentalisms and the Struggle over 'Sacred' Landmarks in the American West," in *Not Just Green, Not Just White: Race, Justice, and Environmental History*, eds. Mary E. Mendoza and Traci Brynne Voyles (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2025), 287-311; Todd Allin Morman, *Many Nations, Under Many Gods: Public Land Management and American Indian Sacred Sites* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018), 48-88; and Matthew S. Makley and Michael J. Makley, *Cave Rock: Climbers, Courts, and a Washoe Indian Sacred Place* (Reno, NV: University of Nevada Press, 2010), 49-54.

negotiate with one another.⁴¹⁸ In these cases, neither group had the final say. Instead, federal land managers made the final decision based on federal laws, policies, and management guidelines.

Recreation and play are wrapped up in larger issues of access, use, and meaning. For much of the twentieth century, Euro-American climbers defined the high places of the West as sites of adventure, play, and recreation. Climbers created new meanings for places that Native peoples had long valued.⁴¹⁹ Beginning in the 1970s, however, Native peoples reasserted their historic legacies to these places and challenged climbers' dominance at these sites. These histories reveal the messy process of deciding the meaning and use of singular places valued by different cultural groups. They present a range of outcomes for contested sites in the North American West and offer insight about how to deal with conflicts that may arise in the future.

Respecting Tribal Authority? The Navajo Reservation, 1960s and 1970s

The conflicts on the Navajo reservation set the baseline for climber-Native interactions after World War II and demonstrate the power of land ownership in deciding these clashes. Charles Damon's letter to Steve Roper formalized a tribal policy that had been instituted years earlier. In the 1970 issue of *Ascent*, Roper wrote an article about the history of climbing in the Southwest and acknowledged previous attempts by the Navajo to manage climbing on the reservation. As early as 1962, Navajo officials had requested that climbers avoid Spider Rock and the Totem Pole. "The reason given," explained Roper, "was the growing reluctance of

⁴¹⁸ On federal lands in the American West, see "A Wealth of Public Lands," in *Atlas of the New West: Portrait of a Changing Region*, ed. William E. Riebsame (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 58-62.

⁴¹⁹ For Euro-American meaning making in the West, see Jared Farmer, *On Zion's Mount: Mormons, Indians, and the American Landscape* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008)

Indians to have their sacred rocks violated.”⁴²⁰ In defiance of these requests, Roper and some of his peers responded with “outbursts of rage and civil disobedience,” and some continued to ascend these sacred spires.⁴²¹ By the late 1960s, some climbers had run-ins with tribal authorities while others encountered signs at the base of these iconic formations that read “ABSOLUTELY NO ROCK CLIMBING.”⁴²² These negative interactions, however, did little to deter climbers. In an effort to mend relations, Roper proposed a series of regulations to the Navajo Director of Parks and Recreation, Sam Day III. He suggested a climbing application process that included a fee and letter of recommendation; a requirement that climbers camouflage any hardware left behind; and a prohibition on summiting Spider Rock so as to not disturb the sacred space.⁴²³ These suggestions did not appease tribal concerns, however, and Damon penned his letter to Roper in 1971.

Climbers responded immediately. In June 1971, *Summit* magazine ran a cover that was, like Damon’s letter, unambiguous. Printed below a picture of Shiprock (*Tsé Bit’a’i*) was the headline: “SHIPROCK: permanent climbing ban.” A caption on the inside cover elaborated: “Spider Rock in Canyon de Chelly on the Navajo Reservation is one of the spectacular monoliths that will never again be ascended by rock climbers under the new unconditional ban imposed by the Navajo Tribe.”⁴²⁴ Ernie Anderson, the author of the article, gave further context for the fraught exchanges between climbers and tribal leaders.⁴²⁵ Although he may not have liked the

⁴²⁰ Steve Roper, “Four Corners,” *Ascent*, May 1970, 32.

⁴²¹ Roper, “Four Corners,” 32.

⁴²² Chuck Pratt, “The View from Deadhorse Point,” *Ascent*, May 1970, 37-42; and Roper, “Four Corners,” 32.

⁴²³ Roper, “Four Corners,” 32.

⁴²⁴ Ernie Anderson, “Shiprock,” *Summit*, June 1971, 1.

⁴²⁵ Anderson, “Shiprock,” 1.

decision, Anderson encouraged others to heed Navajo policies and “stay away from Shiprock, Canyon de Chelly, Monument Valley, Todilto Park and all other areas under their jurisdiction.”⁴²⁶

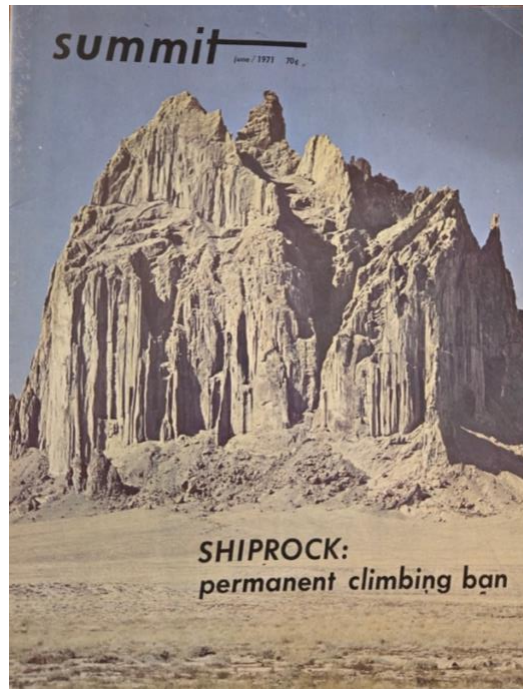


Figure 5.2. Photo of Shiprock (*Tsé Bit'a'i*) on the Navajo Reservation. Shiprock was one of the places on the reservation closed by the Navajo in the early 1970s over concerns that climbers were negatively impacting the physical and spiritual integrity of these sites. Photo from *Summit* magazine. Author's private collection.

While Anderson counseled climbers to abide by the closure, others took a different tact. Steve Roper publicly disagreed with the closure. As editor of the popular mountaineering magazine *Ascent*, his opinion was influential.⁴²⁷ In 1979, Roper inflamed the situation when he published a historical mountaineering guidebook with his friend Allen Steck, *Fifty Classic Climbs of North America*. The volume laid out the fifty best—by which they meant the most

⁴²⁶ Anderson, “Shiprock,” 1.

⁴²⁷ Joseph E. Taylor III, “On Climber, Granite, Sky,” *Environmental History* 11, no. 1 (January 2006): 130-135, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3985741>.

aesthetic and historically significant—climbs on the continent. It provided climbers a list of areas to visit and routes to complete. It included climbs in iconic western venues like Yosemite, the Tetons, and Mount Rainier. The book became an instant classic—and remains influential.⁴²⁸

Roper and Steck featured three Southwest climbs in the volume. They included Shiprock (*Tsé Bit'a'i*). In the opening to the section, they said they would have included Spider Rock in Canyon de Chelly “had the Navajo Tribal Council not placed it permanently off limits.”⁴²⁹ Their decision to include Shiprock warrants scrutiny. As we know from Damon’s letter, both Spider Rock *and* Shiprock were placed off-limits by the Tribe in 1971, so why acknowledge the ban on one and ignore it on the other? Perhaps, their decision stemmed from Shiprock having been a focal point for Euro-American climbers during the interwar period and immediately after World War II.⁴³⁰ The decision to include Shiprock made sense if *Fifty Classic Climbs* was a purely historical project.⁴³¹

But the book was more than just historical—it was also a climbing guide. The Shiprock entry included a history of ascents as well as directions to the mountain and information about routes to climb. Even more troubling, Roper included a subversive discussion of the ban at the entry’s end. He acknowledged the conflict began “in the early 1960s, as climbing the various

⁴²⁸ For the reception of the book, see George Bell, Jr., “Fifty Crowded Classics,” *Ascent: The Mountaineering Experience in Word and Image*, eds. Allen Steck and Steve Roper (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1989), 129-137. For the continued influence of the book, see Aidan Multhauf, “Twenty Classic Climbs in Twenty Days,” *Alpinist*, Autumn 2024, 26-35.

⁴²⁹ Steve Roper and Allen Steck, *Fifty Classic Climbs of North America* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1979), 207.

⁴³⁰ For a history of American climbers on Shiprock, see Roper and Steck, *Fifty Classic Climbs*, 209-213 and Chris Jones, *Climbing in North America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 107-109 and 134-141. For the popularity of Shiprock during the postwar era, see Raymond G. Jacquot and David E. Reynolds, *CC on the Rocks: The Story of the Wyoming Mountaineers of Casper College, 1955-1959*, 2nd ed. (self-published, 2013), 41-46. Author’s private collection.

⁴³¹ Roper and Steck, *Fifty Classic Climbs*, 213.

towers and buttes on the Navajo reservation was becoming popular ... [and] a new awareness of their changing role in American society caused the Navajos to reconsider letting outsiders defile their sacred rocks.”⁴³² But, he reminded readers, “Shiprock was not included in the ban until the Spring of 1970, when signs announcing ‘Absolutely No Rock Climbing’ appeared around the rock.”⁴³³

Roper pivoted to language that intentionally undermined tribal policies. “At the present time the ban is still in effect,” he wrote, “though many clandestine ascents have been made. If a responsible and influential group made an effort to negotiate with tribal officials, perhaps some sort of agreement could be worked out so that climbers once again could be allowed on the formation.”⁴³⁴ Rather than respect Navajo sovereignty on the matter, he suggested the issue was unsettled, which it was not. Some climbers, following Roper’s lead, chose (and still choose) to flaunt Navajo laws.⁴³⁵ These violations have upset many Navajos and hardened their positions against climbers.⁴³⁶

What occurred on the Navajo reservation in the 1960s and 1970s prefigured the conflicts that occurred elsewhere in the 1990s and 2000s. Until the 1960s, climbers had enjoyed nearly unlimited access to Western mountains, cliffs, spires, and towers, including those on tribal lands. While many climbers were aware of Native Americans’ unique relationships with these sites, few

⁴³² Roper and Steck, 213.

⁴³³ Roper and Steck, 213-214.

⁴³⁴ Roper and Steck, 214.

⁴³⁵ Published stories of clandestine ascents on the Navajo reservation are not difficult to find. See Jeff Bowman, “Stealing the Totem Pole,” *Climbing*, December 1998, 92; Jeff Smoot, *Hangdog Days: Conflict, Change, and the Race for 5.14* (Seattle: Mountaineers Books, 2019), 112-117; and Russ Clune, *The Lifer: Rock Climbing Adventures in the Gunks and Beyond* (Houston: Di Angelo Publications, 2023), 118-121.

⁴³⁶ “Rock climbing injury should have never happened at Shiprock,” *Navajo Times*, May 29, 1997, Indigenous Newspapers in North America.

took these beliefs seriously.⁴³⁷ When climbers faced pushback from Navajo officials, some relented, some attempted to negotiate with tribal leaders, and some knowingly ignored and violated tribal policies. These reactions reappeared during later conflicts.

For all of the ways this conflicts proves to be similar to the later ones, a crucial difference sets this example apart from the others. The Totem Pole, Shiprock, and Spider Rock all lay within the boundaries of the Navajo Nation. Authority regarding the use of these places resided with the tribal government and its representatives; they had the final say about access and use of these sites. Bear Lodge (Devils Tower National Monument), however, was managed by the federal government. At this site, federal land managers had the authority to make decisions regarding access, meaning, and use.

Locating Common Ground? Devils Tower National Monument,
Wyoming, 1990s-2000s

Bear Lodge (*Mato tipila*), better known by its federal name, Devils Tower National Monument, stands tall above the plains and foothills of northeastern Wyoming.⁴³⁸ The monolith's verticality is undeniable; it is a landmark in the Northern Great Plains. At Bear Lodge, climbers are on full display high above the ground, while down below prayer bundles attest to the importance of the site for the Native peoples of the Northern Great Plains, including the Eastern Shoshone, Kiowa, Crow, Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Lakota.⁴³⁹ Although a favorite destination for rock climbers, *Mato tipila* is a sacred site for the Native peoples who lived—and continue to

⁴³⁷ Pratt, "The View," 38-39.

⁴³⁸ On the naming of this site, see Jeffrey R. Hanson and Sally Chirinos, "Ethnographic Overview and Assessment of Devils Tower National Monument, Wyoming," Cultural Resources Selections, Intermountain Region, National Park Service, no. 9, 1997, 19-22.

⁴³⁹ Hanson and Chirinos, "Ethnographic Overview," 19-23.

live—near it. In the 1990s, this place became a site of contestation between rock climbers and Native peoples who had divergent histories and visions about this singular place. Examining this conflict alongside the previous example illuminates the ongoing nature of struggles between climbers and Native peoples but points to ways these dynamics shifted in the final decade of the century.

Since the mid-1930s, federal officials have welcomed climbers at Devils Tower National Monument. After Fritz Wiessner, Bill House, and Lawrence Coveney ascended the tower in June 1937, word spread among American climbers about its unique climbing challenges.⁴⁴⁰ In the summer of 1956, the Wyoming Mountaineers of Casper College (WMCC) organized a “Mountaineers Week” to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the monument. They invited climbing groups from across the country to join them for a week of revelry, fun, and public demonstrations.⁴⁴¹ *Life* magazine covered the week-long event, which helped shape the idea that the tower was a premier destination for rock climbing in America.⁴⁴² In the 1970s, more climbers began to visit Bear Lodge.⁴⁴³ During the 1980s, climbers began to install bolts on the tower as they explored the faces between the vertical cracks.⁴⁴⁴

⁴⁴⁰ Jacob F. Northcutt, Michael S. Reidy, and Travis Carioscia, “Climbing at Devils Tower National Monument: A Vertical History, 1898-2006,” in *Devils Tower National Monument Historic Resource Study*, eds. Janet Ore, Daniel Zizzamia, and James A. Pritchard (Santa Fe: National Park Service, 2023), 225-238.

⁴⁴¹ “Mountaineers Week,” Files + Documents, Box 1, Wyoming Mountaineers of Casper College Archives, Western History Center, Casper College, Casper, Wyoming.

⁴⁴² For the *Life* spread, see “A Crowd of Climbers on a Big Rock,” Wyoming Mountaineers of Casper College—Scrapbook, Box 1, Western History Center, Casper College, Casper, Wyoming.

⁴⁴³ US Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Devils Tower National Monument, *Final Climbing Management Plan/Finding of No Significant Impact*, 1995, xii. Documents, Devils Tower National Monument, National Park Service History Electronic Library and Archive, <https://npshistory.com/publications/deto/index.htm#documents>.

⁴⁴⁴ For sport climbing, see Andy Petefish, “Devils Tower: 1987 in review,” *Climbing*, June 1988, 40; Dennis Horning, “Devils Tower: Close encounters of the sustained kind,” *Climbing*, November 1990, 62; and Martin Ziebell, “The Devil will find work,” *Climbing*, December 1990-January 1991, 29-31.

During these same decades, Native peoples secured rights they had been denied for decades. In 1978, Congress passed the American Indian Religious Freedom Act (AIRFA), which made it an official policy of the United States to “protect and preserve for American Indians their inherent right of freedom to believe, express, and exercise the traditional religions ... including but not limited to access to sites, use and possession of sacred objects, and the freedom to worship through ceremonials and traditional rites.”⁴⁴⁵ This act directed federal agencies, including the National Park Service, “to evaluate their policies and procedures in consultation with native traditional religious leaders in order to determine appropriate changes necessary to protect and preserve Native American religious cultural rights and practices.”⁴⁴⁶ AIFRA and other bills during this decade, such as the Archaeological Resources Protection Act (1979), demonstrated the federal government’s acknowledgement of Native peoples’ historic relations to sites managed by federal agencies and a new commitment to consultation when making management decisions.⁴⁴⁷ When park managers began drafting a climbing management plan for the monument in the early 1990s, they contacted tribal leaders as well as local and national climbing organizations and environmental groups.

