

FROM MAIDENS TO MOUNTAINEERS:
IDENTITY, FEMINISM, AND AMERICAN WOMEN CLIMBERS

by

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American women have been scaling high mountains for well over a century, but their presence in mountaineering history has been virtually ignored. As a result, the complexities and nuances of their experiences in a predominately male endeavor are likely to be either forgotten or over-emphasized. The historical analysis that does exist classifies all women climbers into a specific category—such as overt feminists—in order to make sense of why women would be inspired to strive for summits. American women's climbing history is a dynamic story of individual women who climb the world's highest mountains for diverse reasons. It is a history that confronts the myths of American manhood and frontier ideals; stems from a human desire for both challenge and wildness; blends with the goals of feminism; and reveals the struggle that skilled climbers face between their raw passion for mountaineering and their own reality as women who climb. Some speak as feminists, some as women, many as climbers, and others as all three, but what all the voices of America's most accomplished mountaineers portray is that women, too, yearn to push their limits in vertical, awesome spaces. In so doing, they have created their own history, one that captures both the essence of mountaineering and the nature of climbing as women in a symbolic pursuit of American identity.

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PREFACE

That the history of women climbers is silent...is no surprise...As with all women's studies, women have to be sought after, rediscovered.

--Susan Rogers, Climbing Magazine, 1989¹

When I was eight years old I hiked to the top of Mt. Elbert, the highest peak in Colorado. I must have enjoyed myself—despite my whining—because for the next ten years I made the tops of the Southwest's highest mountains my personal sanctuaries. It is difficult for climbers to articulate why they climb mountains, but as I wrote in my journal after climbing in the Wind River Range in Wyoming in 1997:

I feel so alive! The snow and rock beyond are the makings of an unforgiving place, And yet it is a world I long to explore, to be challenged by and, of course, to return safely from. I often wonder why I come to the mountains. Is it to surrender to something grand? Is it to climb or to have climbed? Perhaps it is simply because this place, these mountains are life itself—raw and daunting.

At the age of eighteen I held my first ice axe on Washington's Mt. Baker in the North Cascades and with it discovered an infinite, demanding world of snow and ice that would leave me with an unquenchable thirst for mountains. I was influenced by all of climbing's greatest legends—Royal Robbins, Paul Petzoldt, Willi Unsoeld, and Reinhold Messner. But it was not until 1995 that I was inspired by my first female mountaineer, Stacy Alison, who in 1989 became the first American woman to climb Mt. Everest. After reading her book, Beyond the Limits, I realized that there was an entire voice and history of mountaineering that I knew nothing about. Perhaps I did not realize the depth that these women's stories would give to my own climbing

¹ Susan Rogers, "Finding a Positive History," Climbing August 1987: 127.

because, after all, most of my own wilderness adventures had all been positive experiences that were primarily with men. But after teaching students how to climb mountains over the last three years, I recognized that my female students often excelled even more when they had strong female role-models to encourage them in a sport that has been dominated historically by men. While we, the instructors, became their role-models, my interest and focus on American women's history guided me towards a much more profound spectrum of women climbers to discover. Though there are plenty of talented contemporary female mountaineers to look to for inspiration, by recreating an unwritten history of American women climbers, I have, I think placed modern women's climbing into the context of the women who preceded us. Our "foremothers," so to speak, accomplished incredible feats, and they deserve to be recognized among climbing's most revered. Thus my motivation was to re-insert women into—and ultimately question—American mountaineering history.

This history is very much a testimony to the selected women in this work. But beyond their individual stories, they are indicative of something much broader, and illustrate the complexities, intricacies, and contradictions that surround women in an overwhelming male endeavor. Thus, this work is secondarily a lens into how mountain climbing intertwines with American identity, how women respond in a male arena, and how mountaineering and feminist ideology create a certain degree of tension. What emerged from the women's own writing was a diverse history that could not be defined into a single category. By assessing their accounts it becomes clear that women's climbing history and feminist history are inextricably linked. But what is also apparent is that women's climbing history was not necessarily a product of feminist history nor do all female mountaineers identify with feminist principles. Put simply, women climb for a variety of reasons. Thus, I was compelled to illustrate the apparent feminist undercurrent without losing the climber's voice with which these women so passionately spoke.

