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PUSHING THE LIMIT

At 85, More Peaks to Conquer and Adventures to Seek

By [MICHAEL BRICK](#)

SEATTLE — He had been called a vagabond, a recluse and a schemer, a cantankerous mountain man hiding his little black book of secret climbing techniques from the world. In seven decades, he had claimed more virgin ascents than any mountaineer alive. Some ascribed his feats to vengeance of a long-ago slight, others to the murder of his own fears. He was said to howl at tourists. His past was the stuff of lore, his plans the stuff of mystery.

Then, this fall, word of his next expedition spread among the worldwide network of contacts whose telephone numbers he kept scribbled on notecards wrapped with rubber bands in the gearbox pocket of his station wagon. The plan was announced in disarmingly casual fashion.

“Hi everyone, Fred Beckey called yesterday and he is going to northern Spain in early to mid-December,” began one posting this autumn at an online rock climbing forum. “Might be a long shot, but he’s looking for a partner to hook up with in Barcelona.”

Wolfgang Paul Heinrich Beckey: The name, shortened and altered when his family had emigrated from pre-war Düsseldorf to the Pacific Northwest, resounded across the archives of mountaineering journals, the pages of literary guidebooks and the maps of newly discovered peaks. His own reluctant namesake, Mount Beckey, rises some 8,500 feet in a largely uncharted subrange near the Cathedral Spires of southeastern Alaska.

By the turn of the latest century, any self-respecting young climber could recite the high points of the Fred Beckey legend: Born in 1923 to a father who practiced medicine and a mother who performed arias, a teenage Fred rejected the life of a city intellectual for the pursuit of wild things. Learning to climb in the [Boy Scouts](#), he joined the first ascent of Mount Despair in 1939.

As a young man, Beckey earned a master’s degree in business administration and entered the printing industry, but the assignments he accepted, like driving a delivery truck, traded career ambitions for precious time.

From his first expeditions in the North Cascades, Beckey cast himself as a renegade. Defined by defiance, he ascended peaks termed unclimbable by the Mountaineers, a local outfit renowned for classes and publications promoting the sport. In return, the Mountaineers rejected his guidebook manuscripts.

Many of the climbers of Beckey’s era, their lives staked on trust and cooperation, grew wary of his gruff

manner, his outlier reputation, his intransigence. He was labeled a showboat, a womanizer and worse. When his partners were hurt or killed on expeditions, including Charles Shiverick in the Coast Range of British Columbia in 1947 and Bruno Spirig in the Himalayas in 1955, Beckey was criticized. In the early 1960s, as the first American team was assembled to summit Mount Everest, no one invited Beckey.

Setting out with his brother, Helmy, Beckey put up new routes across Wyoming, Colorado, California, British Columbia and Alaska. Though he preferred Alpine scenery, he climbed desert rock formations, icy crags and boulders, the Gunks, the Bitterroots and the Bugaboos.

As other mountaineers began to focus on repeating ascents for speed, Beckey roamed Europe, China and the North American backcountry in search of unconquered peaks. By his own account, he climbed Mount Rainier, a two-hour drive from Seattle, only five times. In the summer of 1954 alone, he scaled Mounts McKinley, Hunter and Deborah in the Alaska Range, an accomplishment that became known as his Triple Crown of First Ascents. By 1963, when he logged 26 first ascents in a single year, his legend was secure.

“He’s been everywhere, he’s done amazing things everywhere,” said Dave Burdick, known as Alpine Dave, a 28-year-old climber from Seattle. “And it’s just this drive he has.”

But in the fullness of time, Beckey’s legacy emerged as something grander than a list of records. That drive, born of a wanderlust once characterized as recklessness, fermented into a sort of sublime seeking. It appeared most vividly in his guidebook prose, a stirring amalgam of technical analysis, historical insight, geographical research and a sense of wonderment.

“If Thoreau and Emerson describe the transcendental American theme, then Beckey — after Ahab, akin to Kerouac — describes the oddly manic drive to scale and map and detail the wilderness in a modern way,” said Steve Costie, executive director of the Mountaineers, which eventually accepted Beckey as a member. “Almost adversarial; never transcendental.”

Far past retirement age, Beckey has kept hard to the road, recruiting younger companions to split the cost of travel.

“In my climbing lifetime, he was well known for being on the trailing edge of his career — that was 30 years ago, too — but still being ambitious,” said John Middendorf, 49, a onetime climbing partner, speaking by telephone from Tasmania. “His mode of operation was to invite climbers on expeditions, things he wanted to do but couldn’t necessarily do.”

This fall, despite the crumbling economy and the weak dollar, the chance to join the 85-year-old Beckey in Europe became a source of temptation for climbers around the world.

“I’m essentially going because, yeah, I like to climb, never been to Spain, but I’m mostly going to hang out with Beckey,” said Diane Kearns, 49, an instructor from Winchester, Va. “The opportunity to get to know Fred is tremendous. He’s a legend in his own time.”

A few miles northeast of downtown Seattle, on a narrow lane of wood pines and berry trees, where the

bumper stickers of parked cars promote Democrats, motorcycling and the concept of coexistence, an open garage door exposed stacks of mountain gear. Beside a “No Soliciting” sign, a lean, hunched figure emerged from a clapboard house. He extended a greeting: two thumbs up.

His breathing was labored, his hearing aid out of commission. His long fingers, swabbed with paint, turned slightly inward. His lips folded over his teeth and his silvery blue eyes were rimmed red. He wore a zippered Patagonia jacket, a huge digital watch and a ball cap that read, “Red River Gorge Climbing Coalition.”

Inside the kitchen, coffee was brewing. From the radio [Don Henley](#) sang about how those days are gone forever and he should just let them go. Where other people’s houses might display portraits of family members, framed pictures of mountain peaks covered the walls here. The table was cluttered with photographs and notes for a new manuscript, a career retrospective to be entitled Classic Climbs.

“You’ve got to be physically pretty strong to be any good at it at all,” Beckey said. “You’ve got to have a hard-core mental attitude. You’ve got to have the right mantra. You’ve got to have dedication, a sense of security, safety and sensitivity with your partners, and a good sense of balance. It’s a combination of many, many things. You need to have the capability or desire to accept a certain amount of risk. A lot of it is maybe spiritual, not a religious type, but you have to have an affinity with the outdoors.”

To complete his opus, he said, a handful of ascents remained, including routes up Mount Monarch in the Coast Range, Longs Peak in Rocky Mountain National Park and Mount Assiniboine in the Canadian Rockies. The coming European trip he ascribed partly to whim, partly to a desire to visit his brother, who has returned home to Germany.

“One of my reasons to do it is I hate Christmas shopping,” Beckey said. “I’m single, I don’t have kids, it’s going to be raining here.”

At late morning, he drove down to the new waterfront headquarters of the Mountaineers. As officials showed him an outdoor climbing gym constructed of composite rock and plastic complete with a short trail of rocks and an eight-inch layer of shredded tires designed to cushion a fall, two young women backed away in reverence, snapping photographs and speaking in hushed tones of “Mr. Beckey.”

Later, in a reflective moment, he would say: “You’re putting yourself on the line. Man used to put himself on the line all the time. Nowadays we’re protected by the police, fire, everything. There’s not much adventure left. Unless you look for it.”

But for now, Beckey dug around inside the manmade crevices, finding his grip, pulling himself up a foot, two feet, five feet into the air. Asked by the Mountaineers about his next expedition, he said he did not know. Then he slid down onto the bed of shredded rubber, remarked upon the fineness of the weather and walked up the hill and away.

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