In April 1993, representatives from Native tribes, local and national climbing organizations, and environmental groups met with NPS officials to begin drafting the climbing management plan.⁴⁴⁸ According to legal scholar Lloyd Burton, NPS officials created a special working group because they recognized the likelihood for conflict between climbers and Native

⁴⁴⁵ American Indian Religious Freedom Act, Public Law 95-341, August 11, 1978, 92 Stat. 469, 42 U.S.C. 1996 et seq.

⁴⁴⁶ American Indian Religious Freedom Act

⁴⁴⁷ Chris Smith and Elizabeth Manning, “The sacred and profane collide in the West,” *High Country News*, May 26, 1997, <https://www.hcn.org/issues/issue-109/the-sacred-and-profane-collide-in-the-west/>.

⁴⁴⁸ Anna Marie Kramer, “Power of the Tower: Contesting History at Bear Lodge/Devils Tower National Monument” (undergraduate thesis, Claremont College, 2016), 63.

peoples at this particular site.⁴⁴⁹ The first meeting of the working group proceeded as expected. The tribal representatives—and their supporters—explained why they were offended by climbers scaling *Mato tipila* as well as their issues with the installation of bolts on the monolith. The two climbers present—Bob Archbold from the Access Fund, a national climbing advocacy group, and Carl Coy from the Black Hills Climbers Coalition, a local group—explained their personal connections to the tower as well as a general philosophy of climbing.⁴⁵⁰ Both sides used this first meeting to stake their claims to the tower. It appeared they shared little common ground.

Subsequent meetings proved more fruitful. At the second meeting, both Archbold and Coy acknowledged climbers could better understand Native perspectives and histories. In his presentation to the group, Coy “acknowledged that the religious value of the Tower existed long before the Tower assumed value as a place to climb.” He stated, “[If] Indian people did not want people on the Tower, he personally would respect this wish.”⁴⁵¹ Despite this concession, issues remained when the working group met again in August in Denver, Colorado. Archbold and Coy argued that rock climbers were being unfairly singled out.⁴⁵² They suggested that any closure should affect all non-Native people equally, not just climbers. It appeared the working group had come to an impasse.

Yet when the group began to discuss the specifics of a climbing closure at their fourth meeting in October, things took an unexpected turn. Led by Elaine Quiver (Lakota), the tribal representatives made it known that they preferred a voluntary closure over a mandatory one.⁴⁵³

⁴⁴⁹ Lloyd Burton, *Worship and Wilderness: Culture, Religion, and Law in the Management of Public Lands and Resources* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 131.

⁴⁵⁰ Kramer, “Power of the Tower,” 65.

⁴⁵¹ “Meeting Minutes for Climbing Management Plan,” May 21 and 22, 1993, Bob Archbold Papers, quoted in Kramer, 68.

⁴⁵² Kramer, 74.

⁴⁵³ Kramer, 74.

The reason for a voluntary rather than mandatory closure was simple yet remarkable: Quiver and the other tribal representatives wanted climbers “to choose not to climb out of respect for [their] ceremonies,” rather than be coerced into not climbing by the federal government.⁴⁵⁴ The group determined that a voluntary closure during the month of June when many Native nations gathered at *Mato tipila* for the Sun Dance ceremony offered the best chance for reconciliation. Archbold supported the voluntary closure and committed the Access Fund to help “promote the voluntary closure with brochures and articles in climbing magazines.”⁴⁵⁵ Despite steep odds, rock climbers and tribal representatives had found an acceptable compromise.

By most accounts, the voluntary June closure proved to be a success. In October 1996, Diane Kelly reported in *High Country News* that park officials had witnessed an 85% reduction in the number of recreational climbers who visited the monument during the previous June. In addition, “eight out of nine commercial climbing guides stayed away.”⁴⁵⁶ By these measures, the voluntary closure seemed to have widespread support among both recreational climbers and professional guides. In an editorial in *High Country News*, Forrest McCarthy, a climbing guide from Wilson, Wyoming, wrote that “many climbers and guides ... support the voluntary closure of climbing at Devils Tower.”⁴⁵⁷ He reminded climbers: “Whether it is trampled vegetation on the Lower Saddle of the Grand Teton, piles of garbage at Everest base camp, Nepalese villagers, or Lakota Sun Dancers, we need to be responsible and respectful of the people and places that we

⁴⁵⁴ Debbie Bird, interview by Anna Kramer, June 25, 2015 and Dave Ruppert, interview by Anna Kramer, July 23, 2015, quoted in Kramer, 75.

⁴⁵⁵ Kramer, 74.

⁴⁵⁶ Diane Kelly, “Saying please at Devils Tower,” *High Country News*, October 16, 1995, <https://www.hcn.org/issues/issue-45/saying-please-at-devils-tower/>.

⁴⁵⁷ Forrest G. McCarthy, “Climbing ban makes sense,” *High Country News*, June 10, 1996, <https://www.hcn.org/issues/issue-61/climbing-ban-makes-sense/>.

visit.”⁴⁵⁸ The vast majority of climbers agreed with McCarthy and chose to stay away from the tower during the month of June.

If we compare this site with the Navajo reservation in the 1970s, we witness a remarkable change in Native-climber dynamics. Whereas many leading climbers directly flaunted the Navajo’s ban, the vast majority of climbers were willing to abide by the voluntary June closure. Of course, a month-long closure is different than a wholesale closure. Nevertheless, this case study demonstrates a general shift in American climbers’ attitudes towards Native peoples, lands, and histories. In the 1990s, climbers proved more willing to consider Native peoples’ histories and relationships with the region’s high places. This represented progress from what had occurred on the Navajo reservation two decades before.

Yet not everyone agreed. A few outspoken individuals took issue with the voluntary closure. In 1996, the Mountain States Legal Foundation, a Denver-based anti-federal lands law firm, sued the National Park Service over the voluntary ban.⁴⁵⁹ They argued that the voluntary ban established a preference for Native religion that violated the First Amendment.⁴⁶⁰ In June 1996, Judge William Downes of the U.S. District Court “granted a preliminary injunction ... that stop[ped] the National Park Service from prohibiting commercial climbing during the month of June.”⁴⁶¹ However, two years later when local climber and guide Andy Petefish sought further

⁴⁵⁸ McCarthy, “Climbing ban,” *High Country News*.

⁴⁵⁹ Charles Levendosky, “Group sues to stamp out tolerance and diversity,” *High Country News*, August 15, 1996, <https://www.hcn.org/issues/issue-57/group-sues-to-stamp-out-tolerance-and-diversity/>.

⁴⁶⁰ Smith and Manning, “The sacred and profane collide,” *High Country News*.

⁴⁶¹ Chris Tollefson, “Wyoming climbers win equal footing,” *High Country News*, June 24, 1996, <https://www.hcn.org/issues/issue-62/wyoming-climbers-win-equal-footing/>.

legal action, Judge Downes dismissed his appeal, writing that “the ban was ‘in the nature of accommodation, not promotion, and consequently is a legitimate secular purpose.’”⁴⁶²

To the relief of many, the voluntary closure withstood legal challenge. Native leaders hailed Downes’s decision as a victory. “Once again,” said Arvol Looking Horse, a member of the Cheyenne River Sioux tribe, “we can worship in our traditional way and practice our traditional culture without interference at this sacred site.”⁴⁶³ Many climbers felt similarly. As scholar Wendy Rex-Aztet has noted, “Although their voices have made it into the general media less frequently if at all, far more climbers have expressed dismay at Petefish’s behavior than the few who have publicly supported him.”⁴⁶⁴ The voluntary closure appealed to both Native peoples and climbers.

Since the mid-1990s, the voluntary closure during the month of June has remained in effect. Each Spring, the Access Fund encourages climbers to not disrupt traditional Native ceremonies during the month of June.⁴⁶⁵ For the most part, climbers are happy to go along with this request. Although the number of climbers during June has fluctuated over the years, the vast majority continue to avoid climbing during this month.⁴⁶⁶ Some have even begun to consider

⁴⁶² J. T. Thomas, “Climbing ban upheld at Devils Tower,” *High Country News*, April 27, 1998, <https://www.hcn.org/issues/issue-129/climbing-ban-upheld-at-devils-tower/>.

⁴⁶³ Thomas, “Climbing ban,” *High Country News*.

⁴⁶⁴ Wendy Rex-Aztet, “Narratives of Place and Power: Laying Claim to Devils Tower,” in *Imagining the Big Open: Nature, Identity, and Play in the New West*, eds. Liza Nichols, Elaine M. Bapis, and Thomas J. Harvey (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2003), 61.

⁴⁶⁵ See Sam Davidson, “Supreme Court: Devils Tower Policy Okay,” *Vertical Times*, May 2000, 9, <https://www.accessfund.org/vertical-times-magazine/>; “Why You Shouldn’t Climb Devils Tower in June,” *Access Fund*, July 11, 2017, <https://www.accessfund.org/latest-news/news-and-events/news/why-you-shouldnt-climb-devils-tower-in-june>; and “Devils Tower Voluntary June Closure: An Opportunity to Show Respect,” *Access Fund*, May 7, 2025, <https://www.accessfund.org/latest-news/news-and-events/news/climbers-honor-the-june-closure-at-devils-tower>.

⁴⁶⁶ Chris Kalman, “It’s Time to Rethink Climbing on Devils Tower,” *Outside*, July 25, 2018, <https://www.outsideonline.com/outdoor-adventure/climbing/why-its-time-rethink-climbing-ban-devils-tower/>.

whether they want to climb there at all.⁴⁶⁷ Many climbers have begun to take Native people's perspectives and histories into account and have demonstrated a desire to recreate in ways that respect Native cultures and peoples.

Coda: Cave Rock, Nevada (*De Ek Wadapush*) and Other Sites,
1990s-2010s

These issues have not gone away or become any less complicated over the past twenty-five years. Despite the compromise at *Mato tipila*, climbers and Native peoples have clashed at other sites, though they have also worked side-by-side during other moments. Looking briefly at some of these more contemporary sites rounds out our survey of Native-climber relations at high places in the American West.

At Cave Rock (*De Ek Wadapush*) on the eastern shores of Lake Tahoe, a long dispute between rock climbers and the Washoe Tribe eventually ended in favor of the Washoe in 2008.⁴⁶⁸ The cave was an important place for Washoe shaman, yet became another site of conflict after climbers discovered the cave in the late 1980s.⁴⁶⁹ During a series of collaborative meetings hosted by the United States Forest Service in the mid-1990s to decide the fate of the site, a group of climbers argued for a compromise that would allow the Washoe access for ceremonial purposes and permit climbing to continue.⁴⁷⁰ However, Washoe tribal members, led by chairman

⁴⁶⁷ Nick Mott, "In the Bear's Lodge," *Alpinist*, June 26, 2017, <https://alpinist.com/features/in-the-bears-lodge/>; and Alexis Krauss (@alexiskrauss), "Why we decided to not climb Devil's Tower," Instagram, September 20, 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/CivSWbHu6g2/?hl=en&img_index=6.

⁴⁶⁸ Matthew S. Makley and Michael J. Makley, *Cave Rock: Climbers, Courts, and a Washoe Indian Sacred Place* (Reno, NV: University of Nevada Press, 2010).

⁴⁶⁹ For the importance of the site for Washoe shaman, see Makley and Makley, *Cave Rock*, 10. For climbers, see "Hot Flashes," *Climbing*, June-July 1992, 39 and Jim Thornburg, "Climb With a View," *Climbing*, March-May 1994, 66. For the name of the site, see "De Ek Wadapush – Cave Rock," Nevada State Historic Preservation Office, <https://shpo.nv.gov/nevadas-historical-markers/historical-markers/de-ek-wadapush-cave-rock>.

⁴⁷⁰ Makley and Makley, 60-67.

Brian Wallace, continuously stated that because of the unique nature of the cave no compromise was possible.⁴⁷¹ In these heated debates, some climbers sided with the Washoe while others continued to press for an alternative outcome. Ultimately, no common ground could be found and United States Forest Service (USFS) leaders were forced to make a decision regarding the site. In 2003, forest supervisor Maribeth Gustafson closed the cave to rock climbing.⁴⁷² After a lawsuit by the Access Fund failed, two local rock climbers stripped protection bolts from the cave and removed the cement floor that climbers had installed.⁴⁷³ The site has remained quiet ever since.

Although climbers and Native peoples clashed at Cave Rock (*De Ek Wadapush*), elsewhere they have worked together to protect sites of mutual interest. For example, climbers and Native leaders both lobbied for the creation of Bears Ears National Monument in Southern Utah. Together, they celebrated President Barack Obama's designation of the monument in November 2016 and protested President Donald Trump's reduction of the monument in 2017.⁴⁷⁴ Most recently, climbers have supported members of the San Carlos Apache tribe fighting to protect Oak Flat, Arizona (*Chi'chil Bildagoteel*) near Phoenix, Arizona from destruction by a multi-national mining company.⁴⁷⁵

⁴⁷¹ Makley and Makley, 60-67.

⁴⁷² "Feds ban Cave Rock climbing," *The Record-Courier*, July 11, 2003, <https://www.recordcourier.com/news/2003/jul/11/feds-ban-cave-rock-climbing/>; "Success Story: Land Use Management Planning Protects Historic De'ek Wadapush (Cave Rock)," *Advisory Council on Historic Preservation*, <https://www.achp.gov/success-stories/cave-rock>; and Makley and Makley, 82.

⁴⁷³ Makley and Makley, *Cave Rock*, 97-100.

⁴⁷⁴ For climbers' involvement in the fight to protect Bears Ears, see "The Fight for Bears Ears and America's Public Lands," *Vertical Times*, Winter 2016, 11; "The Fight for Bears Ears is Just Beginning," *Vertical Times*, Spring 2018, 6-7; "The Complex Fight for Bears Ears & Indian Creek," *Vertical Times*, Summer 2019, 7-8.

⁴⁷⁵ For Oak Flat, see Paige Blankenbuehler, "The Latest: San Carlos Apache lobbies to protect lands threatened by copper mining," *High Country News*, August 17, 2015, <https://www.hcn.org/issues/47-14/the-latest-san-carlos-apache-lobbies-to-protect-lands-threatened-by-copper-mining/>; Maya L. Kapoor, "In Arizona, fighting a copper mine planned on sacred land," *High Country News*, January 22, 2021, <https://www.hcn.org/issues/53-2/latest-mining-in-arizona-fighting-a-copper-mine-planned-on-sacred-land/>; Len Necefer, "Oak Flat Is No Sacrifice Zone,"

These recent collaborations have stemmed, in part, from transformations within the American climbing community. Over the past decade, a group of Native climbers have asserted themselves in American climbing culture.⁴⁷⁶ These activists and leaders have foregrounded Indigenous lands issues and challenged climbing organizations, industry leaders, and individual climbers to recognize and respect traditional Indigenous lands.⁴⁷⁷ For the most part, American climbers have embraced these climbers and their ideas. Early indications suggest these recent developments have created more pathways for communication and understanding between climbers and Native peoples.

