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Robert Hicks Bates

January 14, 1911 - September 13, 2007
Born in Philadelphia, PA.
Resided in Exeter, NH

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Obituary



ROBERT H. BATES

Robert H. Bates, teacher, author, mountaineer and first Peace Corps Director in Nepal, died on Thursday, September 13, in Exeter, New Hampshire. He was 96.

As an instructor in English at Phillips Exeter Academy in Exeter, NH, from 1939 to 1976, Bates encouraged and inspired countless students with his warmth, energy and optimism. In addition to teaching in the classroom, he introduced many students to rock-climbing and winter survival in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, sharing his great enthusiasm for the outdoors.

Well-known among mountain climbers as climbing partner with Charles Houston on two early expeditions in 1938 and 1953 on K2, the second highest mountain in the world, Bates climbed during the "golden age of mountaineering," a time when few of the world's highest peaks had been reached. The 1938 team trekked more than 350 miles to the base of the mountain, ferried supplies to eight high camps, and reconnoitered several possible summit routes. They reached a height of 26,000 feet before limited supplies forced the team to turn back. In 1953, a massive storm forced the expedition team of eight climbers to descend, attempting to save the life of a seriously ill team member. A fall by one climber at 25,000 feet resulted in a tangle of ropes and bodies as each pair of roped climbers fell in turn, all miraculously held by one climber in what has come to be described as the most famous belay in mountaineering history. Accounts of these climbs were published as *Five Miles High* (1939), edited by Bates, and *K2: The Savage Mountain* (1954), co-authored by Bates and Houston.

Robert Hicks Bates was born on January 14, 1911, in Philadelphia, PA. He absorbed from his parents an early fascination for exploration, an interest in other cultures and a love of reading that lasted throughout his life. His father, William N. Bates, was a distinguished classical scholar at the University of Pennsylvania. Both he and Bates's mother, Edith N. Richardson, were descendants of Minutemen from Cambridge, Massachusetts, who were killed on the first day of the Revolution. Bates attended the William Penn Charter School in Philadelphia before graduating from Phillips Exeter Academy in 1929. He earned both an undergraduate degree, magna cum laude, in 1933 and a master's degree in 1935 from Harvard University. Interrupted by World War II, Bates earned his Ph.D. degree from the University of Pennsylvania in 1947 under the GI Bill. His thesis on the literature of the mountains was published under the title *Mystery, Beauty, and Danger* (2000).

Early in his career at Harvard, Bates made friends in the Harvard Mountaineering Club who became known as the "Harvard Five" — Bradford Washburn, Adams Carter, Charles Houston, Terris Moore and Bates — climbers who dominated American climbing for many years. With Washburn, who became a renowned cartographer and director of the Museum of Science in Boston, Bates explored some of the largest unmapped areas of North America in Alaska and the Yukon territory, making several first ascents between 1932 and 1942. The story of their incredible survival, after walking close to 100 miles across remote crevasse-filled glaciers in the Yukon and summiting both Mt. Lucania, then the highest unclimbed peak in North America, and Mt. Steele, is told by David Roberts in *Escape from Lucania* (2002).

By the time the United States entered World War II, Bates had had considerable experience with the limitations of the cold-weather clothing, boots and equipment available at the time. He entered the U.S. Army in 1941 and was assigned to the Office of the

Quartermaster General as a captain in charge of testing clothing and equipment for use by the army's mountain troops. He coordinated the successful third ascent of Mt. McKinley in 1942 as part of the Army's Alaska Test Expedition, a test of army clothing and equipment conducted jointly with the American Alpine Club. For further testing in combat and for training mountain troops in effective protection in cold weather, Bates was sent to Anzio, Italy, in 1944. His work there resulted in significant decreases in casualties from frostbite and trench foot. He was discharged in 1946 as a lieutenant colonel, having been awarded a Legion of Merit and a Bronze Star.

After the war, Bates returned to teaching at Phillips Exeter, continuing to travel and climb. In 1954, he married Gail Oberlin, a former staff member of the American Alpine Club and avid traveler, who survives him. Together, during the 1962-1963 academic year, they lived in Kathmandu, Nepal, where Bates had been recruited by Sargent Shriver to be director of the first group of Peace Corps volunteers. One outcome of this experience was for Bates and his wife to bring a Tibetan refugee from Lhasa to study at the University of New Hampshire, a young woman who became a member of his extended family. After returning to their home in Exeter, Bates continued to welcome countless students, climbers, Peace Corps volunteers and friends from around the world, always imbuing them with a sense of excitement about the possibilities in life and the belief that they could accomplish whatever they set out to do.

Remaining active after his retirement from teaching, Bates, in 1985 at age 74, led with Nicholas Clinch the first joint Chinese-American climbing expedition to Ulugh Muztagh, the so-called "great ice mountain," a previously unclimbed peak in remote south-central China. Bates recounted the experience in his autobiography *The Love of Mountains Is Best* (1994).

Besides his mountaineering interests, as a past president of the American Alpine Club and an honorary member of the 10th Mountain Division, Bates was also very involved in civic affairs in the town of Exeter. The preservation of the Dudley House in its present location in the center of town and the adjacent "Town Common" owe a great deal to his efforts as does the historical integrity of Water Street. He was an active member of the Exeter Historical Society, chairman of the Historic District Commission, and, as a committed outdoorsman, worked with conservation organizations to save the open land surrounding Exeter. Always engaged with other people, Bates was modest about his own accomplishments. He often dismissed admiring comments such as "You've had such an amazing life!" with a smile and the simple reply, "I've had an interesting one."

