

The Learning Project

by Lincoln Stoller

Fred Beckey, Mountaineer

Interviewed in New Paltz, New York, December 9, 2007

Born: 1923, Düsseldorf, Germany

"I was suddenly brought to a dead stop, with arms outspread, clinging close to the face of the rock, unable to move hand or foot either up or down. My doom appeared fixed. I must fall. There would be a moment of bewilderment, and then a lifeless rumble down ... to the glacier below.

"When this final danger flashed upon me... my mind seemed to fill with a stifling smoke. But this terrible eclipse lasted only for a moment, when life blazed forth again with preternatural clearness. I seemed suddenly to be possessed of a new sense. The other self... came forward and assumed control. ... I found a way without effort, and soon stood upon the topmost crag in the blessed light."

— John Muir, recounting his 1872 solo, first ascent of Mt. Ritter, in California

LS:

Fred, I want to get some thoughts from you for this book I'm writing. It's a book for young people, for teenagers, and it's about what learning could be...

FB:

So you have you seen Metcalf? (Peter Metcalf, CEO of Black Diamond Equipment, and my climbing partner when we were young. — Ed.)

LS:

Every year he sends this one-page description that summarizes his life over the past year. He sends it to all his friends around Christmas time. It's something his father used to do. I like it, and if you know him well enough to read between the lines... you can tell what's happening. He stills climbs, and he keeps in shape.

FB:

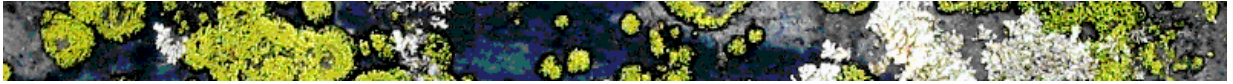
You still climbing?

LS:

No, I go flying. I have a glider. I keep in shape.

FB:

I have climbing friends in Canada who do that. They go paragliding and... I don't do it. I'm not brave enough. I bet it's fun.



LS:

Yeah, you don't have to stay in shape for it. Well, maybe you do. So how do you stay in shape? Do you climb a lot?

FB:

I just stick to skiing and climbing, that's all I do for fun.

LS:

So how did you start climbing?

FB:

Oh, I don't know. Just sort of got into it by accident living in Seattle. I had a lot to do with the Boy Scouts. It's hard to find exact reasons why you do things.

I don't even know why people climb. I can't figure it out. It's a lot easier to play tennis or golf, bicycle; a lot less stress, not dangerous, doesn't have the risk, doesn't have the suffering. Climbing's got a lot of suffering, a lot of it.

You know, you get asked this, "Why do people climb?" There's got to be a reason. Part of it's the beauty of the mountains, but you can get that from hiking. You go hiking and essentially get the same scenery. You don't look down a cliff, but... most of it.

LS:

Did you hike? You were always climbing, right?

FB:

Well, you have to hike to get to a climb. I seldom go out just to hike. I used to. But for quite a few peaks, particularly in the Cascades, you have to do a lot hiking to get to them. So that's my hiking! (laughs)

Have you read this book of Jon Krakauer's about the guy who went hiking in Alaska: "Into the Wild?" They're making a movie of it, I guess. I saw an ad in the New York Times.

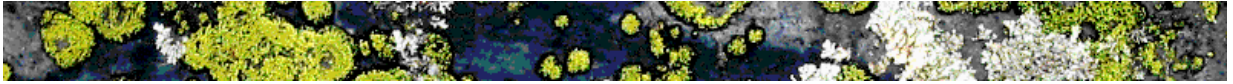
LS:

It's not a book I'd think you'd make a movie out of.

FB:

The guy got caught in big trouble in Alaska, and he didn't have enough food with him. You know, you don't go up there with three days food and hope you can stay there 21 days; and don't go up there without fuel, hoping you can find some wood on the glacier. Sure, you're asking for trouble.