Conclusion

These case studies allow us to reflect on the multiple meanings of high places in the North American West. In the twentieth century, climbers created new meanings for these places grounded in Euro-American ideas about nature, adventure, and recreation. However, as Native peoples regained social and political power during the second half of the century, they reasserted themselves at these places and made their meanings for these sites known. As these case studies demonstrate, climbers' ways of knowing mountains, rock spires, and towers are layered on top of other, deeper ways of knowing these places.

Patagonia, April 15, 2022, <https://www.patagonia.com/stories/oak-flat-is-no-sacrifice-zone/story-120206.html>; and "Climbers and Tribes Join Forces to Save Oak Flat," *Access Fund*, November 8, 2019, <https://www.accessfund.org/latest-news/news-and-events/news/climbers-and-tribes-join-forces-to-save-oak-flat>.

⁴⁷⁶ See Ruth Alexander, *Democracy's Mountain: Longs Peak and the Unfulfilled Promises of America's National Parks* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2023), 211.

⁴⁷⁷ Len Necefer, "Water Is Life," *Alpinist*, Autumn 2020, 94-100; Len Necefer, "Sounds of Ceremony: The Future of Sacred Landscapes," *Alpinist*, Autumn 2021, 53-55; and Aaron Mike, "Navajo Rising," *The Climbing Zine*, Accessed October 20, 2025, <https://climbingzine.com/navajo-rising-by-aaron-mike/>.

Decisions about access and use hinged on who owned and managed the land. The Navajo were able to restrict climbers' access to spires and towers on the reservation because they owned and managed the land. However, sites on federal lands, like Bear Lodge (*Mato tipila*) and Cave Rock (*De Ek Wadapush*), became places of negotiation because neither group owned the land outright. Ultimately, federal land managers made decisions in these disputes. This fact reminds us of federal land managers' powerful role in determining land use issues at sites across the American West.

Above all, these case studies highlight an important change that has occurred within the American climbing community. Climbers' opinions, ideas, and positions regarding Native lands and peoples have transformed since the 1970s. Although climbers and Native peoples have disagreed at a few contemporary sites, in general climbers have demonstrated a growing interest in Native peoples' perspectives and traditions.⁴⁷⁸ The events at Devils Tower National Monument in the 1990s marked a shift in climber-Native relations. These dynamics have continued to develop in the twenty-first century, especially as some Indigenous peoples have emerged as leaders in the American climbing community. Although these issues are far from settled, it appears that these groups have begun to work through differences regarding the meaning and use of the region's high places.

⁴⁷⁸ Yvette Towersap Tuell, "Public Lands and American Indians: Traditional Use and Off-Reservation Treaty Rights," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 88, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 115-120. For the shift in outdoor recreation culture, see Krista Langlois, "Sacred Native American Sites Are Not Your Playgrounds," *Outside*, July 5, 2018 (Updated October 14, 2024), <https://www.outsideonline.com/2322921/new-rules-respectful-recreation>.

ENVIRONMENTAL LEADERS OR MENACES?

In the July 2003 issue of *High Country News*, Robyn Morrison noted a concerning shift in American climbing culture. “In the past,” she wrote, “climbers occasionally left the mountains to lead battles to save those mountains. But as climbing shifts from the peaks to boulders and indoor rock gyms will it continue to incubate the environmental leaders it once did—like climbing pioneers John Muir and David Brower who also fought to save mountains, rivers and forests?” Morrison fretted, “Do ‘quiet recreationists’ like us represent the West’s next environmental menace?”⁴⁷⁹

Morrison traced the evolution of the sport during the twentieth century from peaks and summits to small cliffs and crags to boulders to indoor gyms. She reflected on the active role climbers had played in the conservation and environmental movements, yet she questioned current climbers’ involvement with these issues. As the sport moved away from its roots in the mountains towards roadside areas and indoor gyms, could climbers be counted on to continue to act as environmental leaders, Morrison wondered?

The town of Bishop, California served as her case study. Bishop had been a center for mountaineers and rock climbers since the early decades of the twentieth century. From mountaineers like John Muir and Norman Clyde to alpine climbers attracted to backcountry granite walls to sport climbers infatuated with the Owens River Gorge to the current generation who frequented the boulders near town, climbers had milled around Bishop for more than a century.⁴⁸⁰ Yet the climbers Morrison encountered during her visit appeared to have little in

⁴⁷⁹ Robyn Morrison, “Invasion of the rocks jocks,” *High Country News*, July 7, 2003, <https://www.hcn.org/issues/issue-254/invasion-of-the-rock-jocks/>

⁴⁸⁰ Morrison, “Invasion of the rocks jocks.”

common with previous generations. They seemed more interested gymnastic routes than they did in fighting to protect these places. Worse yet, these boulderers seemed unaware of the ways they impacted fragile desert ecosystems and sensitive cultural artifacts.⁴⁸¹ Although some climbers Morrison spoke with expressed their conviction that this younger generation could be counted on to act as good stewards, Morrison remained skeptical.

These issues were not unique to Bishop. What Morrison witnessed here occurred across the region in the 1990s and 2000s. Although some boosters, economists, and community leaders touted human-powered outdoor recreation like mountain biking, backcountry skiing, and rock climbing as environmentally friendly alternatives to ranching, mining, and other extractive industries, by the early years of the twenty-first century the effects of outdoor recreation on western landscapes were undeniable.⁴⁸² Trampled vegetation, cliffs splattered in climbing chalk, and the mistreatment of cultural and archaeological sites were common.⁴⁸³ So, too, were conflicts between climbers and nesting raptors as well as erosion at popular cliffs. More complicated questions about climbers use of fossil fuel and the petroleum-based nature of outdoor equipment loomed.⁴⁸⁴

⁴⁸¹ Morrison, "Invasion of the rocks jocks."

⁴⁸² On this shift in western economics, see Charles Wilkinson, "Paradise Revised," in *Atlas of the New West: Portrait of a Changing Region*, ed. William E. Riebsame (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 17-18 and Patricia Nelson Limerick, "The Shadows of Heaven Itself," *Atlas of the New West: Portrait of a Changing Region*, ed. William E. Riebsame (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 175.

⁴⁸³ Morrison, "Invasion of the rocks jocks."

⁴⁸⁴ On fossil fuel use by outdoor recreationists and the petroleum based nature of outdoor equipment, see Mark Boxell and Will Wright, "Postwar play and petroleum: tourism and energy abundance in Rocky Mountain National Park," *Journal of Tourism History* 9, nos. 2-3 (2017): 119-138; Gregory L. Simon and Peter S. Alagona, "Beyond Leave No Trace," *Ethics, Place and Environment* 12, no. 1 (March 2009): 19-20; and James Morton Turner, "From Woodcraft to 'Leave No Trace': Wilderness, Consumerism, and Environmentalism in Twentieth-Century America," *Environmental History* 7, no. 3 (July 2002): 473-474.

During the second half of the twentieth century, rock climbers descended on areas across the West. As they spread across the region, they affected places in unprecedented ways. Yet climbers, like other non-motorized outdoor recreationists, cared about the places they recreated. The sport had deep roots in the conservation and environmental movements. However, by the turn of the twenty-first century degraded environments forced climbers to reckon with their impacts as land managers debated the future of climbing on federal lands. How could a sport with deep roots in the conservation and environmental movements transform so much that by the turn of the twenty-first century a journalist in a leading western periodical could wonder if climbers had lost their way and become not just apathetic environmentalists but environmental menaces? Untangling this knotted rope requires patience. As we sort out the kinks, follow loose ends, and attempt to unravel a mess of intertwined people, places, events, and ideas, we remain focused on the ways climbers thought about western environments, their sport, and the impacts they had on places across the region. We pay close attention to internal debates within the climbing community as well as land managers opinions.

Twentieth century American climbers had complicated environmental legacies. They could be both assertive conservationists as well as destructive forces. By studying climbers, we better understand how climbers were key players in conservation efforts yet oftentimes overlooked their impacts on nonhuman nature. Like other American environmentalists during these decades, they often struggled to live up to their ideals.

Climbers, Conservation, and Wilderness, 1890s-1960s

In the late nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth, western climbers played outsized roles in the conservation and wilderness movements. As Morrison noted in her article,

two of America's most prominent environmental leaders, John Muir and David Brower, were also well-respected mountaineers. John Muir established a base of concerned citizens that David Brower built on during the second half of the century. Both men were outspoken activists for the preservation of wilderness areas in the West.⁴⁸⁵ Muir was an ardent defender of Yosemite Valley and the leader of the Sierra Club from 1892 to 1914.⁴⁸⁶ Many scholars regard his fight to protect the Hetch Hetchy Valley as a signal moment in the history of the preservation movement.⁴⁸⁷ In many ways, Brower took the torch from Muir and guided the Sierra Club as it became one of the most influential environmental organizations in the country during the 1960s and 1970s. Similar to Muir's fight against the flooding of the Hetch Hetchy Valley, Brower led the Sierra Club in the highly publicized fight against the Echo Park Dam on the Green River in Dinosaur National Monument in the early 1950s.⁴⁸⁸ In addition to this campaign, Brower and the Sierra Club fought the construction of other dams in the region and raised awareness about wilderness protection.⁴⁸⁹

Both men's political sensibilities were influenced by time spent climbing in the high places of the North American West.⁴⁹⁰ Muir rambled widely across the region and scrambled to

⁴⁸⁵ We recognize that "wilderness" is a western European construct and that the places Muir and Brower fought to protect as wilderness were the traditional ancestral homelands of Native peoples. We recognize the history of expulsion related with wilderness in America, yet we also understand and recognize value in having wild areas conserved for present and future generations of Americans. See William Cronon, "The Trouble With Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), 69-90; Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Karl Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

⁴⁸⁶ Michael P. Cohen, *The Pathless Way: John Muir and American Wilderness* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984).

⁴⁸⁷ Louis S. Warren, ed. *American Environmental History*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2021), 304-307.

⁴⁸⁸ Andrew Needham, *Powerlines: Phoenix and the Making of the Modern Southwest* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 191-192.

⁴⁸⁹ Needham, *Powerlines*, 185-201. Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 4th ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 247-248 and 255.

⁴⁹⁰ Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy, ed., *Contact: Mountain Climbing and Environmental Thinking* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2008), 107-109.

summits in his beloved High Sierras and other western ranges. Some of his famous climbs included Mount Whitney, Mount Ritter, Mt. Shasta, and Mount Rainier.⁴⁹¹ Brower, who got his start climbing with the Sierra Club Rock Climbing Section (RCS) as a teenager, was a fixture in Yosemite Valley during the interwar years. According to Yosemite climbing historian Steve Roper, Brower was one of the best and most active rock climbers in the Sierra Club during the 1930s. He made sixteen first ascents in Yosemite Valley during these years, more than any other climber during this period.⁴⁹² In 1939, Brower was a key member on the historic first ascent of Shiprock (Tsé Bit'a'í) on the Navajo Reservation in northern New Mexico.⁴⁹³

Climbing turned out to be good training for environmental campaigning. Although Muir often sought out solitary experiences in the mountains, mountaineering scholar Caroline Schaumann argues, “The mountain respite did not foster a retreat from politics but on the contrary turned into a political battleground where Muir toured lawmakers and politicians in pursuit of his cause.”⁴⁹⁴ Muir lobbied for the creation of national parks and forest reserves across the West, in part because of the transformative personal experiences he had had in the region’s high places. Similarly, Brower’s experiences as a member of the RCS influenced his later efforts to protect wild places across the West. According to historian Susan Schrepfer, “Brower later asserted that it was climbing that had prepared the members of the Sierra Club to assume

⁴⁹¹ For Muir’s mountaineering exploits, see John Muir, *Mountaineering Essays*, ed. Richard F. Fleck (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1997) and Caroline Schaumann, *Peak Pursuits: The Emergence of Mountaineering in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 260-264.

⁴⁹² Steve Roper, *Camp 4: Recollections of a Yosemite Rockclimber* (Seattle: The Mountaineers, 1994), 26-28.

⁴⁹³ On the indigenous name for “Shiprock,” see “Native Places Atlas,” American West Center, University of Utah, Accessed September 26, 2025, https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/d0290c878a9b464ca02839a79e0e597b#data_s=id%3A3d065ce50b3a4c5abc03ec429b39861c-193b6c1a3ac-layer-18%3A196. For the first ascent of Shiprock, see Bestor Robinson, “Shiprock,” *American Alpine Journal* (1940): 54-56.

⁴⁹⁴ Schaumann, *Peak Pursuits*, 263-264.

controversial roles in conservation.”⁴⁹⁵ More than just leisure activities, mountaineering and rock climbing taught Muir, Brower, and other Sierra Club members the value of conserved lands and inspired them to fight for their protection.

The Sierra Club was not alone in their fight to preserve western wilderness areas. In fact, all of early twentieth century western mountaineering clubs were founded on the twin principles of mountain recreation and conservation. In his history of the Colorado Mountain Club, Hugh Kingery details the club’s involvement with the conservation movement in Colorado after its founding in 1912. He writes about early campaigns to protect columbines from being over harvested by eager tourists as well as efforts to create and erect signage to persuade campers to practice good habits while in the mountains.⁴⁹⁶ While the club chose to not get involved in the Echo Dam controversy in 1954 (the same controversy which brought Brower and the Sierra Club much fame and notoriety), they enthusiastically supported the Wilderness Act, opposed dams in the Grand Canyon, and fought to protect parts of the Eagles Nest Wilderness during the planning and scoping of Interstate 70.⁴⁹⁷ Likewise, The Mountaineers in Seattle were committed to conservation issues in the West. The club, explains historian Jim Kjeldsen, fought alongside the Sierra Club to prevent the Hetch Hetchy Dam, wrote letters in support of Glacier National Park in Montana, and assisted Enos Mills during his campaign to create Rocky Mountain National Park.⁴⁹⁸ Closer to home, the club played an important role in the establishment of Olympic National Park and Mount Rainier National Park in Colorado.⁴⁹⁹ During these decades,

⁴⁹⁵ Susan Schrepfer, *Nature’s Altars: Mountains, Gender, and American Environmentalism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 178.

⁴⁹⁶ Hugh Kingery, *The Colorado Mountain Club: The First Seventy-Five Years of a Highly Individual Corporation, 1912-1987* (Evergreen, Colorado: Cordillera Press, 1988), 71-74.

⁴⁹⁷ Kingery, *The Colorado Mountain Club*, 77-79.

⁴⁹⁸ Jim Kjeldsen, *The Mountaineers: A History* (Seattle: The Mountaineers, 1998), 118-119.

⁴⁹⁹ Kjeldsen, *The Mountaineers*, 119-129.

“[mountaineering] clubs became the vanguard of environmentalism,” argues Susan Shrepfer, “fighting the united strength of logging, mining, grazing, and waterpower interests.”⁵⁰⁰ From wildflower protection to the establishment of national parks, western mountaineers organized themselves and lobbied for the protection of wild places during the first half of the twentieth century. Conservation became an enduring aspect of western climbing culture.

Yet as the sport became more popular, technologies evolved, and clubs had less influence, some climbers focused on difficult ascents rather than conservation issues. While many climbers continued to advocate for conservation and other environmental issues after World War II, a split emerged between those who focused their energy on these issues, like Brower, and those who focused on the sporting aspects of climbing.

During these years, questions emerged that reverberated through the rest of the century. First, climbers had undeniably fought to protect wilderness areas throughout the West during the first half of the century. In fact, they often led these fights. Yet what were the purposes of these conserved and protected lands? Were they places for human recreation or were they refuges for biological diversity? Second, could forest reserves, wilderness areas, and other protected lands in the West be places where humans recreated *and* nonhuman nature flourished? Third, and more pressing, how would climbers respond to charges that they negatively affected places across the region?