In addition to his wife, survivors also include two nieces, Edith B. Buchanan of Denver, Colorado, and Elizabeth T. Bates of Philadelphia, PA, three great-nieces, two great-nephews, two great-great-nephews and Tsering Yangdon and her son Nima Taylor. His brother, William N. Bates, Jr., predeceased him. Contributions in his memory may be made to the Nature Conservancy and the Southeast Land Trust of New Hampshire.

A memorial service will be held on Saturday, October 27, 2007 at 2:00 PM at Phillips Church, Exeter, NH.

held at a future date.

Burial will be held at Mt. Auburn Cemetery, Cambridge, MA.

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arrangements. To sign an on-line guest book, please visit www.brewittfuneralhome.com

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ROBERT H. BATES

Born: January 14, 1911

Parents: William Nickerson Bates and Edith Newell Richardson

Married: June 18, 1954, to Gail Oberlin in Cleveland, Ohio

Education:

Phillips Exeter Academy, Exeter, NH, 1929
Harvard University, magna cum laude, A.B., 1933
Harvard University, M.A., 1935
University of Pennsylvania, Ph.D., 1947

Profession:

Instructor in English, Phillips Exeter Academy, Exeter, NH, 1939-1976
First Peace Corps Director, Nepal, 1962-1963
Instructor in English, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, 1935-1939

Military Service:

U.S. Army, 1941-1946, discharged as Lieutenant Colonel
Quartermaster Corps, in charge of testing cold-weather clothing, boots, and equipment for mountain warfare
Decorations and Citations:
Legion of Merit
Bronze Star
American Campaign Medal
European, African, Middle Eastern Campaign Medals with three bronze battle stars
Asiatic Pacific Campaign Medal
World War II Victory Medal

Climbs and Expeditions:

1932, 1933: Mt. Crillon, Fairweather Range, Alaska
1935: National Geographic Society Expedition exploring and mapping southwest corner of Yukon territory
1937: First ascent Mt. Lucania, Yukon territory, crossing St. Elias Range to Kluane Lake
1938: First American Karakoram Expedition to K2, Pakistan, second highest mountain in world, trekked 720 miles from Srinagar to K2 to Srinagar, reached high camp at 24,500 feet
1941: American Geological Society Wood Yukon Expedition, first ascents in St. Elias Range
1942: Executive Officer of U.S. Army Alaska Test Expedition, third ascent Mt. McKinley

1946: Operation Muskox, northwest territories
1951: Arctic Institute of North America Yukon Expedition, first ascents of Mt. Hubbard and Mt. Alverston
1953: American Alpine Club Third American Karakoram Expedition to K2, Pakistan
1956: Ojos del Salado Expedition, Chile
1965: Mt. Russell, Alaska

1970: Mt. Ararat, Turkey
1985: Joint China-United States Ulugh Muztagh Expedition, Sinkiang-Tibet border

Other Travels:

1938: Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Turkey
1954: Nepal, Thailand, Australia, New Zealand, Panama
1962-1963: Nepal, Cambodia, Burma, Vietnam, Japan
1967: Sikkim, Nepal, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Ethiopia
1969: Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria
1970: Turkey
1971: Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary
1973: Yucatan, Mexico
1974: Pakistan
1975: Greece, Iran, Nepal
1977: India, Pakistan
1978: Afghanistan
1979: Pakistan, China
1980: China
1983: China, Japan
1984: Egypt
1985: India, Bhutan

Publications:

Five Miles High: The Story of an Attack on the Second Highest Mountain in the World by the Members of the First American Karakoram Expedition, with Charles Houston (1939)
K2: The Savage Mountain, with Charles Houston (1954)
Mountain Man: The Story of Belmore Browne, Hunter, Explorer, Artist, Naturalist (1988)
The Love of Mountains Is Best: Climbs and Travels from K2 to Kathmandu (1994)
Mystery, Beauty, and Danger: The Literature of the Mountains and Mountain Climbing Published in English Before 1946 (2000)

Related publications:

David Roberts, Escape from Lucania: An Epic Story of Survival (2002)

Honors and Affiliations:

Past president of the American Alpine Club
Honorary member of the U.S. Army's 10th Mountain Division
Past president, Exeter Historic District Commission
Lecturer, Merrill Lecture Series
Consultant, Outward Bound
Member, Harvard Travelers Club
Member, Harvard Club of Boston

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Memorial service

Phillips Church

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Exeter, NH US 03833

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2:00 PM

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603-895-3628

Epping
9 Pleasant Street
Epping, NH 03042
603-679-5391



Mountaineer's calculations will change the map of China

By John Milne
Globe Staff

EXETER, N.H. — Robert H. Bates' calculations will change maps of China.

Bates, a retired prep-school teacher who turns 75 next month, has just returned from a two-month trip to Ulu Muztag, a mountain in a remote section of

Xinjiang near the Tibetan border. He made the first accurate measurement of the height of Ulu Muztag — 22,867 feet, 2,510 feet lower than shown on current maps.

Bates was part of a joint US-Chinese expedition that made the first successful climb of Ulu Muztag. Five Chinese climbers reached the peak on Oct. 21. The US group's attempt was called off

after two Chinese fell and had to be rescued.

"The Chinese couldn't get over the fact that we'd given up the peak for a rescue," Bates said in an interview yesterday, shortly after his return.

"To us," Bates continued, "everyone who was up there was part of a team. There was no question, you'd go for the rescue."

Known for K2 assault

The statement seemed characteristic of this real-life Indiana Jones who taught English at Phillips Exeter Academy from 1939 to 1976, at the same time being an amateur scientist and mountaineer. He has mapped unexplored land in the Yukon and tried twice to scale the legendary K2 in Nepal. His 1953 assault, called off short of the summit because a member became ill, was more celebrated than 1954's successful climb because of "K2 — The Savage Mountain," a book that Bates helped write.

Yesterday, Bates had another tale to tell.