You know, Lincoln, I really fail to understand what's interesting about that story. The guy sounded like a spoiled kid from a well-to-do family, who had nothing better to do but rebel against society. There are thousands of people like that around; every bum holding a sign on the street is essentially doing that.



So why is he so different or unusual? To me, everything he did seemed like he was an idealist who's rebelling, and about why? I don't know. He's taking advantage of civilization. I have friends who think it's fascinating, and other people think it's ridiculous. I don't know.

LS:

I want to know more about how you learned. Was there somebody who taught you? Did you just pick it up?

FB:

We were with the Boy Scouts, but the Boy Scouts were not into climbing, they were into scrambling. We put a rope on a couple of times, like on a glacier, Mt. Olympus, but I don't think anyone knew how to rescue somebody from a crevasse. I doubt it. I don't remember ever falling into one.

LS:

So how did you learn? You know, I learned a lot from you, I think.

FB:

Yeah, well how'd you learn? You went to Mt. Fairweather. But where did you learn to be safe on a glacier?

LS:

I read books. I thought I learned something through books, but I didn't. Mostly watching other people. You taught me to always carry ascenders on my belt, and to have everything ready in case I found myself hanging upside down in a crevasse.

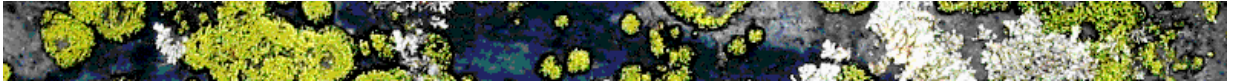
FB:

A lot of people have gotten in trouble on glaciers by not having ascenders, or what ever. I always carry them with me, you never know. You run into people who run onto glaciers and don't tie into the rope. Who was the guy who made the winter climb of Mt. McKinley, about 1970? They didn't rope-up and he fell in a crevasse and he's still there. That's a calculated risk. Nobody else fell in, just he did.

Crevasse scare me more than anything else. You never really know. I'm sure you've stepped into them. I have a picture in the slide show — people kind of laugh when I tell them the story. We were climbing near Mt. Saint Elias; we went through a bunch of ice falls and seracs. It wasn't really difficult but it was dangerous. Then we got up onto some easier terrain.

We were roped-up, there were four of us, and we're going up to the summit along a moderate snow ridge. Giant cornices leaned out over the ridge, so we kept away from the cornices. We took turns and I happened to be going first. It wasn't really leading, it was just a matter of kicking steps. The snow was pretty good.

We were a couple of hundred meters from the summit. All of a sudden the snow collapsed under me, there were no signs, but all of a sudden I was down about 40 feet. Wham! Just



like that. The crevasse actually ran the same way as the ridge, so we weren't expecting it, and the rope kind of sawed in lengthwise so I went down about 40 feet.

I got out eventually, using prussic knots. It was a little bit cold, and it was kind of scary. I have a picture that shows the hole, and the rope going down into it. And I tell people, "What you're seeing is the rope going into the crevasse and I'm down there about 40 feet trying to get out." In the mean time my friends are having lunch and taking pictures. And the audience all laughs. I don't know what's funny about it, but something is, I guess.

LS:

Tell me about being competitive. You were pretty competitive with Chouinard (Yvon Chouinard, climber and founder of Patagonia, Inc.) and other people, in order to be the first person to do a new route.

FB:

No, never with Chinouard. Ed Cooper was a little competitive in climbing. One time he jumped us on a climb on purpose. It was kind of funny. He climbed with some of the same people that I did, and sometimes you'd know that somebody's was interested in doing a particular route. You'd think, "I'll get up there next weekend, before them, and beat them out." In hindsight it's kind of amusing. It's no big deal.

As I recall I came up there with a friend, across a mountain from Seattle, and we had to hike up a couple of hours. It was called Snow Creek Wall, near Leavenworth. We got up there and they were already way up there on the route. We were probably annoyed, probably, but we did another climb. I'm not annoyed any more, and I've climbed with him after that, in different places.