⁵⁰⁰ Schrepfer, *Nature's Altars*, 209.

Piton Scars, 1930s-1960s

Yosemite Valley was unlike other climbing areas in the United States. The walls were taller, steeper, and more imposing. In contrast to alpine climbing venues like the High Sierras, the Cascades, the Tetons, or the Sawtooths where broken ridgelines provided early mountaineers clear paths of travel, Yosemite's smooth walls broken by steep vertical cracks offered few easy routes. In the early twentieth century, Sierra Club climbers realized that they would need to break from the alpine tradition if they were going to ascend these towering cliffs.⁵⁰¹ Similar to Italian climbers who pioneered big wall climbs on the tall limestone walls of the Dolomites during the first decades of the twentieth century, Yosemite climbers embraced technological solutions to the challenges they encountered.⁵⁰² Over time, however, it became evident that these technological approaches altered cliffs in irreversible ways.

In the 1930s, Sierra Club members first experimented with these techniques and technologies. Their ascent of Higher Cathedral Spire in 1933-1934 demonstrated their willingness to use technology to overcome obstacles. During this ascent, they hammered pitons and used these little metal wedges as artificial hand and footholds.⁵⁰³ This embrace of technology marked a break with the alpine tradition that had dominated American climbing culture.⁵⁰⁴

As they traveled across the West, Sierra Club climbers brought this style with them. In 1939, a group that included future club president David Brower climbed Shiprock (Tsé Bit'a'i), a

⁵⁰¹ On the influence of European climbing culture on American climbing culture, see Joseph E. Taylor III, *Pilgrims of the Vertical: Yosemite Rock Climbers and Nature at Risk* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 15-43.

⁵⁰² For Italians use of technology in the Dolomites, see David Smart, "Shadows on the Stone," *Alpinist*, Winter 2021-2022, 44-71.

⁵⁰³ Roper, *Camp 4*, 23-24.

⁵⁰⁴ For this conflict within the American climbing community over technology, see Robinson, "Shiprock," 54-56.

complex mountain of volcanic rock on the Navajo reservation.⁵⁰⁵ During the ascent, the men used pitons and expansion bolts, more typically used in the construction industry, to protect challenging sections of their route.⁵⁰⁶ In addition to using natural features—edges, cracks, and protrusions—as hand and footholds, the climbers pounded a series of small metal wedges into the rock that they used as artificial hand and footholds when natural features could not be found. In an article in the *American Alpine Journal*, Sierra Club climber Bestor Robinson did not hide the team’s use of mechanical aids to surmount some of the difficulties they encountered. Rather, he declared, “I’m a rock engineer and proud of it.”⁵⁰⁷ Unlike their counterparts in other parts of the country who believed that excessive use of technology was poor style, Yosemite climbers found pitons and expansion bolts critical to pushing the boundaries of the sport in the years before World War II.

Although civilian climbing across the West paused during World War II, after the war Sierra Club members returned to Yosemite keen to share in the joys and pleasures of climbing.⁵⁰⁸ Increased affluence and the end to gasoline rationing meant that more people had access to automobiles and cheap gasoline.⁵⁰⁹ It became commonplace for Sierra Club members to spend the week working in one of California’s rapidly expanding urban areas and then drive out to the

⁵⁰⁵ Since 1971 the Navajo have forbidden climbing on the reservation, including Shiprock. See “Tribal Ban – Desert Pioneers,” *The American Alpine Club*, Accessed May 9, 2024, <http://exhibits.americanalpineclub.org/clubhouse/desert-pioneers/>.

⁵⁰⁶ For an extended discussion of the Shiprock ascent, see Chris Jones, *Climbing in North America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 135-139.

⁵⁰⁷ Robinson, “Shiprock,” 55.

⁵⁰⁸ Schrepfer, *Nature’s Altars*, 181-184.

⁵⁰⁹ On expanded postwar car ownership and outdoor recreation, see Isserman, *Continental Divide*, 270 and Taylor, *Pilgrims*, 122.

Valley for a weekend of climbing and socializing.⁵¹⁰ On these trips, they brought with them rucksacks stuffed with Army surplus equipment, including pitons that had been developed for America's mountain troops during the war.⁵¹¹ Armed with a cheap supply of pitons, climbers began nailing their way up the Valley's imposing walls where they soon learned the limitations of this equipment. The Army issued pitons were made of a "relatively malleable metal."⁵¹² These pitons worked well in the soft limestone of Europe but tended to buckle and bend when pounded into Yosemite's hard granite.

John Salathé, a Swiss ironworker living in California, engineered a solution to this problem. After he became annoyed with the Army issued pitons that bent when he struck them, he forged his own from a much harder metal alloy. Supposedly, he fashioned these pitons from the discarded axle of a Model-A Ford.⁵¹³ Using his homemade equipment, Salathé hammered his way up cracks that had previously given him fits. In 1947, Salathé along with his partner, Ax Nelson, made the first ascent of Lost Arrow Chimney near Yosemite Falls, a route that had been on the minds of Yosemite's pioneers for more than a decade.⁵¹⁴ In his story in the *Sierra Club Bulletin*, Nelson reported that he and Salathé carried only "18 pitons ... but these were drove in

⁵¹⁰ On the relationship between western urban areas and recreational destinations beyond the city limits during the postwar years, see John Findlay, *The Mobilized American West, 1940-2000* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2023), 94-103.

⁵¹¹ For army surplus equipment, see Maurice Isserman, *Continental Divide: A History of American Mountaineering* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016), 271-273. See also, Gross, *Shopping*, 91-114. For a brief history of U.S. Army equipment developed for use during the war, see Christian Beckwith, *The Ninety Pound Rucksack*, podcast audio, January 12, 2024 and March 25, 2024, <https://christianbeckwith.com/gear-heads/> and <https://christianbeckwith.com/gear-heads-part-2-episode-09/>.

⁵¹² Jones, *Climbing in North America*, 186.

⁵¹³ Ax Nelson, "Five Days and Nights on the Lost Arrow," in *Ordeal by Piton: Writings from the Golden Age of Yosemite Climbing*, ed. Steve Roper (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Libraries, 2003), 34. Yosemite climbing historian Steve Roper questions the validity of this story. Instead, he suggests that Salathé worked with bars of the metal which would have been cheap and readily available during this period. See Roper, *Camp 4*, 33.

⁵¹⁴ Roper, *Camp 4*, 40.

hundreds of places.”⁵¹⁵ On this ascent, Salathé and Nelson demonstrated the value of stronger pitons to the Yosemite faithful.

A series of impressive, technological climbs ensued. After climbing the Lost Arrow Chimney, Salathé teamed up with young climber Allen Steck to attempt the north face of Sentinel Rock. Over the course of four-and-a-half days in early July 1950, Steck and Salathé hammered and removed approximately one hundred and fifty-six pitons and drilled nine bolts as they forced their way up this imposing wall.⁵¹⁶ Other climbers mimicked these tactics. Royal Robbins, Jerry Gallwas, and Mike Sherrick brought strong pitons with them when they attempted the Northwest Face of Half Dome in 1957.⁵¹⁷ According to Sherrick, the pitons “survived a beating on almost every lead; some must have been used fifteen to twenty times each.”⁵¹⁸ Warren Harding used similar tactics when he sieged The Nose route on El Capitan from July 1957 to November 1958.⁵¹⁹ During this period, all of the major (and minor) climbs in Yosemite relied on extensive hammering. The cliffs resembled a construction zone.

⁵¹⁵ Nelson, “Five Days,” 34.

⁵¹⁶ Allen Steck, “Ordeal by Piton,” in *Ordeal by Piton: Writings from the Golden Age of Yosemite Climbing*, ed. Steve Roper (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Libraries, 2003), 41.

⁵¹⁷ Mike Sherrick, “The Northwest Face of Half Dome,” in *Ordeal by Piton: Writings from the Golden Age of Yosemite Climbing*, ed. Steve Roper (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Libraries, 2003), 58.

⁵¹⁸ Sherrick, “The Northwest Face,” 58.

⁵¹⁹ Warren Harding, “El Capitan,” in *Ordeal by Piton: Writings from the Golden Age of Yosemite Climbing*, ed. Steve Roper (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Libraries, 2003), 62-67.



Figure 6.1. A climber from the Wyoming Mountaineers of Casper College nailing his way up Wind River Pinnacle in Wind River Canyon. Climbers across the West embraced pitons and aid climbing during the 1950s and 1960s. Photo from Western History Collection, Casper College, Wyoming.

While Yosemite may have set the standard, rock climbers across the West embraced pitons and direct aid climbing during these years. For example, in May/June of 1956 the Wyoming Mountaineers of Casper College established a new route at Devils Tower (*Mato tipila*) that employed extensive technical engineering. In his journal documenting the climb, club leader Walt Bailey described the route as a “highway of pitons.”⁵²⁰ He estimated that he and his students had placed approximately sixty pitons and three bolts over the course of their climb.⁵²¹ Elsewhere, climbers took similar approaches. In the 1949 edition of *The American Alpine*

⁵²⁰ “6-56 Casper College Rt – Devils Tower,” Box 1, Folder 4, Walt Bailey Papers, Collection Number 2635, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

⁵²¹ “6-56 Casper College Rt – Devils Tower,” Box 1, Folder 4, Walt Bailey Papers, Collection Number 2635, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

Journal, Washington climber Ralph S. Widrig described a series of climbs in the Cashmere Crags near Leavenworth, Washington that all relied on the use of pitons and “contraction bolts.”⁵²² In 1953, Dale Johnson led a route up the overhanging northwest face of the Maiden near Boulder, Colorado using a complex assortment of bolts and pitons.⁵²³ During the 1950s and 1960s, American climbers across the West united in their embrace of pitons and other equipment to make difficult ascents.

Although there were critics of this style, most were thrilled to explore new terrain and complete routes that only a generation early had been deemed impossible. In a 1951 article in the *Sierra Club Bulletin*, Allen Steck observed, “This is a technical age and climbers will continue in the future to look for new routes. There is nothing more satisfying than being a pioneer.”⁵²⁴ More than a decade later, Yosemite climber Yvon Chouinard expanded on this observation. In “Modern Yosemite Climbing,” Chouinard went into detail about the techniques, technologies, and philosophies that had made Yosemite into one of the most important climbing areas in the country—and world. He spent a considerable amount of space in the article discussing the development of stronger pitons, from Salathé’s to Gallwas’s to his own, as well as the intricacies of direct aid climbing.⁵²⁵ According to Steck and Chouinard, the best American climbers were skilled technicians who were capable of climbing unbelievable walls across the American West and beyond. As leading Yosemite climbers, Steck and Chouinard understood the pioneering ethos that motivated this generation.

⁵²² Ralph S. Widrig, “First Ascents in the Cashmere Crags,” *American Alpine Journal* (1949): 248-255.

⁵²³ Jeff Achey, Dudley Chelton, and Bob Godfrey, *Climb! The History of Rock Climbing in Colorado*, 2nd ed. (Seattle: The Mountaineers Books, 2002), 22-23.

⁵²⁴ Steck, “Ordeal,” 39.

⁵²⁵ Yvon Chouinard, “Modern Yosemite Climbing,” in *Ordeal by Piton: Writings from the Golden Age of Yosemite Climbing*, ed. Steve Roper (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Libraries, 2003), 99-101.



Figure 6.2. An example of a piton-scarred crack. This photo of the route "Serenity Crack" in Yosemite Valley demonstrates the damage done to rock environments by the repeated placement and removal of pitons. This photo appeared in the first issue of John Stannard's publication *The Eastern Trade*. Photo from Rock & Snow Archives.

Yet, like most pioneers, they did not recognize the negative repercussions of their actions. The repeated hammering of pitons had begun to take a toll on the rock itself, especially as more climbers gathered at popular areas. Across the West in the 1960s, cracks widened from thin fissures to unsightly scars as climbers hammered and removed pitons, over and over and over. They had fought hard for the conservation of high places, but now, they were destroying the very places they professed to care the most about.

Clean Climbing? Sport and Environment, 1970s

The late 1960s and early 1970s spawned new thoughts about human's relationships to the environment. Activists, politicians, bureaucrats, scholars, and citizens alike tried to figure out

how to address a complicated set of concerns that ranged from toxicity and pollution in urban and agricultural areas to wilderness preservation, endangered species, and more. Within this milieu, advocates of wilderness sports, led by equipment manufacturers, encouraged recreationists to consider ways to reduce their impacts on the places where they camped, paddled, skied, and climbed.⁵²⁶

At an Earth Day gathering in Wausau, Wisconsin in April 1970, Gerry Cunningham of Gerry Mountaineering spoke to attendees about how they might reduce their impact on wilderness areas. Instead of the “pioneering camping ethic” in which “every tree was to be turned into something useful,” Cunningham told those in the audience of a different approach.⁵²⁷ “Being intelligent,” he enthused, “man has developed the technology to be able to pass through the wilderness leaving no sign of his passing.” After making his point about the need for change, Cunningham asked listeners to join him in a “Wilderness Traveler Pledge”:

I believe that man -- the intelligent animal -- can travel through the wilderness and
LEAVE NO TRACE.

I will keep my group small

I will keep my stay in any one place short

I will not dig up the ground cover

I will not cut down trees or branches

I will not build fires, or if I do I will keep them small and scatter their remains when
I leave

I will leave no trash or other evidence of my stay in the wilderness

⁵²⁶ On companies’ relationships to environmental causes, see Gross, *Shopping*, 155-163.

⁵²⁷ “TO LEAVE NO TRACE,” Box 1, Gerry and Ann Cunningham papers USU_ORA 021. Special Collections and Archives. Utah State University Merrill-Cazier Library. Logan, Utah.

I will LEAVE NO TRACE⁵²⁸

As more Americans traveled, camped, and recreated in parks, forests, and wilderness areas, they left noticeable impacts these places. In response, industry leaders like Gerry Cunningham encouraged outdoor recreationists to embrace ethics that minimized the evidence of their passage. However, as scholars such as James Morton Turner, Gregory L. Simon, and Peter Alagona have pointed out, this new ethic came with a host of environmental trade-offs.⁵²⁹ In the 1970s, wilderness recreationists began to use equipment like white gas stoves and nylon products backpacks that relied on fossil fuels to manufacture and use. While they may have reduced the immediate impact on wilderness areas in the American West, they negatively affected peoples and places elsewhere. However, contrary to what these leaders expressed, these minimum impact recreation ethics *did not* solve issues of environmental damage in the American West by outdoor recreationists. Across the region, recreationists continued to impact wilderness areas in negative ways.

Clean Climbing

Like Gerry Cunningham, Yvon Chouinard was a leading manufacturer and supplier of outdoor equipment in postwar America.⁵³⁰ Whereas Cunningham specialized in soft goods like parkas, backpacks, and tents, Chouinard manufactured and sold pitons, carabiners, and other climbing equipment through his company Chouinard Equipment. Cunningham focused on the damage backpackers and campers did to wilderness areas, while Chouinard focused on the ways

⁵²⁸ "TO LEAVE NO TRACE," Box 1, USU_ORA 021, USUSCA.

⁵²⁹ See James Morton Turner, "From Woodcraft to 'Leave No Trace': Wilderness, Consumerism, and Environmentalism in Twentieth-Century America," *Environmental History* 7, no. 3 (July 2002): 462-484; and Gregory L. Simon and Peter S. Alagona, "Beyond Leave No Trace," *Ethics, Place and Environment* 12, no. 1 (March 2009): 17-34.