The Americans on the expedition to China described themselves as geriatric climbers: Bates; Nicholas B. Clinch, 54, of Palo Alto, Calif.; Peter K. Schoening, 59, of Seattle, and Thomas Hornbein, 54, of Bellevue, Wash. The youngsters were photographer Jeff Foott, 41, of Jackson Hole, Wyo., and Dennis Hennek, 39, of

'The Chinese couldn't get over the fact that we'd given up the peak for a rescue.'

— Robert H. Bates

Ventura, Calif. The Chinese sent 43 mountaineers. Two MIT geologists, Clark Burchfiel and Peter Molnar, both of Boston, accompanied to group to study the mountain's volcanic structure.

Bates and Clinch had been seeking permission to climb Ulu Muztag since 1966, but had been told the area was off-limits to foreigners. The Chinese changed earlier this year and made the climb part of the celebration marking 30 years that Xinjiang's 30th anniversary as an autonomous region of China. The US team provided clothing and equipment for the climb, while the Chinese provided transportation over 1,100 miles of desert.

A slip means trouble

Bates, with a pair of borrowed instruments, took two measurements of the mountain from a seven-mile baseline and used the triangle to calculate the height. "It was windy, cold and dry," he said. "The wind was strong enough to whip you around, and you had to keep your eye on the peak." The old measurement, by a British adventurer in 1895, was wrong because "the early surveyors had no idea of where they're starting from."

Ulu Muztag was covered with ice and rocks. "It's a real mountain," Bates said. "One slip and you're in real trouble."

Bates described the Chinese as "plenty tough, willing climbers." The night before they reached the summit, he said, they had been awake until 3 a.m., searching for a lost colleague.

"The plan was for the Chinese and Americans to go together, but the Chinese decided to go ahead



Richard H. Bates, back home in Exeter, N.H.

GLOBE STAFF PHOTO BY TED DULLY

fore dusk. When they got up there, they thought they could find an easier way down — and two of them fell about 500 meters."

He said when the US climbers came out of their tents, "they saw one fellow stuck in the snow and another sliding past him. They gave up the climb and went down to help, and got the people back to camp."

Bates said he only took short climbs because he didn't feel up to carrying a 40-pound pack. "I

to the top," Bates said, "but there's an intellectual side of mountaineering, how you get to the top, working out the route. Even if you don't get to the summit, if you have a share in the climb, you get a great kick of accomplishment."

And there's still the pride of being where Westerners had not gone for decades. "What's fun," Bates said, "is to be the first to get

Robert H. Bates turns 75 in a few months.

But before he does that, he has a mountain to climb.

By Eric Hubler
Contributing Reporter

EXETER, N.H. — Robert H. Bates turns 75 in January, but before that birthday he has a mountain to climb — the Ulu Muztag in China, believed to be the second-highest unclimbed peak in the world.

Bates and several other Americans will participate this month in the first entirely cooperative US-Chinese climbing expedition. They will travel 680 miles through Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, which has been closed to Westerners for 30 years, to reach the mountain, located near the Tibetan border.

Bates has climbed so many mountains — or “rocks,” as he refers to many of them — that he has “absolutely no idea” how many. “Oh, gosh,” muses the thin and thin-haired but very fit Bates, “I think the very first was in Northeast Harbor, Maine, near Bar Harbor. I guess I was probably 6.”



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO BY JOSEPH DENNEHY

Before he's 75, he has a mountain to climb

■ BATES

Continued from Page A29

Since then, he has climbed at every opportunity, often with his wife, Gail. He frequently took students from Phillips Exeter Academy, where he taught English from 1939 to 1976 (except for four years in the Army) on trips to the White Mountains.

He even climbed during World War II, when the Army assigned him to help develop climbing and survival equipment.

"We said we wouldn't develop them if we couldn't test them, so they said, 'Pick a place,'" Bates recalls. They picked Mount McKinley, Alaska, at 20,320 feet, the highest peak in North America.

Bates, who saw action in Anzio, Italy, was decorated by the Army, but displays characteristic modesty. "Legion of Merit, battle stars and stuff. No big deal. Keep it low, don't advertise me," he says.

He would rather talk about the upcoming China expedition.

Bates, whose exploits include unsuccessful attempts on K2 in Nepal, in 1938 and 1953, and who co-authored "K2: The Savage Mountain," has wanted to climb Ulu Muztag (Turkic for "Great Ice Mountain") since the early 1970s. During an expedition to Mount McKinley — "in a tent in a 13-day storm" — the famous English climber, Eric Shipton, who served as British Consul in Kashgar after World War II, told Bates the one thing he'd always wanted to do but never got around to was climb Ulu Muztag.

On a different occasion, Shipton told Nicholas B. Clinch, of Palo Alto, Calif., about the mountain. Clinch, whose conquests include K2 and Hidden Peak in Nepal, also decided to climb it. Before the United States had recognized the People's Republic of China, Bates and Clinch made several applications to the Chinese government, including one for a joint Chinese-American-Pakistani expedition, but were turned down every time.

A couple of years later, says Bates, "the Chinese opened up a little." He visited China three times, talked to various diplomats and Chinese sports officials, and began working out details. "The Chinese are very tough bargainers, but they stick to their word," he says. "We really got along fine together."

However, Bates' and Clinch's contacts couldn't change the fact that the strategically sensitive Xinjiang region remained off-limits to foreigners. "We couldn't get through that stone wall for years".

Suddenly, permission was granted May 31. "It just hap-

pened, after years when nothing happened," says Bates. "I had given up hope, frankly."

Unexplored area

Now that the large, but little-known, region is open for expeditions, about 50 parties of foreigners have applied to explore there. For Bates, "the big thing is to be the first into an unexplored area." The Chinese have made efforts to develop the sparsely-populated region, inhabited mainly by Uygurs, a Turkic people, but have done relatively little exploring on their own. "The Chinese," Bates explains, "don't climb peaks for fun."