LS:

You were famous for being really secretive about where you were going, and what you had planned.

FB:

Not really. Not that much. A little bit. It's really kind of childish. What's the psychology of it? I suppose that beneath it all there's a certain amount of ego. I suppose: vanity.

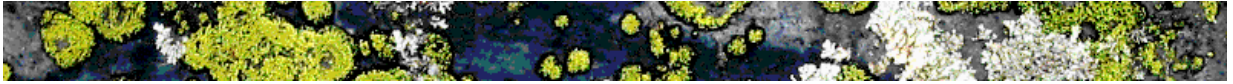
Yeah. I admit that when you're going around making first ascents you don't go around bragging about what you're going to do to all your friends who are climbers. I suppose there's some of that.

LS:

You still do that?

FB:

Nah, not really. When you get down to it, I think it stems from there being a limited number of climbs that can be done. So maybe people are a little bit jealous, they want to climb some route that nobody's done yet. But in the mountains, like in the Cascades for example, there are so many routes left to do. Canada is full of them. You fly to Alaska, and if you



have good weather you can see all the peaks up there: it's mind boggling. Unclimbed peaks. Even on the ones that have been climbed there are potential new routes. So, who cares?

You know, everybody likes a pretty woman, "Hey, I'd like to have her as a girlfriend." But you go to a big city like New York or LA and there's millions of people around. You can't catch everybody. You can't catch every climb.

I actually haven't done a new route for at least three or four years. We did some climbs last year, maybe one variation of a pitch, I've gotten to the point where I'm just as happy doing a good, traditional climb.

LS:

That's a change.

FB:

A little bit, maybe. There's always new things to do. I've got some things in mind that I'd like to do next year.

LS:

So why? Why did you change? Is it the risk? There's always more risk with first ascents.

FB:

I don't know. I'm really not sure. I'd rather climb an established route here in the Gunks, than go out to look for some new route that hadn't been done yet, and end up spending all my time.

LS:

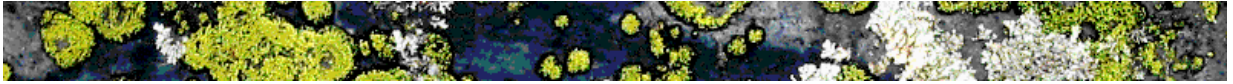
That's right, a person spends a lot of time doing a new route. Do you consider yourself a professional climber? Is there such a thing as a professional climber?

FB:

A guide is a professional climber. There are at least half a dozen young guys who are good climbers, who are sponsored by Black Diamond. Black Diamond doesn't give me anything. I get a Pro deal: 40% off.

Patagonia gave me some free clothes for the picture on their catalog, but I've got so many clothes now. I've got about five jackets like this! I mean, how many can you wear? I have jackets like this that are 20 years old and, except for maybe a little hole, they're still good. They'll last forever! How many do you need?

This whole fashion thing... A lot of people go shopping looking like they're ready to go to Mt. Everest: down jackets in New York City. They're trying to copy somebody who climbs, I guess. I really don't know. Of course the companies are pushing that real hard, that's where the money is.



LS:

What's your attitude towards money? Were you ever concerned?

FB:

I've never thought about it. I get by a little bit better than I used to. I guess you have your choice of trying to make money or getting involved with adventure.

The way society is now, if you don't have an education of some kind, or skill, you're going to have a tough time meeting ends. Unless the government pays you off, which sometimes happens, or you join the army and get shot at in Iraq, and come back and you probably have a pension. It seems to me like there's a huge difference in people's abilities, and their luck at making money.

I've thought about teaching school. I've never really done it, but I don't think you have to be terribly smart to get a teaching degree. Just mind your own business and teach high school, or grade school. It's a sure thing. I think if I was starting over again that's what I'd do. You have a guaranteed salary, unless you molest boys or girls, which some teachers seem to do.