⁵³⁰ For Chouinard's place in the postwar scene, see Gross, *Shopping*, 166.

climbers had altered cliffs and rock environments. In the early 1970s, Chouinard encouraged climbers to move away from pitons towards equipment that would reduce their physical damage on cliffs and mountains. This new style was predicated on environmental awareness and perception.⁵³¹ “There is a word for it,” wrote California climber Doug Robinson, “and the word is clean.”⁵³²

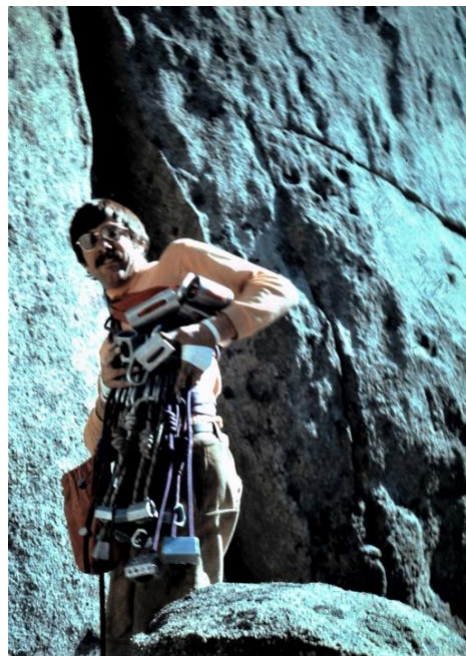


Figure 6.3. Montana climber Jim Kanzler draped with clean climbing equipment in the Humbug Spires, Montana. In the 1970s, American climbers embraced “clean climbing” as an environmentally sensitive ethic that supposedly preserved rock environments from destruction. Photo courtesy Doug McCarty.

What exactly was “clean” about clean climbing? Clean climbing refers to the style of climbing that developed in America during the late 1960s and early 1970s in which climbers put

⁵³¹ For other countercultural Americans who questioned the use of technology in American society, see Andrew G. Kirk, *Counterculture Green: The Whole Earth Catalog and American Environmentalism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007).

⁵³² Doug Robinson, “The Whole Natural Art of Protection,” in *Chouinard* (Santa Barbara: Sandollar Press, 1972), 12. Book Collection 72, C-12, Folder 1970-1980, Special Collections, Utah State University.

down their hammers and pitons in favor of other types of equipment—called chocks, hexcentrics, and nuts—that supposedly did less damage to cliff and mountain environments. Although a relatively simple concept, the story of how clean climbing became a central tenant of American climbing culture is a bit more complicated. In many popular accounts, clean climbing began with the 1972 Chouinard Equipment catalog and Doug Robinson’s essay “The Whole Natural Art of Protection.” Most writers, including historians, often credit Yvon Chouinard, Tom Frost, and Doug Robinson with developing the clean climbing philosophy in America.⁵³³ In reality, the idea has earlier origins as well as ties to regions beyond the North American West.

By the late-1950s, Royal Robbins was America’s leading rock climber. A charismatic, obsessive person, Robbins was the driving force behind many of Yosemite’s most dramatic rock climbs in the 1950s and 1960s.⁵³⁴ Although a fixture in Yosemite, Robbins traveled far and wide to climb. In the mid-1960s, Robbins took a trip to England and noticed something different about British climbers. Instead of using pitons to protect routes—what Robbins called “ironmongery”—British climbers used machine nuts that they found on railroad tracks as protection.⁵³⁵ “When attached to a sling and carabiner, and jammed into a crack,” Robbins explained, “these nuts become artificial chockstones.”⁵³⁶ Although Robbins was intrigued by this style, especially its emphasis on boldness and technical skill, he did not think Americans need adopt it.

A year later, however, Robbins changed his mind. In the May 1967 issue of *Summit*, Robbins contributed an article in which he detailed his new ideas about these artificial

⁵³³ Ruth Alexander, *Democracy’s Mountain*, 186.

⁵³⁴ See more on Royal Robbins, see David Smart, *Royal Robbins: The American Climber* (Seattle: Mountaineers Books, 2023).

⁵³⁵ Royal Robbins, “A Visit To Britain,” *Summit* (December 1966): 5.

⁵³⁶ Robbins, “A Visit,” 5.

chockstones. Robbins discussed how American climbers, like British climbers, might use manufactured machine nuts to protect routes instead of pitons. Some benefits included speedier placement as well as the ability to protect sections where pitons did not fit. More to the point, he discussed how nuts might alleviate piton scarring. “Nuts do not deface the rock,” he wrote, “they do not change the nature of the route, as pitons often do, by weakening sections of rock and breaking off holds.”⁵³⁷ Over and above the ways nuts made climbing easier, Robbins argued that American climbers should switch from pitons to nuts to preserve rock environments.

Others joined Robbins in his alarm over the damage done by pitons. John Stannard was a leading climber in the Shawangunks, New York during the 1960s and 1970s. As the sport became more popular, Stannard witnessed the damage being done to cliffs by pitons. In October 1971, Stannard began publishing a small newsletter called *The Eastern Trade*. This newsletter was dedicated to “the preservation of climbing areas.”⁵³⁸ In his first publication, Stannard highlighted the issue of piton damage. “Six years of [placing and removing pitons],” he wrote, “has produced a level of destruction in the Shawangunks exceeded only by the destruction it has produced in Yosemite.”⁵³⁹ As evidence, he included a photo of the route “Serenity Crack” in Yosemite Valley. As he made his case for why climbers should switch from pitons to nuts, he reminded readers of a simple and indisputable fact: “Rock damage is permanent.”⁵⁴⁰ Like Robbins, Stannard advocated for shifting away from pitons years before Chouinard, Frost, and Robinson.

⁵³⁷ Royal Robbins, “Nuts to You!,” *Summit* (May 1967), 5-6. Patrick Callis private collection.

⁵³⁸ “The Eastern Trade,” *Rock & Snow*, <https://www.rockandsnow.com/219/Archive/>.

⁵³⁹ “The New Ethic,” *The Eastern Trade*, October 1971, 3, <https://www.rockandsnow.com/222/Eastern-Trade-Volume-0-Number-0/>.

⁵⁴⁰ “The New Ethic,” *The Eastern Trade*, 3.

Although other climbers had called for a change prior to 1972, the Chouinard Equipment catalog packages these ideas in a compelling way that resonated with the new generation of countercultural climbers. The catalog opened with a two-page editorial by Chouinard and Tom Frost, his business partner. The two men explained how the 1960s had been a period of unparalleled growth for the sport. However, they continued, “No longer can we assume the earth’s resources are limitless ... Mountains are finite, and despite their massive appearance, they are fragile.”⁵⁴¹ Chouinard and Frost pointed out the ways pitons destroyed the cliffs of Yosemite. “On popular routes,” they explained, “the cracks are degenerating into a series of piton holes [and] flakes and slabs are being pried loose and broken off as a result of repeated placement and removal of hard pitons.”⁵⁴² Frost and Chouinard were concerned about their climbing equipment damaged mountains and cliffs.

They offered some stern advice. “Stay off climbs you do not intend to finish. Don’t climb up to Sickle Ledge unless you plan to do the entire Nose. Do not use artificial aid on free climbs,” they implored their readers. “But most of all,” they wrote, “start using chocks.”⁵⁴³ Following Robbins’ and Stannards’ leads, they believed that a shift in equipment could solve current dilemmas. They explained, “Chocks and runners are not damaging to the rock and provide a pleasurable and practical alternative on most ... climbs.” They pleaded with their readers to “re-examine your motives for climbing. Employ restraint and good judgement in the use of Chouinard equipment. Remember the rock, the other climber ----- climb clean.”⁵⁴⁴

⁵⁴¹ Yvon Chouinard and Tom Frost, “A Word...,” in *Chouinard* (Santa Barbara: Sandollar Press, 1972), 2. Book Collection 72, C-12, Folder 1970-1980, Special Collections, Utah State University.

⁵⁴² Chouinard and Frost, “A Word...,” 2.

⁵⁴³ Chouinard and Frost, 2.

⁵⁴⁴ Chouinard and Frost, 2.

A few pages later, Doug Robinson contributed the central essay of the catalog. In “The Whole Natural Art of Protection,” Robinson underscored Chouinard and Frost’s earlier points. “Clean,” wrote Robinson, “is climbing the rock without changing it; a step closer to organic climbing for the natural man.”⁵⁴⁵ He provided readers with a detailed how-to guide as well as philosophy. He wrote, “Clean climbing demands vision and an awareness of the rock. To place a nut you must begin by thinking about the shape of cracks. Right from the start clean climbing demands increased awareness of the rock environment.”⁵⁴⁶ This style encouraged climbers to expand their awareness and think differently. Chouinard, Frost, and Robinson hoped that clean climbing would reawaken climbers’ environmental awareness that had lapsed during the rush for new climbs in the 1950s and 1960s. Although this may seem ironic coming in a catalog that had gear, clothing, and other equipment for sale, the clean climbing advocates were sincere about their ideas.⁵⁴⁷ They believed that clean climbing, like Leave No Trace, offered solutions to current environmental issues.

While it took a few years to catch on, climbers across the West eventually embraced clean climbing. As Colorado climber Jim Erickson recalls, “[...] I read an article about piton damage to the rock in Yosemite, with graphic pictures of *Serenity Crack*, and I unilaterally decided I did not want to be part of that rock damage any longer. I decided to stop carrying pitons on rock climbs. This decision was entirely motivated by environmental issues.”⁵⁴⁸ Most climbers joined

⁵⁴⁵ Doug Robinson, “The Whole Natural Art of Protection,” in *Chouinard* (Santa Barbara: Sandollar Press, 1972), 12. Utah State University, Special Collections, Book Collection 72, C-12, Folder 1970-1980.

⁵⁴⁶ Robinson, “The Whole Natural Art,” 16.

⁵⁴⁷ For a critique of Chouinard and Patagonia along these lines, see Bruce Erickson, “Recreational activism: politics, nature, and the rise of neoliberalism,” *Leisure Studies* 30, no. 4 (October 2011): 477-494.

⁵⁴⁸ Jim Erickson, “The First Earth Day and the Advent of Clean Climbing,” *Sharp End Publishing*, April 22, 2020, <https://stores.sharpendbooks.com/blog/the-first-earth-day-and-the-advent-of-clean-climbing/>.

Erickson in his environmental commitments. As the decade wore on, the majority of American rock climbers hung up their hammers and began to practice the art of climbing clean.

Clean climbing marked a paradigm shift in American climbing. In a small way, climbers' shift in equipment demonstrated their desire to reduce their environmental impacts on places. In their quest to leave as little impact as possible, climbers aligned with other outdoor recreationists during this period who also embraced similar ethics. However, clean climbing did not remedy all of the damages climbers did to vertical environments across the region. Climbers continued to affect places and nonhuman nature throughout the American West in devastating and irreversible ways.

Reckoning with Impacts: Gardening Cliffs, Litter, and Other Harms

In the 1970s, Milton “Chip” Salaun, a climber and botanist, began studying the impact of climbers on cliff dwelling plants. His area of study was Longs Peak in Rocky Mountain National Park. According to historian Ruth Alexander, Salaun was “concerned that aid and free climbers on the East Face [of Longs Peak] were surpassing plants’ capacity to withstand disruption.”⁵⁴⁹ Through his study, Salaun learned that climbers sometimes removed fragile alpine plants in their quest to climb routes in the new “clean” style. Climbers “gardened” cracks—meaning they removed dirt, soil, plants, and other material—in order to find placements for nuts, chocks, hexcentrics, and other equipment.⁵⁵⁰ “Buttercups, mustards, stonecrops, saxifrage, roses, pea clovers, parsnips, primroses, and phlox,” all suffered at the hands of rock climbers, Alexander

⁵⁴⁹ Ruth Alexander, *Democracy’s Mountain*, 190.

⁵⁵⁰ On gardening, see Taylor, *Pilgrims of the Vertical*, 208.

explains.⁵⁵¹ While climbers across the West professed their new environmental awareness and sensitivity during the 1970s, they continued to affect alpine environments in detrimental ways.

Salaun communicated his findings with Park Service officials, but he also published articles in popular climbing magazines.⁵⁵² In the June 1976 issue of *Off Belay*, Salaun pointed out some of the contradictions present in the clean climbing approach. In an article provocatively titled “A Hole in the Clean Climbing Philosophy,” Salaun pointed out the loss of fragile, alpine plants as a result of efforts to prepare routes for climbing. These losses were permanent. Some of the plants climbers removed, explained Salaun, “are over 200 years of age. They’ve been there a long time without parkas, tools and tents.”⁵⁵³ Yet, in their haste for new ascents, climbers regularly destroyed these plants. “Cleaning a crack above timberline is more than just temporarily easing the conditions for your own ephemeral passage,” he wrote. “For all practical purposes, once it is done it will be forever. If the plants were in their normal, level ground environment, these perennials have a recovery rate from serious destruction which varies from several hundred years to a thousand years. But in the vertical world, just the mechanics of soil formation borders on the mystic and the question of recovery is purely academic.”⁵⁵⁴ Once a plant was gone from this environment, for all intents and purposes, it was gone for good. Salaun urged climbers to more fully consider their impacts on the alpine environments of Longs Peak and other alpine areas.

⁵⁵¹ Alexander, *Democracy’s Mountain*, 190.

⁵⁵² Alexander, *Democracy’s Mountain*, 190.

⁵⁵³ Chip Salaun, “A Hole in the Clean Climbing Philosophy,” *Off Belay*, June 1976, 37.

⁵⁵⁴ Salaun, “A Hole,” 37.



Figure 6.4. Photo of wildflowers on Longs Peak in Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado. Chip Salaun included this photo in his article about climbers' impacts on the flora of Longs Peak in *Off Belay* magazine. A caption accompanying the photo read, "Wildflowers growing in the cracks high up on the Longs Peak 'Diamond.' Must they die just to foster another 'clean, free ascent?'" Although many climbers embraced clean climbing for environmental reasons in the 1970s, they "gardened" cracks of plants, soils, and other material which did irreparable harm to these environments and species. Photo from *Off Belay* magazine, author's private collection.

Climbers needed to be more critical of their actions. "Free climbing and all-nut climbing are certainly good and valuable pursuits," wrote Salaun, "But every once in a while the life of something else, way up there, takes preeminence to our human games."⁵⁵⁵ He made his point: climbers needed to do more than just climb with nuts and hexes. They had to think long and hard about their actions, particularly the effects they had on sensitive wildflowers and plants in high alpine environment. Climbing in alpine areas was not necessarily wrong, but destroying plant communities in the name of "clean, free ascents" was certainly objectionable.⁵⁵⁶

⁵⁵⁵ Salaun, "A Hole," 35.

⁵⁵⁶ Salaun, "A Hole," 35.

Though most climbers in the 1970s shifted to clean climbing for environmental reasons, many remained unaware or uncritical of how they impacted sensitive alpine areas and cliff ecologies. Although reports, studies, and magazine articles spelled out the ways climbers affected these places, these publications had little effect on climbers' behaviors. While sympathetic to environmental causes and issues, many climbers were too wrapped up with their climbs to consider how they impacted places. There were clear limits to the clean climbing ethic. It was a step in the right direction, but it did not solve all of the issues. In the decades to come, climbers' continued impacts posed particular challenges for land managers charged with preserving and upkeeping parks, monuments, reserves, and other federal lands in the West.