The expedition will make a "big splash" in China, says Bates, because it will be a symbolically potent element of the 30th anniversary of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region's establishment within the People's Republic. In keeping with the tone of nationalistic celebration, Bates is excited that "this is a real partnership. There will be Chinese climbers as well as American climbers, Chinese scientists as well as American scientists."

Previous Chinese joint expeditions, he says, have consisted of "attaching a few people to an American expedition or a Japanese expedition." This, on the other hand, will be "a joint project all the way through." The Americans will supply clothing and personal gear, and the Chinese will supply trucks and support personnel, so that the entire expedition will be identically equipped.

First joint arrangement

The arrangement will be a first for the Americans, as well. "To my knowledge," says Bates, "this is the first one that has entered unexplored country. The Chinese have always climbed a peak before they have allowed foreigners to come in and climb it."

Since May, Bates and Clinch have assembled a first-rate team of American climbers, including Massachusetts Institute of Technology geologists Burrell C. Burchfiel and Peter Molnar; documentary filmmaker Jeff Foott; Dennis Hennek, who was part of the first ascent of Gauri Shankar in Nepal; and Peter K. Schoening, who climbed K2 and Hidden Peak with Clinch. The only uncertainty now is which of three doctors — Thomas F. Hornbein, James D. Morissey or Peter Hackett — will be available. All three have climbed Everest.

Bates says the list of Chinese climbers "doesn't mean a thing to



GLOBE MAP BY JANE SIMON

me." He knows their height, chest and foot measurements and he knows three of them are scientists. But that's it. "We're confident that they are up to the work in every way," he says.

The language barrier, like the peak, should be surmountable. "We'll probably learn pretty fast to say, 'So-and-So is going to Camp 2,' or 'We leave tomorrow at 5 a.m.' And I'm sure we'll have the same terms for rockfall or crevasse or anything like that."

Bates is studying the Turkic words defined in the 1899 book, "Through Asia," by Swedish explorer Sven Hedin, just in case any of the 17 support personnel — drivers, mechanics, a radio operator, a cook and maybe others whose function Bates does not yet know — is a Uygur. It is unlikely that the expedition will meet anyone on the 680-mile drive from Urumqi, the regional capital, to Ulu Muztag. But if it does, words like "kok-chai" (green tea) and "nasbit" (pear) might help make things friendly.

Long, dusty drive

The group will drive 10 days from Urumqi southward. Bates says the desert road, which will end after about 430 miles, "may not be too bad, but it will be terribly dusty. I think we'll all wear masks and dark glasses... Most of that country is dust, dust, dust. It's a very dry, eroded landscape. It's nothing you cross for beauty. Basically, it's not going to be a very pleasant trip."

When they start climbing out of the desert and into the mountains, their biggest problem will be the rivers, flowing with melt water from glaciers and snow. Turn-of-the-century European ex-

peditions lost most of their animals in the rivers, but the Chinese appear to have perfected a new technique: winching the trucks across.

Bates explains, "The process is to get something or somebody across the river with a steel cable. The engine makes the wheel go around and it drags itself through the river. Apparently either the water wasn't too high or they were able to do something to the exhaust pipe so it didn't flood the engine. If you flood the engine, you're in trouble."

The expedition is important for scientific reasons, as well as of political and exploratory interest. In 1895, Englishman St. George R. Littledale surveyed Ulu Muztag at 25,377 feet above sea level, but no one is sure if that is correct. At least four different heights appear on maps. If the peak is that high, then it is the second-highest unclimbed peak in the world, after Namcha Barwa, also in Chinese territory. And if it is volcanic, as some satellite pictures suggest, then it is the highest volcano anywhere.

To find Ulu Muztag's correct height, the expedition will use a rented Magnavox MX 1502 Satellite Surveyor, a theodolite loaned by the University of New Hampshire and a untranger loaned by Museum of Science chairman Bradford Washburn. Bates and Washburn, Harvard classmates, climb often together.

Bates is not jogging or renting Jane Fonda videos to get in shape for this expedition. He is walking up and down a few more stairs than usual. Despite his advanced age, his usual exercise regimen — being walked by his dog, Duffy — will suffice. "I just like to be out and in the open and doing what comes along," he says.

THE FIRST TIME I MET BILL HOUSE, he and his wife, Laney, had hiked through the woods to our house. This was some 15 years ago, when we moved to Chesham, New Hampshire. They wore well-worn down jackets and hiking boots, and they introduced themselves as my neighbors to the north. They



Bill House

were a handsome couple, he tall and noble, with a full head of snow-white hair, and she willowy and blue-eyed. They sat in our living room and we talked of neighborly things. Later I found my way to their house, which is hidden from the road, on a rise with a fine view of Mount Monadnock. The walls of their



Charles Houston

kitchen were hung with framed photographs of a young man dangling from ropes draped over steep rock walls. "Is this you?" I asked him then. "Yes," he said, without elaboration.



Bob Bates

In the years since, we have remained good neighbors, helping each other when the need is there, occasionally sharing a meal or an outing. Bill and I have served together on committees at the local church.

Whenever our family has been in need, Bill is always the first to offer help. Bill is quiet and thoughtful, a man who rarely talks about himself but one who is always an interested listener.

A measure of that is that few people in town know that he was, at one time, a brilliant rock climber, perhaps the world's best. In the early 1930s, he was one of the two to first climb Mount Waddington in

British Columbia (17 previous attempts had failed) and the first to scale the treacherous Devil's Tower, a sheer-sided mesa that rises straight up out of the desert in Wyoming.