You've got a ticket for life: you've got a salary, a summer vacation, a few weeks off here and there. You've got retirement pay, you've got medical insurance, you've got a lot of things going for you! There's a lot of stuff you've got to do. If you've got an 11 o'clock class, then you've got to be there at 11 o'clock. You've got to play games with the administration, I suppose, but it's almost a sure thing.

I've read articles like in, oh, in the Wall Street Journal or some newspaper, that people that work for the government, the county, the city, they've got a surefire job. Unless they do something like cross paths with the wrong people, or swindle money or something, they come out better in the long run than somebody who's worked for a big company like Proctor and Gamble, or Ford Motor Company — they don't give pensions anymore. I don't know.

I've sort of figured that if I work, don't play games, and apportion my free time, then I'll have enough to go climbing, or skiing, or whatever I want to do. It doesn't always work that way.

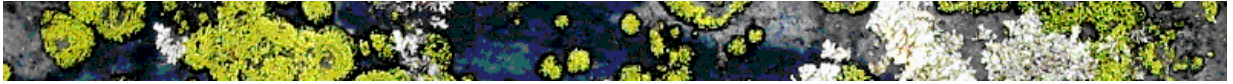
Most people get married and by the time they're 30 they've got a couple of kids, and then they're strapped down. Then they *have* to work. They'd better get a job with somebody, stay with it, and get their salary, pension, or whatever. Right or wrong, I had more flexibility. It just worked out that way.

LS:

You did a lot of temporary jobs, didn't you?

FB:

I wouldn't say temporary. I got started somehow, really by complete accident, after I got out of school, being involved with marketing and selling printing out in Seattle. Kind of a fun job, really.



I worked for the Seattle newspaper for a year selling advertising space. I'd call on customers, maybe the department store J.C. Penny; they'd have a big ad in the Sunday papers selling clothing. It was a lot of running around. A lot of work, really, for what you got out of it.

Then I got involved with a big printing company called Craftsman Press. Printing is actually the 7th, 8th, or 9th biggest industry in North America. Most people don't think about it. When you think of all these catalogs, newspapers, and magazines... it's a *huge* business. That catalog that Patagonia prints — I believe they send out 700,000 — and with companies like L.L. Bean there must be *millions!*

A big printing company like Craftsman Press, they've got contracts like printing the phone book maybe, printing big catalogs, and Boeing Annual Reports. Annual reports: you've got to get them out to millions of people, that's a big business; it's competitive.

So I got involved with selling and marketing, calling on customers. I had some free time between jobs, and that's the way it worked, not on purpose. I'd try to go climbing in Alaska, or where ever, sort of in between jobs. It just worked that way, pretty much by luck.

LS:

It never seemed to get in your way!

FB:

Sometimes it got in my way; sometimes I couldn't go off climbing during the summer. But you're right. It's kind of funny, in almost every slide show I give — if we have questions and answers afterwards — someone will raise their hand and I can almost say, "I know what you're going to ask me: 'How did you get by with all this?'" The reason they want to know is how can they do it! That's alright.

LS:

So, what do you say? Can they do it?

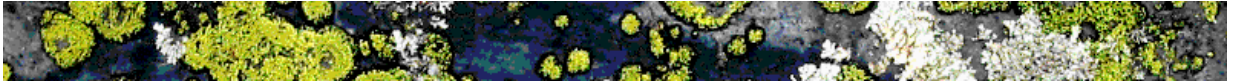
FB:

I don't know. I don't have any secret. The other secret is to be extremely brilliant at something. I know one guy who's, like, a Nobel Prize quality physicist. He could say, "I'll work for you for 4 months a year, and then I'm going to go play the rest of the year." And they'll say, "We'll be glad to have you. Please come back." Some of these computer geniuses, they can do the same thing.

There's one guy I know, he's not really a close personal friend, but I talked to him at one time about getting me a job at Microsoft. It's not my thing, really, technology. I'm computer dumb. I don't even understand how electricity works. I have a little Dell desktop just to do word processing. I know how to check email, and I know how to use Word. In fact, I find Word very handy for doing a book. Anything. I used to have a typewriter.