Managing the Vertical West: Federal Land Agencies and Climbing
Management Plans, 1990s

By the late 1980s, federal land managers at parks, national monuments, forests, and sites across the American West had become aware of the damage done by mountaineers and rock climbers. Litter, human waste, trampling of sensitive plant communities, and negative interactions with nesting raptors and other wildlife proved difficult to manage. So, too, issues regarding damage to culturally and archaeologically significant sites weighed heavy on land managers' minds. As more Americans (and international visitors) sought out the West as an iconic region for these activities during the 1980s, these issues compounded. At the same time, the shift from clean climbing to "sport climbing" presented land managers with further conundrums. In the early 1990s, federal land managers across the West created specific management plans to address the effects of rock climbers and mountaineers. These management

plans detailed damage to park resources by climbers and set out specific guidelines to manage the sport at parks, monuments, and other federal sites across the region.

The Origin of Climbing Management Plans

In a memo to all Regional Directors of the National Park Service (NPS) in July 1991, the Associate Director of Operations laid out a concern. Although mountain climbing and rock climbing had been an “acceptable and welcome” use of national parks for decades, recent developments within the sport proved troubling.⁵⁵⁷ They wrote: “The use of technology, such as motorized drills and chisels, has lead [*sic*] to an exponential increase of climbing activities on all public lands, including the parks. Some park areas now report many times the number of climbers from only a few years ago.”⁵⁵⁸ Increased use, however, was not the primary issue. Rather, the issue was the degradation of park resources associated with this use. “Natural cracks are being cleaned (‘gardened’) of dirt and small plants,” explained the Associate Director, “and lichen is removed from rock faces with wire brushes.” Worse yet, “There is more frequent use of chisels, hammers, and glue to alter the rock [and] the increasing use of chalk has also made highly visible ‘chalk trails’ on rock faces.” If this weren’t troublesome enough, “the number and erosion of approach trails and paths to the beginning of a climb has greatly increased, along with the resulting increase in sanitation and litter impacts at the beginning of climbs.”⁵⁵⁹ The Associate Director’s memo reads like a litany of grievances.

⁵⁵⁷ Associate Director, Operations to Regional Directors, July 23, 1991. “Rock Climbing Management,” Management/Policies/Laws, National Park Service History Electronic Library and Archive, https://npshistory.com/agency_history.htm.

⁵⁵⁸ Associate Director, Operations to Regional Directors, July 23, 1991.

⁵⁵⁹ Associate Director, Operations to Regional Directors, July 23, 1991.

They followed these grievances with an important reminder. “The National Park Service continues to support technical rock climbing as a legitimate recreational activity in park areas,” they wrote. “Many park areas with climbing activities have been very successful in developing close ties and working with local climbers and climbing groups in an attempt to manage climbing in their areas.” Nevertheless, “the increasing impacts from the growth of certain climbing activities requires a certain consistency in management of these issues.”⁵⁶⁰ Here was the gist of the Associate Director’s memo: Climbers had long been important supporters of national parks and public lands, the majority of which were located in the West, yet they had negatively affected park resources and needed to be regulated.⁵⁶¹ Throughout the 1980s, the sport had changed dramatically and the NPS needed to create management plans to prevent any further damage to park resources by climbers.

Climbing Management Plans: A Review of Three Sites

In response to the Associate Director’s memo, federal land managers across the West studied rock climbers’ effects on park resources. They documented the changes that had occurred during the 1980s as bolt protected “sport climbing” became accepted by the majority of American rock-climbers. During the drafting of these plans, park leaders unearthed a whole host of environmental issues: loss of plants, lichen, and other flora from cliffs and base areas; networks of undesignated social trails; soil compaction near the base of popular routes; negative interactions with nesting raptors; and damage done to the rock itself by bolts. Less pressing were issues of human waste and litter; climbers’ effects on large mammals and other wildlife; and the

⁵⁶⁰ Associate Director, Operations to Regional Directors, July 23, 1991.

⁵⁶¹ On the distribution of federal lands, see “A Wealth of Public Lands,” in *The Atlas of the New West: Portrait of a Changing Region*, ed. William E. Riebsame (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 58-62.

use of gymnastic chalk. By reviewing management plans at three different western parks and monuments—Joshua Tree National Monument in Southern California, City of Rocks National Preserve in Southeastern Idaho, and Devils Tower National Monument in Northeastern Wyoming—we see federal officials’ particular concerns about rock climbing in the final decade of the century.

At Joshua Tree National Monument, park managers dealt with the fact that their park had become an extremely popular climbing destination. “The relatively mild and stable weather affords a long climbing season—usually eight months per year. This is much longer than many of the nation’s other winter climbing areas,” read the report.⁵⁶² Climbers from the greater Los Angeles-San Diego metropolitan area as well as from across the West frequented the park during the winter months when other climbing areas in the region became too cold and inhospitable. So, too, the park had become popular with international climbers. “The international climbing magazine, *Vertical*, claim[ed] that Joshua Tree [was] the most popular climbing area in the world,” the report boldly stated.⁵⁶³ Whether or not Joshua Tree was the most popular climbing area in the world, climbers’ impacts were visible across the monument.

The report laid out five critical resources—plants, wildlife, cultural resources, geological resources, and wilderness resources—climbers had affected. The report noted: “The increase in climber traffic has produced significant trampling of plants at the base of some rock formations ... This damage primarily affects shrubby perennials, that flourish because of the water runoff from rock formations. These areas have also been subjected to damage caused by trees and

⁵⁶² US Department of the Interior, National Park Service, *Joshua Tree National Monument Climbing Management Plan*, by Todd Swain, February 1993, 11. Documents, Joshua Tree National Park, National Park Service History Electronic Library and Archive, <https://npshistory.com/publications/jotr/index.htm#documents>.

⁵⁶³ National Park Service, *Joshua Tree National Monument Climbing Management Plan*, 11.

bushes being purposefully pruned or damaged to access climbs.”⁵⁶⁴ In addition, “very small and specially adapted plants are also encountered in cracks and crevices on the cliff faces. These plants may easily be pulled out by climbers in their efforts to gain a handhold, foothold, or protection placement.”⁵⁶⁵ Like at Rocky Mountain National Park more than a decade earlier, land managers remained concerned about climbers’ gardening of cracks, but they also noted other concerning actions like cutting trees or pruning bushes. Although park officials did not have definitive data that climbers negatively affected animals, they were concerned about two animals on the Threatened and Endangered (T&E) Species: the Desert Tortoise (*Gopherus agassizi*) and the Desert Bighorn (*Ovis canadensis*). “Of the two,” the report stated, “the Bighorn is more likely to be impacted by climbers, as it frequents rocky terrain.”⁵⁶⁶ Furthermore, the “monzogranite” domes and boulders that lay scattered throughout the park were a major attraction for both climbers and non-climbers.⁵⁶⁷ While climbers in the past had left gear and equipment behind as they ascended and descended these formations, in the 1980s they began to leave trails of shiny metal bolts on these unique geologic features. Non-climbers became aware of this permanent hardware, which affected their experience of the park’s natural qualities. Lastly, park officials recognized networks of social trails that “affect drainage patterns, lead to widespread plant damage, [and] disturbance and destruction of cultural resources.”⁵⁶⁸ Without question, climbers had altered the natural environments of monument.

⁵⁶⁴ National Park Service, *Joshua Tree National Monument Climbing Management Plan*, 5.

⁵⁶⁵ National Park Service, *Joshua Tree National Monument Climbing Management Plan*, 5.

⁵⁶⁶ National Park Service, *Joshua Tree National Monument Climbing Management Plan*, 6.

⁵⁶⁷ National Park Service, *Joshua Tree National Monument Climbing Management Plan*, 7.

⁵⁶⁸ National Park Service, *Joshua Tree National Monument Climbing Management Plan*, 8.

But they had also worked with officials to address these issues. For example, when rock climbs “were found to have been established very near to a significant pictograph and petroglyph site in the Barker Dam area ... the climbing community voluntarily removed all signs of their presence from the area.”⁵⁶⁹ So, too, climbers made “a serious effort to camouflage bolt hangers and ... substitute[d] rock colored chains and/or webbing for the brightly colored webbing historically found at rappel stations.”⁵⁷⁰ To address issues of human waste, climbers had paid for the installation of outhouses at popular trailheads. They also funded the purchase of “Carsonite markers” to mark trails and reduce the number of social trails littering the landscape.⁵⁷¹ At Joshua Tree National Monument, climbers responded positively to land manager’s concerns about their behavior and actions; they worked alongside park staff to address these issues. On the whole, climbers acted to reduce their effects on the monument’s unique cultural resources, natural environments, and more-than-human species.

Similar dynamics occurred elsewhere. During the second half of the 1980s, park officials at City of Rocks National Reserve (CIRO) in Southern Idaho had witnessed a significant increase in use by rock climbers. Although a small group of local climbers from northern Utah began climbing in the area in the 1960s, it was not widely popular until the 1980s.⁵⁷² With the acceptance of bolted routes, the preserve came onto the radar of regional, national, and international climbers. Between 1988 and 1989, “over 300 new routes were established ...

⁵⁶⁹ National Park Service, *Joshua Tree National Monument Climbing Management Plan*, 7.

⁵⁷⁰ National Park Service, *Joshua Tree National Monument Climbing Management Plan*, 7.

⁵⁷¹ National Park Service, *Joshua Tree National Monument Climbing Management Plan*, 12.

⁵⁷² US Department of the Interior, National Park Service, City of Rocks National Reserve, *Draft Climbing Management Plan and Environmental Assessment*, July 1995, 17. Documents, City of Rocks National Reserve, National Park Service History Electronic Library and Archive, <https://npshistory.com/publications/ciro/index.htm#documents>.

mostly protected by rappel-placed bolts.”⁵⁷³ A guidebook published in 1985 and a series of magazine articles helped promote City of Rocks to a larger audience.⁵⁷⁴ “As the ‘City’ received increased media attention for its sport routes and quality of climbing and camping experience, the area’s popularity exploded. The City of Rocks is now visited by climbers throughout the world,” the report stated.⁵⁷⁵

Like at Joshua Tree, park officials noted how climbers affected the natural environments of the preserve. Climbers’ presence on cliffs negatively impacted bird species like swallows and raptors, while traveling between rock formations likely affected sensitive mammal species like the kit fox and bobcat.⁵⁷⁶ Similar to Joshua Tree, park managers discovered that climbers had chopped, sawed, or pruned trees and other vegetation to facilitate access to routes, while route developers had removed lichen, mosses, and other plants from cliffs.⁵⁷⁷ Bolts, nylon slings, chains, and chalk—the same things that altered the visual landscape of Joshua Tree National Monument—were also present at the Preserve, though land managers believed they were “generally unnoticeable to the casual observer.”⁵⁷⁸ Again, although climbers used chalk and left small bits of litter at the base of cliffs, officials were not too concerned about these small details.⁵⁷⁹ A county ordinance from 1991 limited the use of power drills and effectively solved issues of noise pollution and over-bolting.⁵⁸⁰

⁵⁷³ City of Rocks National Reserve, *Draft Climbing Management Plan and Environmental Assessment*, 19.

⁵⁷⁴ City of Rocks National Reserve, *Draft Climbing Management Plan and Environmental Assessment*, 17.

⁵⁷⁵ City of Rocks National Reserve, *Draft Climbing Management Plan and Environmental Assessment*, 19.

⁵⁷⁶ City of Rocks National Reserve, *Draft Climbing Management Plan and Environmental Assessment*, 23.

⁵⁷⁷ City of Rocks National Reserve, *Draft Climbing Management Plan and Environmental Assessment*, 24.

⁵⁷⁸ City of Rocks National Reserve, *Draft Climbing Management Plan and Environmental Assessment*, 25.

⁵⁷⁹ City of Rocks National Reserve, *Draft Climbing Management Plan and Environmental Assessment*, 27.

⁵⁸⁰ City of Rocks National Reserve, *Draft Climbing Management Plan and Environmental Assessment*, 26-27.

Again, climbers helped park officials address some of these problems. The writers of the report acknowledged that “volunteer work by climbers ha[d] contributed to trail stabilization and trailhead improvements.”⁵⁸¹ In addition, “several new restrooms have been constructed, and climbing information such as trail signing, safety advisories, and an information bulletin board have been established.”⁵⁸² In general, climbers had taken “positive, proactive measures ... to protect and restore the environment and protect historic inscriptions” associated with the California Trail across the preserve.⁵⁸³ Nevertheless, the report declared “more effort [was] needed” to insure that climbers did not irreparably damage park resources.⁵⁸⁴

Officials at Joshua Tree National Monument and City of Rocks National Reserve proved judicious in their assessment of rock climbers. They acknowledged that climbers, like any group of recreationists, had certain negative impacts on park resources, yet they also noted how they had worked alongside park officials to address some of these issues. In both instances, park officials realized that any successful management plan had to engage climbers. As much as they detailed damages, they also praised climbers for their contributions and volunteer efforts.

At Devils Tower National Monument in Northeastern Wyoming park officials took a more critical stance. In the opening pages of the Final Climbing Management Plan/Finding of No Significant Impact (FCMP), park managers stated, “Activities performed by the numerous climbers on the tower during the spring through fall climbing season have affected nesting raptors, soil, vegetation, the integrity of the rock, the area’s natural quiet, and the rock’s physical

⁵⁸¹ City of Rocks National Reserve, *Draft Climbing Management Plan and Environmental Assessment*, 21.

⁵⁸² City of Rocks National Reserve, *Draft Climbing Management Plan and Environmental Assessment*, 21.

⁵⁸³ City of Rocks National Reserve, *Draft Climbing Management Plan and Environmental Assessment*, 21.

⁵⁸⁴ City of Rocks National Reserve, *Draft Climbing Management Plan and Environmental Assessment*, 21.

appearance.”⁵⁸⁵ Because the tower was the focal point of the monument, park officials were concerned about the bolts and fixed equipment climbers had placed on the tower during the 1980s. Shiny bolts, brightly colored webbing, gymnastic chalk, and climbers themselves were visible in ways they were not at Joshua Tree National Monument and City of Rocks National Reserve. These concerns were compounded by the fact that Native Americans had complained to park officials about climbers. They said, “the placement of bolts in the rock ha[d] adversely impacted their traditional activities and seriously impaired the spiritual quality of the site.”⁵⁸⁶ On top of these issues, park managers recognized that climbers had negatively impacted soils and plant communities at the base and summit of the tower and posed a threat to Prairie falcons (*Falco mexicanus*) that nested on the west side of the tower during the spring.⁵⁸⁷ They anticipated future conflicts between climbers and Peregrine falcons (*Falco peregrinus*) as the endangered bird species moved back into the Northern Great Plains.⁵⁸⁸

The FCMP spelled out officials’ plans to address climbers’ impacts. A restriction on new bolted routes accompanied plans to rehabilitate approach trails and the trail to the summit of the tower.⁵⁸⁹ Managers intended to close sections of the tower each spring once they identified raptors’ nests. NPS officials hopes that a robust education program in addition to a voluntary closure during the month of June would encourage respect of Native Americans’ unique relationships with the tower.⁵⁹⁰ Among other things, monument officials hoped that the FCMP

⁵⁸⁵ US Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Devils Tower National Monument, *Final Climbing Management Plan/Finding of No Significant Impact*, 1995, iii. Documents, Devils Tower National Monument, National Park Service History Electronic Library and Archive, <https://npshistory.com/publications/deto/index.htm#documents>.