But perhaps his greatest achievement is that halfway around the world, four miles up K2, the second-highest mountain in the world, there is a gash that bears his name — House's Chimney. Recently the 150-foot vertical ascent of House's Chimney was assessed as the hardest pitch in the Himalayas, harder than anything climbed on Everest in the 1920s and 1930s. Among mountain climbers, that chimney is thought of with awe and a certain amount of desire, as is K2, the mountaineer's mountain, the most perilous mountain on earth.

Until recently, I knew none of this. But two winters ago Bill took a fall, and at the same time Laney threw her back out. So I went up to visit more frequently. One afternoon, Bill and I sat in his living room, enjoying the view of the mountain. Our conversation turned to his years of climbing. He mentioned a book he had once written, along with his friends Bob Bates and Charlie Houston, a book called *Five Miles High*. He pulled it from the shelf in

his living room. Its red binding had faded pink with age. I turned its soft pages carefully and thought I'd like to find a copy, perhaps at a used-book store.



It was hard to find a place on K2 that was flat enough to pitch their tents.

The next day, I called a local bookseller and asked about *Five Miles High*. "Oh," he said,

"I don't think you'd be able to find that. That book is so desirable among mountain climbers that if there ever were a

They had no way to know that climbing

would bloom into an industry built on

copy available, it would go for \$400." The next time I went to visit Bill, I reported this to him and he smiled. "Yes," he said, "I had heard that it was hard to find." Bill went right to the bookshelf and took down his only copy and handed it to me with a smile. "Keep it as long as you need to," he said.

And so, on a winter night, I sat down beside my stove and read about a journey that

Right: Petzoldt picks a way across a glacier.
Below: Houston's 1938 journal records the day they reached their highest point on K2.

took place in the summer of 1938, ten years before I was born.

THOUGH IT IS A GREAT ADVENTURE story, perhaps more than anything *Five Miles High* is the story of a friendship spawned in a desperate place where each person's life depended on the others' help and cooperation. In the beginning of the book, there were photographs of the young adventurers. In addition to Bill House, there was 25-year-old expedition leader Charles Houston (pronounced *House-ton*), a medical student from New York; Bob Bates, then 27 and a native of Exeter, New Hampshire; Richard Burdsall, from New York; and Paul Petzoldt of Wyoming. Of the five, Houston was the most rugged looking, Bates the most boyish, and House the most handsome. I looked into their young and eager faces for some time before I began to read.

K2 was among the last of the great peaks to be discovered. At 28,250 feet it is just shy of Everest's 29,000. Its name



181

July 18 Monday to #6 in cloud. All pack to #6 in cloud. Paul & I reconnoitered 6,000 ft. then sleep in #6

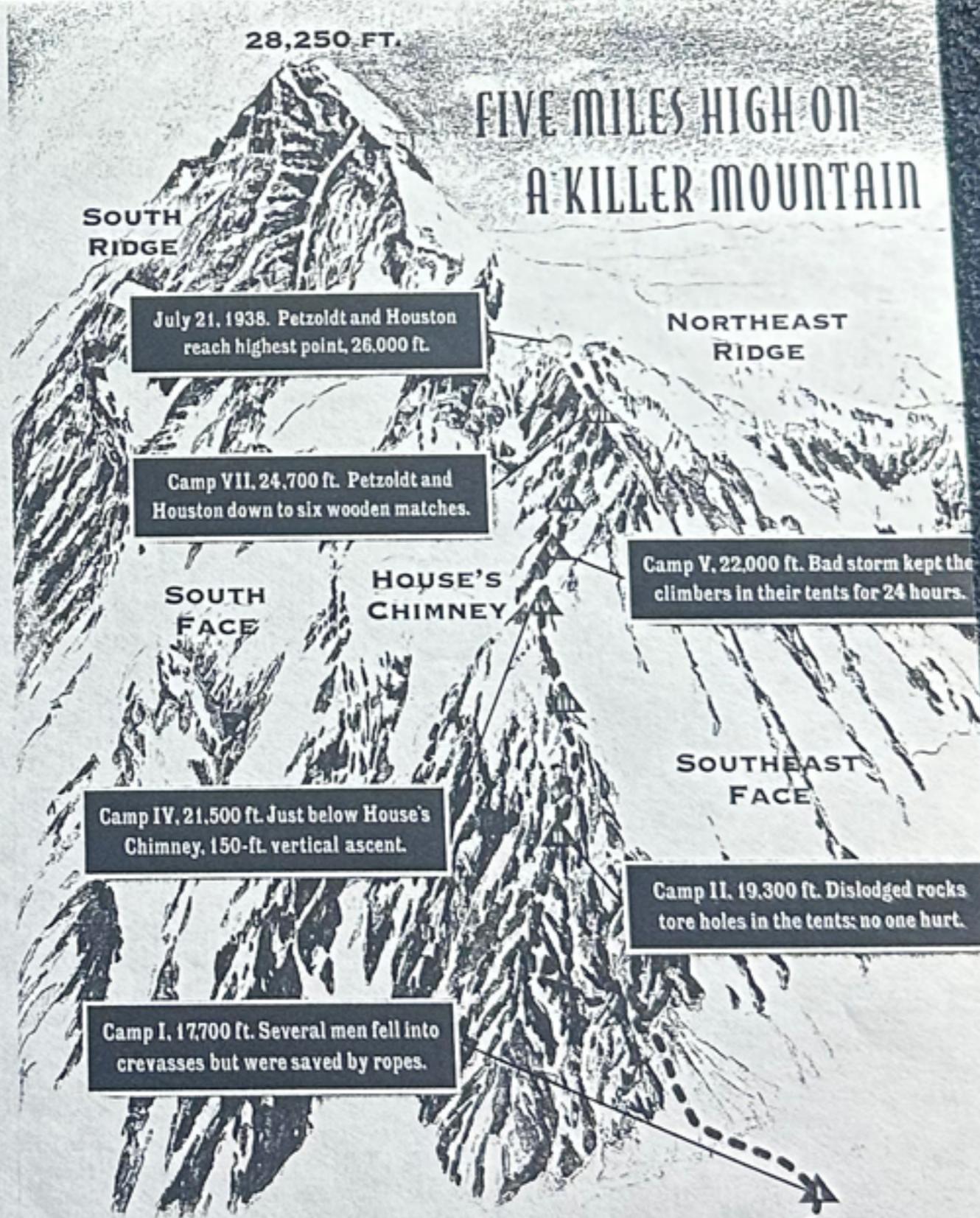
July 19 Tuesday Paul & I reconnoitered to 24,500, sleep at #6. All rest pack up & sleep at #6