LS:

Nah, you don't want that. Out with that.



FB:

What should I know about computers that I don't know?

LS:

These little Blackberry's might be convenient for you. They're like a cell phone that you can do email on.

FB:

Yeah, I have a cell phone. I do everything by paper, I write everything on paper. I'm not saying it's the wrong way or the right way. I can't see myself going to work for some company like Microsoft, I don't know what I could do for them! Maybe some research. I'm fairly good at geography, spatial things, and research. The rest of it: no. I'm not interested in physics, or chemistry, or math.

I started out being pretty good in high school math, but then I got tired of it. I'm not interested in equations and all that, it's too abstract for me. If I had to start over again, I'll tell you, I'd just assume get a job selling printing. Easy job, drive around in a car, shake hands, talk to the pretty secretary, "Here's what we can do for you. I'll get you some quotations tomorrow." That's what I did for about 4 years in LA. It's kind of fun. Give me a company car and I'd take off on Friday afternoon for the High Sierra. You could do worse.

LS:

Why did you stop?

FB:

I don't know. The company got bought-out by somebody, and the job kind of fell flat. I went from there to Oregon. I was interested in doing this book, this history book. We called it "A Range of Glaciers" but it's about the early history of the Cascades ("A Range of Glaciers: The Exploration and Survey of the Northern Cascade Range," by Fred Beckey, Oregon Historical Society Press, 2003).

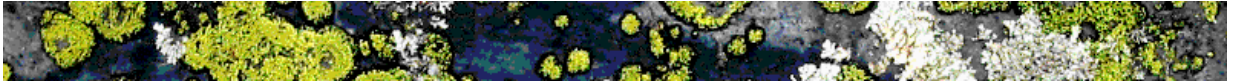
I spent two solid years in Portland. The Oregon Historical Society got some money. I went all over doing research. I spent a month in the National Archives in Washington, D.C. I went to Yale. You know, to different libraries archives. I put that together; it was a lot of work. I don't have a Ph.D., but I think this was as much work as one or two Ph.D.s. A lot of work. It was kind of fun, but I don't want to do anything like that again.

LS:

How did you learn how to do that?

FB:

I don't know. I never took a course. I've never taken a course in geology but I know more about geology than most people. I'm not a geologist, but... I know nothing about mineralogy. I can't tell you what that's made of. I know granite's made out of quartz, feldspar and biotite, but outside of that... I've always felt I worked pretty hard.



When I was going to college in Seattle I had a job that I really suited me. I worked on weekends, vacation time, and in the summers driving a delivery truck — like United Parcel, but smaller, they had maybe 20 trucks. Somebody would load the truck up and we would deliver to 20 or 30 places. You only had about 3 hours to do it, and then you had to come back and pick up stuff. It's kind of like, "Go, Go, Go!" You're really moving. You'd be on the clock, and you had to be on the ball, you had to hop with other drivers. Made a lot of girl friends that way. Oh yeah! Well, not a lot, but sometimes.

Somebody told me, "Save 10, 15, 20% of what you make and put it in the bank." And I did that, always. I'd spend so much, and put some of it in the bank. It added up after a while, with compound interest you know, it takes a while. I started with nothing; my folks didn't have a nickel. It sort of worked that way, you just kind of keep at it.

A lot of people are used to being spend-aholics. They see some car they can't afford, a \$40,000 Lexus, but they don't really need that car. They need a car, but they could buy a \$3,000 Ford from somebody's grandmother that's still in good shape. But that wouldn't have any prestige. People say, "Aw, I can't have people see me driving that beat-up, old car!" A lot of it's vanity and ego. I don't know. I could be wrong.

LS:

You used to make a show of not having vanity and ego. You used to dress in worn-out cloths, and drive an old car. Was that true or was that a show?

FB:

I didn't deliberately wear old clothes! Yeah, some. Climbing trips and skiing trips?

LS:

Yeah.

FB:

Yeah, some.