⁵⁸⁶ Devils Tower National Monument, *Final Climbing Management Plan/Finding of No Significant Impact*, iii

⁵⁸⁷ Devils Tower National Monument, *Final Climbing Management Plan/Finding of No Significant Impact*, 13.

⁵⁸⁸ Devils Tower National Monument, *Final Climbing Management Plan/Finding of No Significant Impact*, 25, 27.

⁵⁸⁹ Devils Tower National Monument, *Final Climbing Management Plan/Finding of No Significant Impact*, 27-29.

⁵⁹⁰ Devils Tower National Monument, *Final Climbing Management Plan/Finding of No Significant Impact*, 15-16.

would “increase climber awareness of their resource impacts” and “encourage climber participation in mitigating resource impacts caused by climbing activities.”⁵⁹¹ For much of the twentieth century, climbers had enjoyed almost unlimited access to the tower.⁵⁹² In the 1990s, however, changes in agency-wide management directives curtailed climbers’ ability to do as they pleased at this iconic—and multi-layered—site.

A close reading of these climbing management plans reveals detailed evidence of climbers impacts on federal lands throughout the region. Although most federal land managers acknowledged climbers’ historic use of high places across the region, these plans hinted at land managers’ general frustrations with climbers. They disturbed nesting birds, ripped plants from cracks, scrubbed lichen off cliffs, installed fixed hardware, and trampled vegetation. Only when pressed by park managers did they consider how they affected cultural and archaeological resources, other user groups, and nonhuman nature. Climbers took part in stewardship projects at parks, monuments, and preserves and consulted during the creation of management plans, yet they were motivated by a confusing blend of genuine care for these places and self-interest.

By the 1990s, most climbers had become fixated on issues that narrowly related to their sport. Interest in landscape preservation, endangered species, and ecosystem health came after they secured the ability to climb on federal lands. Climbers had drifted quite a long way from the positions they had held as leaders of the conservation and wilderness movements earlier in the century. Where they had previously led the fight to protect and preserve landscapes across the

⁵⁹¹ Devils Tower National Monument, *Final Climbing Management Plan/Finding of No Significant Impact*, v.

⁵⁹² For a history of climbers at Devils Tower National Monument, see Jacob F. Northcutt, Michael S. Reidy, and Travis Carioscia, “CHAPTER SEVEN: Climbing at Devils Tower National Monument: A Vertical History, 1898-2006,” in *Devils Tower National Monument Historic Resource Study*, ed. Daniel Zizzamia and James A. Pritchard (Santa Fe: National Park Service, Intermountain Region, 2023), 221-255.

region, in the 1990s climbers became largely self-interested. Instead of conservation and preservation, access became their rallying cry.

Fighting for Access, 1990s and 2000s

In the 1999 issue of *The American Alpine Journal*, Michael Kennedy, former editor of *Climbing* magazine and current president of The Access Fund, penned a call-to-arms. “When the history of climbing in the United States in the last two decades of the 20th century is written,” he wrote, “1998 will likely go down as a watershed year, not so much for technical breakthroughs in the mountains or brilliant performances on the crags, but for the fact that this was the year when a long-simmering stew of issues finally came to the forefront of the American climber’s consciousness. Loosely categorized under the rubric of ‘access,’ these questions of where we climb and the methods we employ will continue to haunt our ‘sport’ ... for many years to come.”⁵⁹³

Kennedy cited three examples in his article. He discussed a United States Forest Service (USFS) rule that banned fixed anchors in Wilderness areas; a decision by managers at City of Rocks National Reserve to close the Twin Sisters formation; and a “draconian” management plan at Hueco Tanks State Park in Texas that had “emptied” this once bustling bouldering area.⁵⁹⁴ While the future of climbing may have been in flux, Kennedy was proud of climbers’ responses to these threats. They had rallied a coalition of “climbing organizations and outdoor industry notables ... mainstream environmental groups, local and national politicians, and hundreds of individual climbers” to fight the USFS’s fixed anchor policy. They had filed a lawsuit against the

⁵⁹³ Michael Kennedy, “Access and the Politics of Climbing,” *The American Alpine Journal* (1999), 12.

⁵⁹⁴ Kennedy, “Access and the Politics,” 12.

NPS regarding the Twin Sisters' closure and lobbied park managers at Hueco Tanks to change their plan.⁵⁹⁵ Here were examples of climbers banding together when the stakes were high. Kennedy was proud. Nevertheless, a future of restricted climbing access in America loomed large. "Climbing is in grave danger of being marginalized and perhaps even regulated out of existence," Kennedy wrote.⁵⁹⁶

As previous leaders of the conservation and wilderness movements, climbers believed themselves to be environmentalists and important supporters of parks, forests, and other federal lands across the West. For much of the twentieth century, they had enjoyed an amicable relationship with federal land managers and almost unfettered access to the regions' high places. But the sport had changed dramatically during the 1980s. In the 1990s, many federal land managers saw climbers as a user group who needed to be managed and regulated. Although some saw this coming, this shift caught many by surprise. Climbers came to understand climbing management plans, like the ones discussed above, as a step by federal land managers to restrict their access to places across the region.⁵⁹⁷ Climbers were concerned that future actions by land managers would tend towards more restriction and oversight. These threats catalyzed the formation of local and national climbing advocacy groups in the 1990s.⁵⁹⁸

In 1991, The Access Fund organized as a non-profit and took the lead in raising the alarm about threats to climbing across the country. As part of their strategy, they built relationships with land managers and supported stewardship projects.⁵⁹⁹ For example, they worked with the

⁵⁹⁵ Kennedy, "Access and the Politics," 12.

⁵⁹⁶ Kennedy, "Access and the Politics," 13.

⁵⁹⁷ Kennedy, "Access and the Politics," 13.

⁵⁹⁸ On the split between the AAC Access Committee and The Access Fund, see "Access Fund Severed," *The American Alpine News* 7, no. 192 (1990), 3.

⁵⁹⁹ Jeff Achey, "Access Denied," *Climbing*, November 1998, 77.

Arizona Mountaineering Club to organize local climbers who were upset over USFS directives outlawing the use of fixed anchors in the Superstition Mountains near Phoenix, Arizona; they advertised and supported crag clean up days at popular climbing areas like Joshua Tree National Monument; they funded the creation of brochures that promoted “minimum-impact climbing and awareness of climber-related management concerns”; and they financed the construction of restrooms and other facilities at heavily trafficked areas like Mount Rushmore National Memorial in South Dakota.⁶⁰⁰ The Access Fund published regular newsletters to keep members aware of important developments and worked with corporate sponsors to raise money for their causes. They generally acted as a watchdog group ready to rally their membership and resources to respond to any effort to restrict climbing access in America.

As a key part of its efforts, The Fund organized and supported conservation work at cliffs and crags across the country. They assisted land managers with trail rehabilitation, organized litter patrols, cleaned chalk from crags, and helped install bathrooms at popular trailheads. Stewardship and conservation projects, however, were nested within the larger discourse and concern about access. In the April/May 1991 issue of *Climbing*, Armando Menocal, the first president of The Access Fund, warned climbers that they were “facing for the first time ... a cohesive national policy regulating the sport on federal lands, that is likely to serve as the blueprint for other policies implemented on the state, county, and municipal levels.”⁶⁰¹ As part of his advice to climbers, he encouraged them to “be active in addressing the most critical access

⁶⁰⁰ “Access,” *Climbing*, February/March 1991, 42.

⁶⁰¹ “Sign of the times,” *Climbing*, April/May 1991, 54.

issues: waste disposal, erosion, trail maintenance, camouflaging of anchors, destruction of natural and cultural properties.”⁶⁰²

This is the key foothold that unlocks the whole sequence. Climbers, on the whole, cared deeply about the places where they climbed, but being good stewards in the 1990s mattered for political reasons. Faced with restrictions by federal, state, and local land managers, climbers doubled-down on their stewardship efforts. They did this because they wanted to influence policy decisions. The Access Fund framed stewardship as a gesture of goodwill to federal land managers who had grown increasingly frustrated with and wary of this small yet assertive group of recreationists.

Whereas climbers in the past had fought to protect lands, rivers, forests, and other environments, by the 1990s climbers were narrowly focused on issues that related specifically to their activity. Climbers continued to be vaguely interested in conservation issues and environmental causes, but in general, they were more concerned about their ability to access places to recreate than anything else. In this way, climbers were like anglers, hunters, backcountry skiers, and mountain bikers who also developed environmental ethics related to their specific recreational activity. Historian William Philpott has called this strain of American environmentalism “recreational consumerism” and blamed it for keeping environmentalists from making broad, transformative changes in American society.⁶⁰³ He explains, “Instead of getting people to care about the total environment in all its ecological interconnectedness, consumerism encouraged them to care more about the particular places where their leisure and lifestyle

⁶⁰² “Sign of the times,” *Climbing*, April/May 1991, 54.

⁶⁰³ William Philpott, *Vacationland: Tourism and Environment in the Colorado High Country* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013), 297.

interests were located.”⁶⁰⁴ Access was about the ability to climb, not the health of landscapes or integrity of ecosystems.

In short, climbers had lost sight of an environmentalism that reached beyond their narrow interests. At the turn of the twenty-first century, they were hardly the environmental leaders they had been earlier in the century. When Robyn Morrison penned her article in 2003, she had good reason to worry about current climbers’ environmental attitudes and future impacts.

Activists: Public Lands, Climate, and Environmental Justice,
2000s-2010s

In the October 2020 issue of *Climbing*, editor Matt Samet surveyed American climbers’ environmental behaviors. He admitted to some contradictions. “We climbers have always prided ourselves on being green ... [but] we have blind spots,” he wrote. “We don’t always carpool ... our gear, some of which we must replace regularly, relies on fossil fuels (nylon for ropes, draws, slings, and harnesses) and mining (metal for carabiner, bolts, and traditional protection). And we travel—a lot—whether it’s crisscrossing America by car or taking international flights to dream destinations.” On the other hand, “We pick up trash at the cliff during clean-up days, build erosion-proof approach trails and platforms, and maintain fixed hardware,” he pointed out. More impressive, Samet noted the “scores of climbers who are working to fight climate change on both micro and macro levels ... including pro climbers like Tommy Caldwell, Emily Harrington, and Conrad Anker who are using their platforms to cultivate change at the policy level.”⁶⁰⁵ Climbers were not perfect environmentalists, but they had responded consistently to issues as small as

⁶⁰⁴ Philpott, *Vacationland*, 297.

⁶⁰⁵ Matt Samet, “Editor’s Note: Climbing Goes Carbon Neutral (Plus Winter 2020 Issue Preview),” *Climbing*, October 27, 2020, <https://www.climbing.com/news/editors-note-climbing-goes-carbon-neutral-plus-winter-2020-issue-preview/>.

trash and erosion at the crag and as large and complex as climate change. If the 1990s had been a low-point for American climbers' environmental commitments, the first two decades of the twenty-first century demonstrated climbers' renewed commitment to environmental activism.

In the 2000s, climbers led the fight to conserve and protect lands across the American West. In Utah, Peter Metcalf, the CEO and founder of Black Diamond Equipment, repeatedly battled governors and legislators who wanted to transfer federal lands to the state and open protected areas to oil, gas, and mineral extraction. In 2003, Metcalf and the Outdoor Industry Association fought Utah governor Michael Leavitt "over a backroom deal Leavitt had made with the Bush administration that stripped temporary wilderness protection from 2.6 million acres of federal lands and paved the way for roads through some of Utah's last wild places."⁶⁰⁶ They used the Outdoor Retailer trade show, which brought tens of millions of dollars a year to Salt Lake City, as their bargaining chip.⁶⁰⁷ By making economic arguments about the value of conserved lands and outdoor recreation in the region, they succeeded in changing Leavitt's mind. In 2006, they managed to convince Leavitt and his successor to protect over two hundred thousand acres of "red-rock wilderness" in southern Utah with the Washington County Lands Bill.⁶⁰⁸ Three years later, Metcalf and other outdoor industry leaders lobbied successfully for the Omnibus Public Lands Act, which "protect[ed] more than 2 million acres of new wilderness, more than 1,000 miles of newly designated wild and scenic rivers, and expand[ed] the national parks and

⁶⁰⁶ Greg Hanscom, "Can the outdoor gear industry wield its power for conservation?," *High Country News*, July 30, 2012, <https://www.hcn.org/issues/44-12/can-the-outdoor-gear-industry-wield-its-power-for-conservation/>.

⁶⁰⁷ Hanscom, "Can the outdoor gear industry."

⁶⁰⁸ US Department of the Interior, Senate Energy & Natural Resource Committee, Subcommittee on Public Lands & Forests, *Washington County Growth and Conservation Act*, S. 3636, November 16, 2006, <https://www.doi.gov/oc/s-3636>.

monuments system.”⁶⁰⁹ Throughout this decade, climbers worked with other outdoor industry partners to preserve millions of acres across the region.

During the 2010s, climbers continued to lobby for federal land protections across the West. Although sweeping conservation victories came to an abrupt end with the election of Tea Party Republicans with anti-federal land agendas in 2010, climbers did not give up efforts to protect sensitive areas across the region.⁶¹⁰ Late in the decade, they rallied around Bears Ears National Monument in Southeastern Utah, which became a crucible for western public lands issues after President Barack Obama created the national monument in 2016.⁶¹¹ In his declaration, President Obama noted the spiritual and cultural significance of Bears Ears for the region’s Native peoples; he discussed the unique desert plants and animals found there; and mentioned the “world class outdoor recreation opportunities, including rock climbing.”⁶¹² When President Donald Trump reduced the size of the monument in 2017, climbers stood alongside environmental groups and Native peoples in protest.⁶¹³ In the years since, they have continued to work with Native groups and government officials on the management and direction of the monument.

⁶⁰⁹ Hanscom, “Can the outdoor gear industry.”

⁶¹⁰ Hanscom, “Can the outdoor gear industry.”

⁶¹¹ For the Bears Ears designation, see Barack Obama, “Establishment of Bears Ears National Monument,” December 28, 2016, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/12/28/proclamation-establishment-bears-ears-national-monument>.

⁶¹² Obama, “Establishment of Bears Ears.”

⁶¹³ For climbers’ involvement in the fight to protect Bears Ears, see “The Fight for Bears Ears and America’s Public Lands,” *Vertical Times*, Winter 2016, 11; “The Fight for Bears Ears is Just Beginning,” *Vertical Times*, Spring 2018, 6-7; “The Complex Fight for Bears Ears & Indian Creek,” *Vertical Times*, Summer 2019, 7-8. For general background on outdoor industry’s response to President Trump’s reduction of the monument, see Tay Wiles, “Outdoor rec industry defends public lands,” *High Country News*, February 10, 2017, <https://www.hcn.org/issues/49-3/utahs-outdoor-rec-industry-defends-public-lands/>.