July 20 Wednesday All pack up to Shoulder in 24,000. Paul & I sleep here?

July 21 Thursday Paul & I go to 26,000, others stay at #6

July 22 Friday Paul & I pack down lunch. All pack

- journal courtesy Charles Houston, M.D., photo by Mark Cardin (Houston), Richard L. Burdsall (top), diagram by Joe Alderman



28,250 FT.
FIVE MILES HIGH ON A KILLER MOUNTAIN

SOUTH RIDGE
July 21, 1938. Petzoldt and Houston reach highest point, 26,000 ft.

NORTHEAST RIDGE
Camp VII, 24,700 ft. Petzoldt and Houston down to six wooden matches.

SOUTH FACE
Camp IV, 21,500 ft. Just below House's Chimney, 150-ft. vertical ascent.

HOUSE'S CHIMNEY

SOUTHEAST FACE
Camp II, 19,300 ft. Dislodged rocks tore holes in the tents; no one hurt.

Camp V, 22,000 ft. Bad storm kept the climbers in their tents for 24 hours.

Camp I, 17,700 ft. Several men fell into crevasses but were saved by ropes.

On June 12, 1938, after a three-week hike with 75 porters carrying two tons of supplies, the expedition made its base camp at 16,600 feet. Sending back all but six Sherpa guides, they listened to avalanches and prepared for the assault.

The journey to the base of K2 was 330

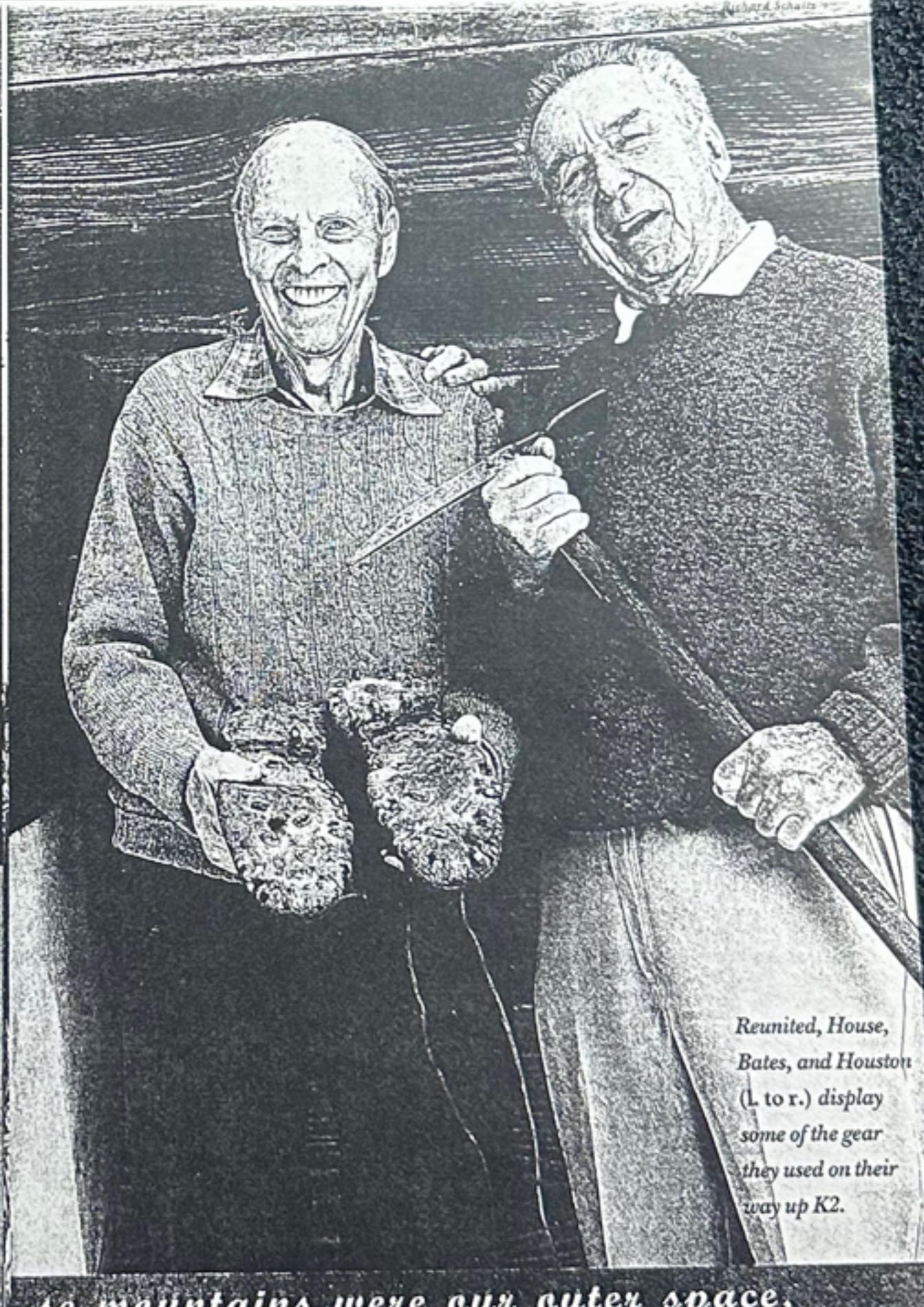
miles long, across desert, high hills,

comes from a simple surveying identification, the K standing for the Karakoram, a ridge at the far eastern edge of the Himalayas, that remarkable chain of mountains that spans Nepal, Tibet, China, and Pakistan.