I've always liked to travel. My brother doesn't. He hates travel. He's living in Germany now. I don't know if he's ever been to Spain. Never been to the Himalayas or anywhere. He's been nowhere!

I like to travel, some people don't. Maybe that's why I'm here instead of hanging around Seattle doing paperwork for somebody. It's kind of fun. Maybe not for everybody.

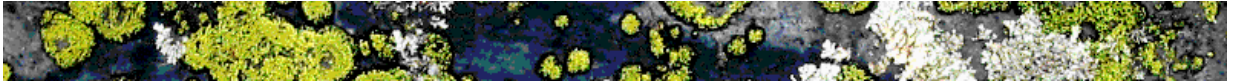
So you're working with a computer business?

LS:

No, I'm moving on to ... I'm doing this book, which is about learning, and which I'm putting on the internet, where it will be free for kids to view. They don't buy books anyway, kids under 20.

FB:

Kind of like a self-help book?



LS:

It's particularly for learning. It's about what learning really is, and how it's not just school.

FB:

It's a "how to" book, how to learn, how to study?

LS:

Not a "how to," but how people did it: like how did Fred Beckey become Fred Beckey, and how all these other people did what they did. I also talk to young people who are thinking about going into film, or becoming a book writer, and I get their story about what they think they need to learn. And then I talk to older people who tell me what they actually did need to learn.

I've got 10 different subjects, and in each field I talk to a young person, a middle aged person, and an older person, all in the same field.

So I've got you, along with Lynn Hill, and then a girl in her teens, whose interest in the outdoors started with going to a survival school. She talks about how wonderful it was to make her own shelter, and to learn to sleep in a pile of leaves.

FB:

I think it's good for people to get back some of the primitive stuff. People now are spoiled. They grow up in a house and never have to go outside. They go to Yosemite and never get out of their camper-trailer.

Supposedly John Muir (1838 – 1914, American Naturalist, founder of The Sierra Club) climbed a tree in the Sierras somewhere, and spent all night in the tree with the wind buffeting him back and forth. He didn't have to — and he could get off the tree — but he must have wanted to experience the wind: a little bit of adventure.

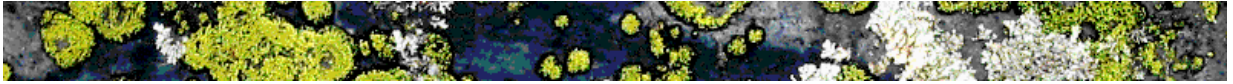
How did you guys get that Mt. Fairweather trip going? You guys were pretty young at that time. Did you do it through college or something?

LS:

No, we were in high school.

FB:

That's right! That's unbelievable. I never heard of anybody that young starting out on a major trip. That's serious mountaineering! Most high school kids, you know, they're interested in ping-pong, and chasing women, raising hell. I can't think of any high school group, or people in high school, who planned a major trip. They might go to the Tetons to climb, but not on an expedition to Alaska.



LS:

We were young. We had all the time in the world. We had no job. We were going to school. What do you do in school? You don't do anything in school.

We didn't think it was so important at the time. It was just something that we did. But now, 35 years later, I see that it was quite a big thing. There was a lot more suffering than we expected.

FB:

Did someone tell you how to get there and what to take?

LS:

No. You know, it's not that hard. If you call the bush pilot, they'll get you there. There were things we didn't know about, like walking on glaciers.

FB:

Yeah, you get used to the conditions in the White Mountains (in Northern New Hampshire), and you get used to winter camping and survival. But high school is pretty young. Most people don't even dream of doing something like that even in college.

LS:

We dreamed of it.

FB:

Well, maybe if their parents were climbers.

LS:

No. Our parents had nothing to do with the outdoors. We read books, we made it up. Remember that book "Mountaineering: The Freedom of the Hills?"

FB:

Yeah. That's great.