In addition to their engagement with public lands issues, climbers have been vocal advocates for addressing anthropogenic climate change. Professional climbers like Conrad Anker, Emily Harrington, Angela Hawse, Graham Zimmerman, and Tommy Caldwell have signed on as members of Protect Our Winters (POW), a non-profit with the mission to turn outdoor recreationists into climate activists.⁶¹⁴ Most of these individuals have used their status as professional climbers with sponsorship from outdoor apparel and equipment brands to raise awareness about climate issues. For example, Tommy Caldwell, a cutting-edge rock climber since the 1990s, speaks frequently about the effects of climate change on global mountain landscapes and communities.⁶¹⁵ As historian Ruth Alexander explains, “Caldwell is among those urging climbers to up their game and tackle climate change.”⁶¹⁶

Alex Honnold, the star of the Oscar winning documentary *Free Solo*, has joined Caldwell and other climbers searching for meaningful solutions to climate change and environmental injustice. In many ways, Honnold resembles the young men Robyn Morrison encountered in the boulders outside of Bishop, California. Like them, he has built his life around rock climbing and cares deeply about difficult routes. Yet Honnold has proven himself to be much more than just a simple “rock jock.” Through a non-profit he started in 2012, The Honnold Foundation, he has partnered with low-income, historically marginalized communities in the North American West

⁶¹⁴ “Protect Our Winters Launches POW Climb,” *Protect Our Winters*, Accessed October 8, 2025, <https://protectourwinters.org/pow-climb-uniting-the-climbing-community-on-climate-advocacy/>. For a brief background on POW, see “About POW,” *Protect Our Winters*, Accessed October 8, 2025, <https://protectourwinters.org/about-pow/>.

⁶¹⁵ Alina Selyukh, “Pro-climber Tommy Caldwell details climate change’s impact on rock climbing,” *New England Public Media*, August 7, 2022, <https://www.nepm.org/2022-08-07/pro-climber-tommy-caldwell-details-climate-changes-impact-on-rock-climbing>.

⁶¹⁶ Alexander, *Democracy’s Mountain*, 211.

and beyond on community-scale solar energy projects.⁶¹⁷ For example, the Foundation worked with Eagle Energy in 2014 on a project on the Navajo Reservation. Together, they “install[ed] solar power systems into the homes of 30 Navajo elders who [were] currently living without access to electricity, and a total of 200 solar lights into five schools.”⁶¹⁸ Like others in his generation, Honnold has used his fame to address socio-environmental issues affecting western lands and peoples.

If the scene was bleak as the twentieth century faded into the twenty-first century, the past twenty years have shifted the narrative that climbers are only interested in causes that narrowly affect them. Over the past two decades, climbers have once again led the fight for public lands conservation and addressed new issues like climate change and environmental injustice. Although fossil fuel use and consumerism continue to dog the climbing community, climbers have demonstrated their attention to issues affecting the lands and peoples of the West as well as complex, multi-faceted problems like climate change. Like other environmentalists, climbers’ actions have not always aligned with their ideals, but recently they have been outspoken activists on a wide-range of environmental issues.

Conclusion

Over the course of the long twentieth century, climbers’ environmental attitudes and behaviors have mirrored the emotions of a difficult climb. There have been high-points and low-points. Moments of assertive action as well as periods of uncertainty and doubt. At numerous

⁶¹⁷ “About,” *Honnold Foundation*, Accessed October 8, 2025, <https://www.honnoldfoundation.org/about#about-hero>. See also, Jonathan Shipley, “Reframe the Climate Discourse,” *Earth Island Journal*, Summer 2022, <https://www.earthisland.org/journal/index.php/magazine/entry/reframe-climate-discourse-climber-alex-honnold/##>.

⁶¹⁸ Samantha Larson, “Rockstar climber Alex Honnold scales up solar in Navajo Territory,” *Grist*, March 20, 2014, <https://grist.org/climate-energy/peak-solar/>.

points, climbers seemed to have blinders on and miss important hand and footholds. Sometimes, climbers rose to the challenge at hand yet at other times their commitments waivered and they faltered.

American climbers have had complicated relationships with environmental issues and the high places of the American West. They championed conservation issues throughout the century yet negatively impacted rock environments, cliffside flora, raptors, and other animals. They participated regularly in stewardship projects at parks, monuments, and other areas yet sometimes view federal land managers with suspicion and distrust. They used fossil fuels to travel widely and carried backpacks full of equipment dripping with petroleum but talked earnestly about climate change and environmental activism. In the end, these sorts of contradictions cannot be fully understood or reconciled.

Climbers' conflicting commitments and endless contradictions elide simple summative statements. Although some scholars and writers have dwelled on the paradoxes present in an environmentalism based on sport and recreation, others have looked to outdoor recreationists, especially climbers, as important leaders in environmental thinking and action.⁶¹⁹ In many ways, climbers represent Americans' uncomfortable and oftentimes conflicting environmental attitudes and behaviors during the twentieth century. Although it is an overstatement to call climbers environmental menaces, it would also be an overstatement to call them environmental

⁶¹⁹ For critiques outdoor recreationists' environmental commitments, see Richard White, "'Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?': Work and Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), 171-185; and Ethan Linck, "Your stoke won't save us," *High Country News*, May 14, 2018, <https://www.hcn.org/issues/50-8/recreation-your-stoke-wont-save-us/>. For writers and scholars who take a more optimistic approach to outdoor recreationists environmental attitudes, see Louis Geltman, "Actually – I think stoke will save us," *High Country News*, May 29, 2018, <https://www.hcn.org/articles/opinion-actually-i-think-stoke-will-save-us/>; and Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy, *Contact: Mountain Climbing and Environmental Thinking* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2008).

champions. Climbers fought hard for the protection of high places and wild areas across the West, but they also had unintended consequences on these very same places. Their decidedly mixed environmental legacies reveal them to be similar to other mainstream American environmentalists struggling to make sense of a complicated—and shifting—set of concerns during the twentieth century.

CONCLUSION

During our traverse of the Vertical West, we have encountered countless people. From Walt Bailey driving along desert highways to Arlene Blum and the Denali Damsels standing together atop the highest point in North America, we have met a cast of characters who found immense meaning, satisfaction, joy, and camaraderie in the high places of the West. We have shivered alongside Doug McCarty on the summit of Granite Peak, joined the Vulgarians on their rollicking journeys through the mountains, and left the trailhead alongside Peter Metcalf loaded down as a member of a NOLS expedition. We have rappelled down the vertical faces of Smith Rock State Park alongside Alan Watts, visited dusty indoor gyms in the Pacific Northwest with Rich Johnston, and wandered the boulder fields outside of Bishop, California led by Robyn Morrison. Together all of these people created the Vertical West.

As colorful as the human characters are in this story, so too are the places we've visited during our travels. We have traveled from the summit of the Grand Teton in winter to the roadside buttresses of Eldorado Canyon State Park to the soaring walls of Yosemite Valley. We have visited the high places of the Navajo reservation and a cave on the shores of Lake Tahoe. From the fractured columns of Devils Tower National Monument to the chunky limestone of American Fork Canyon to downtown Seattle and rainy Portland, we have followed climbers to the places of where they derived meaning, purpose, community, and identity.

The Vertical West resulted from the ways vertical environments and high places in the region made Americans feel. These places were often worlds apart from the realities of everyday life. When out climbing, people were in direct contact with the natural world in ways they often were not during the rest of their lives. Climbing provided westerners, who increasingly lived in

cities and suburban areas and worked white collar jobs that kept them indoors, the opportunity to reconnect with nature in ways they found deeply satisfying.⁶²⁰ Feeling the texture of the rock on their hands, the breeze on their face, and the sun on their back felt good; noticing the color of the sky, the clouds shifting overhead, and the patterns of lichen and plants as they climbed was meditative. Climbing introduced Americans to places of immense beauty and power where the touch of humankind seemed slight. Sometimes these places were deep in the wilderness, but often they were quite close to people's suburban homes and communities. Climbing put people back in touch with nature in visceral ways, especially as American society became ever more urban, industrial, and virtual.⁶²¹

These places inspired introspection and reflection. There is a stillness that exists in high places, especially while hanging from a belay or nestled into a comfortable bivouac after the adrenaline of climbing has ceased, that engenders contemplation. This is what Janis French was driving at when she wrote about her experience climbing the Grand Teton in winter as a member of a NOLS expedition. Despite the immense cold and uncertainty, she gained a certain perspective on her life back in Colorado. She realized how much she cared about her family. This was another reason postwar Americans were attracted to climbing: it brought them to places that gave them the opportunity to gain critical distance and reflect on their lives. In an increasingly frenetic, complicated, and fractured society, climbing afforded postwar Americans the opportunity to slow down, take a breath, and think about things. For many, it allowed them forget

⁶²⁰ Yes, humans are always enmeshed in natural systems, but being outdoors feels different than typing in an office. For the ways in which humans and the natural world are entangled, see Richard White, "'Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?': Work and Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), 184-185.

⁶²¹ For a similar argument about the reasons outdoor recreation has appealed to Americans, see White, "'Are You an Environmentalist,'" 173-174.

the turmoil of American society and the troubles of everyday life for a brief moment. Like other outdoor recreation activities, climbing had a therapeutic quality that many twentieth-century Americans found appealing.

During these decades, Americans realized the West offered seemingly endless opportunities for climbing. From boulder fields to roadside crags to multi-pitch canyons to remote backcountry walls, frozen waterfalls, and towering summits, Americans developed scores of vertical areas for climbing. Americans, especially Euro-Americans, have long viewed the West as a region of promise, hope, and possibility built on monumental nature. These same ideas coursed through twentieth-century American climbing culture. The images that outdoor gear companies used to sell equipment captured the idea that the West was a place where one could find health, adventure, and freedom in nature. These advertisements featured dramatic western landscapes and pictured men and women moving through sublime, larger-than-life places. The siren song of the West's vertical environments proved irresistible for Americans looking for meaningful experiences and restorative activities in the decades after World War II. The region's cliffs, boulders, crags, and mountains beckoned.⁶²²

Yet the rise of the Vertical West was not without its consequences. At different sites across the region, climbers clashed with Native peoples over differences of meaning, use, and access. These skirmishes revealed that outdoor recreation had the potential to stir up issues that had dogged the region for centuries. The complicated legacies of settler-colonialism emerged during these disputes as Native groups argued that climbers disrespected traditional sacred sites in their pursuit of adventure and fun. Although they were hardly united in their opinions, many

⁶²² For the idea of the West as a voluntary region, see John Findlay, *The Mobilized American West, 1940-2000* (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 2023), 92-110.

climbers sympathized with Native peoples and had little interest in perpetuating past wrongs. Whatever climbers felt or believed about these conflicts, these battles demonstrated the complicated social and political terrain of the region at the end of the twentieth century and the festering wounds of American colonialism in the region. These conflicts remind us that different groups with radically different histories and cultures inhabit the region alongside one another and continue to struggle over how to live with one another in the West.

Climbers' environmental legacies in the region are decidedly mixed. They championed conservation causes throughout the century, but were generally uncritical of their use of fossil fuels and other petroleum products. During these decades, most climbers embraced automobiles and cheap gasoline as tools to get to the mountains; they carried backpacks full of products made from petroleum, plastics, and other materials. While they fought hard for the protection of places across the region, they were less willing to consider how their habits contributed to anthropogenic climate change and directly impacted nonhuman species. As a part of mainstream consumer American society, many climbers relied on cheap goods with long supply chains and costly environmental footprints. American climbers continue to wrestle with these complicated issues. Going forward, climbers will need to continue to think critically about the environmental consequences of their actions, especially as the effects of climate change become more tangible in the region every year.

In addition, the meteoric growth of the sport during these decades caused climbers to run afoul of federal land managers. The popularity of the sport, especially since the emergence of indoor climbing gyms across the region in the 1990s, has meant more people at cliffs, crags, and alpine areas across the West. The result has been degraded soils, trampled vegetation, damage to

cultural resources, and other impacts despite climbers' continued stewardship and education efforts.⁶²³ These impacts drew the attention and ire of federal land managers. Although the vast majority of land managers proved willing to work with climbers and figure out solutions that would allow them to continued access to the region's high places, others were more reticent in their approach to these issues. Closures, tightened regulations, and moratoriums on route development have all become common aspects of the western climbing landscape in the twenty-first century. Although climbers have banded together in local, regional, and national climbing organizations and argued for their historic access to high places across the region, they've continuously bumped up against land managers with different priorities, programs, and visions for these sites. Climbers have historically been granted access to high places on federal lands, but it's not clear that this privilege will necessarily continue in the century to come. It certainly won't everywhere.

As we near the end of our journey, let's look back at the ground we've covered. We've thought about how technologies affected where people climbed and how. We've considered how climbing became part of an ascendant outdoor recreation industry in the region and examined the role outdoor gear companies played in the construction of a western regional imaginary. We've studied the social dynamics of climbing and reflected on the transformations that have occurred in western climbing culture since the end of World War II. We've deliberated about some of the

⁶²³ See Jessica Douglas, "Petroglyph vandalism is not a victimless crime," *High Country News*, May 24, 2021, <https://www.hcn.org/articles/indigenous-affairs-archaeology-petroglyph-vandalism-is-not-a-victimless-crime/>; Kevin Johnson, "Coloradan Called Out for Bolting Over Petroglyphs," *Outside*, April 16, 2021, <https://www.outsideonline.com/outdoor-adventure/climbing/moab-area-petroglyphs-climbing-controversy/>; Jack McGovan, "Rock climbers like to connect with nature – but are they also destroying it?," *The Guardian*, November 25, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/nov/25/rock-climbing-damage-cliff-ecosystems-aoe>; Brad Rassler, "Experts Ask: Are We Loving Our Mountains to Death?," *Alpinist*, August 7, 2014, <https://alpinist.com/features/experts-ask-are-we-loving-our-mountains-to-death/>.

social and environmental consequences associated with the popularity of climbing in the West. Throughout we've maintained our focus on the geography of the West and the relationship between humans and the region's vertical spaces. Given all of the terrain we've covered, how might we now answer the question that opened this study?

First, we must now recognize that effects of outdoor recreation are too large and too specific to survey in one manuscript. In this study, we've focused narrowly on climbing and yet we've only scratched the surface of this activity. We've focused on people, places, organizations, and events that were representative and demonstrative of the larger transformations that occurred in western climbing culture during these years, but these people, these places, and these events are only a fraction of the multitude of people, places, and events I could have written about. Now recognize that each outdoor recreation activity—backcountry skiing, whitewater kayaking, trail running, mountain biking, and more—has its own set of places, heroes, and histories. The story of outdoor recreation in the West during the twentieth century will take up many, many volumes.

Acknowledging these limitations, however, there are a couple of things we can say about outdoor recreation in the West. Outdoor recreation spread like wildfire across the region during these decades. It became woven into the fabric of western culture in ways that will prove durable and long lasting. It is now a social, political, economic, and environmental force to be reckoned with in the region. While the specific effects of outdoor recreation may be impossible to predict, outdoor recreation will continue to affect western lands and peoples for the foreseeable future.

The main focus throughout dissertation has been climbers' relationships with western spaces and geography. Our focus on geography has allowed us to see certain things about climbing. Recognizing the importance of physical space for climbers allows us to see clearly the

primacy of place in outdoor recreation cultures. These activities cannot take place anywhere; they occur in specific places. Climbers constructed their personal identities around their relationships with vertical environments. As climbers began to specialize in subdisciplines during these decades, they identified more strongly with some places than others. Through their travels and experiences, climbers constructed their own region in the American West built around specific places of particular importance and relevance for their preferred leisure activity. Together, all of the places climbers went became woven together into a coherent geography called the Vertical West. Asking similar questions about the role of space, place, and geography in other outdoor recreation activity may yield further insights that illuminate our understanding of the American West.

The most important lesson from this dissertation is to recognize how geographies in the American West have been layered over one another. Thinking spatially, thinking vertically, allows us to see the history of the region like geologic strata. Learning to see the history of the West vertically adds dimensions to our understanding of the region, its lands, and its peoples. Viewing history this way, we see how places in the West have accrued meaning over time. We recognize the multitude of layers present at sites across the West. Outdoor recreation is only the most recent layer in the historic record. It is layered over other, deeper sediments.

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