Bates, Houston, and House made their way to K2 by foot. They reasoned that by walking, they would acclimate themselves gradually to the higher elevation. Besides, it was the only way to get there in those days. The journey to the base of K2 was 330 miles long, across desert, high hills, tumbling rivers, and glacial moraines. They crossed rivers by rope bridges of unknown condition and hoisted themselves over waterfalls by gliding on rope and pulley. They walked at night, by the light of the full moon, to avoid the daytime danger of avalanche. They brought with them 4,000 pounds of food and equipment, which required weeks of packing and some 75 porters to carry. They suffered blisters, mountain sickness, dengue fever, and other mysterious ailments. It took them a month to reach the mountain, which they had heard of but had never seen. Bob Bates recalled that moment in *Five Miles High*:

Before us the valley was dark with sullen clouds, but directly ahead of us a rift in the vapor suddenly disclosed . . . the glittering apex of a ghostly summit. It was like something from another world, something ethereal seen in a dream. For a few stunned moments, we stared at the peak we had come so far to see; then it was gone. The glacier stretched ahead for miles into a void of blank, swirling mist.

After establish- (continued on page 130)



Reunited, House, Bates, and Houston (l. to r.) display some of the gear they used on their way up K2.

se mountains were our outer space,

They blazed the trail. In 1938 the

WILD AS "DADAMIT'S

ONE LAST MOUNTAIN TO CLIMB

(continued from page 56)

ing a base camp, they began to survey the mountain. Their goal was to find a route to the summit, not necessarily to make it to the top. Prior to their expedition, only three attempts had ever been made to climb K2. Their efforts were hampered not only by weather but also by the steepness of its slopes. The higher they got, the more difficult it became to find a place flat enough to pitch their tents. One night they slept practically piled on top of each other.

They endured rockfalls (one of which pierced their tent) and lay awake at night listening to the ominous thunder of avalanches roaring down from the upper slopes. In *Five Miles High*, Bill wrote of camping with Charlie Houston on the Savoia Glacier, just beneath the summit:

Long before dark we were in a twilight all our own. . . . Perhaps it was the darkening cirque that rose behind our tent to the unknown above the pass. Perhaps it was that we were actually in the shadow of K2 for the first time — not where it could be viewed from a distance, from the strength-giving companionship of our party, but with a single companion, temporarily cut off from all support, dependent on ourselves and ourselves alone. We were no longer the proud American Karakoram Expedition but two men slightly appalled at what they had challenged.

A few days later I asked Bill what had happened to the other members of his expedition. He told me that Dick Burdsall was

killed in a climbing accident in 1953. Paul Petzoldt was now living in Maine. After their 1938 climb, he became estranged from the others. But with Bob Bates and Charlie Houston, Bill has enjoyed a close friendship of nearly 60 years, a friendship forged on that faraway mountain in that faraway time.

* * *

ON A COLD BUT BRIGHTENING DAY LAST year, the three of them came together once again. They met at Bill's house, where there was still snow on the ground. Charlie Houston drove down from Burlington, Vermont. Bob Bates came from Exeter. The three men greeted each other warmly, not with hugs, for they are men of dignity, but with firm handshakes and sparkly eyes that recalled their youth. Though all are well into their eighties, each is trim and compact, and they moved in similar ways, their sneakered feet slow but agile, like the feet of aging dancers.

To appease my curiosity, they had brought with them tools from their expedition: From the trunk of his car, Bob took his heavy leather climbing boots, the soles pierced with metal spikes. From the space over his garage, Bill brought down the lethal-looking eight-inch crampons he used to climb ice walls, and Charlie carried with him, among other things, his climbing ax, with a handle of smooth cherry wood and a head of bright steel. Also he brought a buff-colored, moth-eaten wool sweater. "Let's see," he said, and he pulled it over his head. Proudly, he smoothed the hem to his hips, and his friends cheered to see that it still fit him.

As they passed the tools among themselves, they turned them in their hands and stared into them as if they were crystal balls in which they could look and see backward, all the way to their youth.

Charlie also brought pages from his 1938 journal, and he sat down on the couch and began to read from it at random.

"On July 8, a furious wind that shook the tent canvas with the sound of gunfire kept us from getting higher. . . . In the afternoon we mended clothes, read the *Oxford Book of English Verse*, and planned what food we should have when we met at our reunion next winter."

The men burst into laughter. Nearly 60



ONE LAST MOUNTAIN TO CLIMB

(continued)

years since that plan, and here they were, about to join in yet another reunion, yet another meal together.

Charlie also had a video of their climb, created from the 16-mm movie he filmed during the ascent. The four of us gathered around a TV and watched. "It was just like the most wonderful dream," Bob mused. "Walking in, not knowing what you were going to see the next day. Everything was so different."

"And so exciting!" Charlie said. "Only a few Westerners had ever walked this route."

The men pass, single file, through the snow. They are dressed in heavy coats. "Those were those dreadful cloth parkas," Charlie pointed out. "They had a double layer, tightly woven. They were quite good but terribly heavy. But we never took our coats off."

"Did you sleep in your clothes?" I asked.

"Well, mostly. I don't remember that we ever took anything off."