LS:

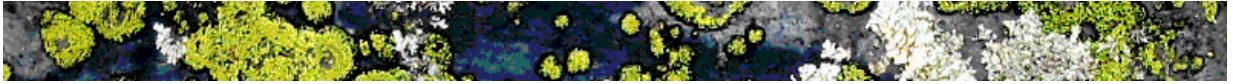
You started pretty young too.

FB:

Scouts first. Then I got involved with the Seattle Mountaineers, took a course; then I met people. You know, you kind of get into it.

LS:

Did you have a climbing partner in the beginning whom you stuck with, like I did with Peter Metcalf?



FB:

I climbed with different people. I don't remember. There were a couple of different people, but they quit, they don't stick with it. I didn't have any affiliation with anybody, really.

LS:

Are you planning to go to Asia again?

FB:

I hope so, maybe next year, maybe in September. China is full of unclimbed mountains. New routes to do, it's full of them. More than any place in the world.

LS:

Is it difficult?

FB:

Oh, yeah, and dangerous. They seem to have a lot of avalanches. A lot of snow in certain places at certain times. Pretty unknown, and it costs money. It's getting expensive. The Chinese see what's happening in Nepal and they try to milk you for going there. India, Nepal, China, Pakistan: they see rich Westerners — French, Germans, Americans, Canadians — and they make you pay to get a permit. You almost need a trekking agency.

I don't know much about the rest of them, but in China they have a quasi-government agency called "The Chinese Mountaineering Association," it's a racket. Everybody that's goes to China has to pay them off: payola. The first time I went there, they sent an interpreter and a liaison officer along: they don't do anything except drink coffee and eat food.

Now, I work with a Chinese agency that runs the trips for me; it's like Mountain Travel (Mountain Travel Sobek, based in Emeryville, California). They organize the trip, they get the permit, and I just show up! Show up in Chengdu and they pick us up in a truck. They do all the organizing for you. They do everything except the actual climbing.

Some people go over there on their own and try to get by with Pigeon Chinese, take buses around. A lot of suffering and misery. You get stopped by the army or at some gate point: "Who are you?" You can't speak anything, it's crazy. I don't want to go through that.

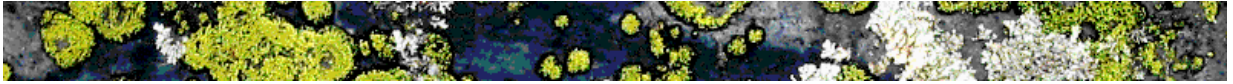
Charlie Fowler did that. That's what I've heard. Maybe that had something to do with why he got killed. (Charlie Fowler was killed in an avalanche in 2006. — Ed.) I don't know. He managed to do it, but I think he knew some Chinese. That's one way to do it, but I don't personally want to do that. I'd like to go back. There are lots of great climbs to do.

LS:

Can you get the information you need? Are there photos and maps?

FB:

Yeah, it's like everything else: you research it. There's actually a Japanese guy named Nakamura, he's the expert in China. He knows more about the Chinese mountains than



anybody in China! (laughs) It's kind of funny, eh? He really knows his stuff. He puts out a booklet once or twice a year called Japanese Alpine News, and it's all about climbing in China.

If I want to go to a certain place, I'll read what I can, and then send him an email asking, "Who do you recommend?" China is maybe like Alaska used to be in Brad Washburn's days; unclimbed stuff all over.

So why do people climb instead of playing tennis, or going to the beach, or riding a bicycle? Riding a bicycle through the Catskills or the Adirondacks: there's a little bit of an adventure in it, but it's not very dangerous... unless you hit a tree. Why do they go climbing instead of doing that?

LS:

Because climbing is harder. I think it's about fear. You can make it as hard as you want.

FB:

You can wrestle, or box with Mike Tyson and get the hell beat out of you. That's hard too.

LS:

I think there's something about being alone. It's just you against nature. And you can trust nature: it doesn't have an attitude. A glacier doesn't play favorites.

FB:

Uh, huh. You're trusting nature, you're risking your ability against nature. You see a reflection of yourself in nature. That might be it!