In one segment, Charlie filmed Bill as he emerged from his chimney, a happy Santa, his strong, handsome young face swaddled in wool and goggles. Charlie had filmed this scene the second time Bill went up through, to record it for history. As Bill appeared through the gash, he raised his heavily gloved hand in mock triumph.

"Boy, it was cold that day," Bob recalled. "Just a bitter cold day."

It would be another 15 years before Everest was conquered. It was the age of innocence, a veritable high-peaks Garden of Eden into which House and Bates and Houston stepped. They had no way to know that it would bloom into an industry built on adrenaline and an appetite for danger, where inexperienced climbers pay upward of \$60,000 for someone of skill to get them up and down a mountain like Everest, an industry rife with summit lust and disaster.

"It's a lot different now," Bob observed. "Now, so many people want to be first. For us, the idea was to climb the mountain. If the mountain was climbed by your expedi-

tion, you all had a part in it, it was your mountain, your climb, your success. It didn't really matter so much who was actually the one to get to the top."

"In those days, the summit was important, but it was not the most important," Charlie agreed.

"Yes, getting back was the most important," Bob said.

"We succeeded in finding a route. That was what we went there to do," Bill said.

Although they have lost many friends to the mountains, remarkably, none of the three ever had a serious climbing accident. Bill explained: "Well, we were all very cautious, very conservative. We were good climbers, but we didn't take risks, although I suppose that you could say that just being on K2 was a risk."

"And we always climbed with men we trusted," Bob said.

"You're all roped together?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, I never climbed with someone I didn't trust," Bill said. "That must be an awful feeling."

I asked them what the most memorable moment on the mountain was for them and Bill said, "The decision to turn back. That was a very, very difficult decision to make."

With dwindling food supplies and worsening weather, the decision had to be made whether to try for the summit. They were down to six matches. In a one-day assault, two in the party reached 26,000 feet, and then, without much discussion, they turned back for good. Charlie wrote this about that moment:

There was no question but that our work was done, and we turned to descend at 4 o'clock with mingled emotions. The whole world was deathly still; not even the clatter of rockfalls broke the calm. All the peaks about us seemed breathlessly awaiting our descent. We trudged down to Camp VII in a deepening twilight. About us the mountains turned first pink, then lavender, then purple. We reached camp safely, exhausted and cold but curiously content.

Since 1938, over 100 climbers have ascended K2 and several dozen have died in the process. There isn't another mountain

on earth with such a gruesome reputation.

"Mountain climbing demands a certain amount of harmony for people to survive. A climb is successful only if you come down from the summit alive. It's different today," Charlie said. "Many of the big expeditions today are chosen of climbers who have outstanding climbing records even if they are difficult personalities. Many of these parties end up in some kind of disenchantment or fights. One of the things that made our trip so great was that we ended up very, very close friends. Forever."

In 1953 Charlie and Bob returned to K2 to try once more. They invited Bill to join them, but having been recently married, he declined, saying that "marriage and mountains do not mix." It was on this journey that Charlie Houston began to call K2 "the savage mountain," a term that is used to this day. One member of their party, Art Gilkey, was seriously ill. As they tried to carry him down through a raging storm, one member of the party slipped, and they all went down like puppets on a string, down the terrible precipice. In one last desperate effort, the lead climber threw his ax into the wall of ice and, unbelievably, it held. They all came to a stop together, the last man dangling in midair. It has become perhaps the most famous fall in mountain-climbing history. When they recovered themselves, they decided to secure Art with ice axes and attempt to pitch camp a short distance away. When they returned, he was gone. His body was not found until six years ago, when his bones came down in a spring thaw. The mere mention of his name brings pain to their faces.

The 1938 expedition remains, in their minds, the best of what they have done. "I can't imagine having a better trip than that," Charlie said. "We did what we set out to do, we came back well, and we are still friends. I don't see how a trip could go any better than that — all for \$9,500 for five months, that's for all of us, for everything!"

Misfortune and death make a mountain-climbing story more tantalizing than a safe ascent and clear roads back down. This may be one reason why the names of these

three men are not better known. They blazed a trail so that others could accomplish what they did not. They went higher than any American had ever been. In 1938 these mountains were our outer space, these men our astronauts.

THE SUN IS LOW AND IT IS TIME TO LEAVE. They rise from their chairs slowly and with caution. "Well, you characters!" Charlie says, chucking Bob on the shoulder. And then he turns to Bill and lightly touches his forehead, which is bruised. "William," he said, "when did you do this?"

It has been a rough winter. Within the last six months, each of them has had brushes with disaster. Bill had his fall in the night, which bloodied his forehead, and soon after, on an icy night, Bill's car landed in a ditch and rescue workers had to be called. Charlie confesses that he slipped on the ice and fell flat, blacking his eyes and leaving his face swollen and badly bruised. Bob also ran his car off the road, having fallen asleep at the wheel. He broke two ribs and bruised his heart. Ironically, he was on his way to visit his old friend Bill, who was ailing. They commiserate, and they laugh at the unlikely chance that they should all endure these mishaps, roughly at the same time.

Each of them has recovered from their midwinter upsets. Still, it is hard. "Don't ever get old!" Bill sometimes says to me as we part.

That's their mountain now. They know the steps, one at a time, cautious but unafraid. I am standing among the quietest of legends, and it startles me to realize that, had Bill not fallen in the night, I might never have discovered all this about him. I have never climbed a mountain and likely never will, but these men have much to teach me: Take risks but never be foolhardy. Do your best but know that sometimes you will have to turn back. Keep an eye on the sky. Watch out for your friends and do what you can to bring them to safety. Never climb alone. I hope that when I arrive at the base of this particular mountain, I can remember Bill and his friends and the way that their feet touch the ground, ever so lightly. □□