Deciding which women to include in this history was not simple. Thousands of women have climbed mountains over the last one-hundred and fifty years in this country. Why did I

choose to write about the most prominent mountaineers rather than the average Josephines who have ascended to the top of America's mountains? Because even though elite climbers do not exactly replicate the experience of everyday women climbers, they do provide a window into that experience. The other factor that played a role in determining who I included in this thesis was the availability of primary sources. I considered several mountaineers for my research, but I wanted to include a spectrum of women who wrote about their experiences. Given that part of my goal was to retrieve the "climber's voice" it was imperative to use written documents that illustrated that voice.²

² At times throughout the thesis I, as the historian, place my own voice into the body of the work, injecting a degree of subjectivity. But that is what historians do. No matter how objectively a historian examines documents, she still brings to her research a certain amount of bias and will ultimately, based on the evidence, draw conclusions about the subject through her own perception. These women wrote about climbing in their own words, but as a mountaineer and as an historian, my assessment becomes an integral part of the history that follows. The principle of recognizing the researcher as a part of the research, or in a "relationship" with the material, is a widely accepted practice in feminist research. This does not mean that subjectivity should minimize the quality of the scholarship but rather the researcher needs to recognize her bias and contextualize her individual perspective. Suggested reading includes: Farnham, Christie, ed. The Impact of Feminist Research in the Academy. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.; Fonow, Margaret and Cook, Judith, eds. Beyond Methodology: Feminist Scholarship as Lived Research. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991.

INTRODUCTION

There are no good women climbers; women climbers either aren't good climbers or they aren't real women.

--Anonymous male mountain guide, 1969³

In 1976, Chris Jones published *Climbing in North America*, which was—and in many ways still is—the comprehensive text on the history of North American mountain climbing. It conveys a history from the first American mountaineering in the early 1800s inspired by Jacksonian “rugged individualism” to the birth of modern day climbing that emerged by the mid 1970s. This 392-page text contains only two paragraphs about female climbers. One paragraph describes the participation of women in the Alpine Club of Canada at the turn of the century.⁴ The other paragraph describes the 1973 first female ascent of El Capitan in Yosemite Valley. Jones’ definitive conclusion to the paragraph is that “in earlier times women tended to be camp followers; today they *may* [my emphasis] outperform men.”⁵ Thus, the average non-climbing American reader could finish Jones’ book and assume that American female mountaineers were almost non-existent prior to 1973 and those who did exist were among the rare category of superhero.

³ Arlene Blum, *Annapurna: A Woman's Place* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1980) 4.

⁴ Canada impressively included women in its growing mountaineering community at the turn of the century. The Alpine Club of Canada included approx. 40% women between 1907 and the 1950s. Furthermore, the authors of the A.C.C. guidebook—a male and a female—demanded that women wear pants rather than dresses when they climb to improve their mobility. From PearlAnn Reichwich, “Beyond the Visionary Mountains” diss. Carleton University, 1995, 92.

⁵ Chris Jones, *Climbing in North America*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976) 371.

Since Jones' book appeared in 1976 there have been only four texts devoted in part to a historical perspective of American women climbers.⁶ The most recent text, *Magnificent Mountain Women* by Janet Robertson, focuses only on Colorado women and includes climbers, travelers, naturalists, and cowgirls. It is a well-conceived book but does not address the possibility of a history or ethic of American female mountaineers. A second book, *Women Climbing* by Bill Birkett and Bill Peascod, is not an academic text but is merely a slim encyclopedia of notable American *and* European ascents in which one could look up the women's high altitude record in 1934 for example.

It is the final two books that became the incentive for my thesis. These texts, *Mountaineering Women* by David Mazel and *Women on the Rope: The Feminine Share in Mountaineering* by Cicely Williams, are historical in nature but describe American climbing history peripherally to European (British) history where climbing has its roots. More importantly, each text inaccurately describes the relationship between mountaineering and feminism. My thesis developed as a more balanced contrast to these two books in which I depict the nuances of female climbing history. It is a history that must include not only the possibility of feminist sensibilities, but the personal motivations of individual climbers as well.

In particular, Mazel's book is a collection of accounts written by female mountaineers; thus, his own historical analysis is limited to his twenty-page introduction. Mazel makes some important connections between the feminist movement and American women in climbing, but he presents women climbers as one-dimensional by overstating the extent to which feminism influenced women's primary inspiration for climbing. While feminism is no doubt an essential part of female climbing history, Mazel does not address the ethic of climbing that is embedded in individual gain, challenge, and risk-taking.⁷ He paints only half of the picture. While American women climbers write about their experiences through a distinct female perspective, Mazel

⁶ The lack of research on the subject has left a wide margin for further analysis.

⁷ A discussion will follow later in the thesis that will represent these values as typically perceived to be "male."

ignores the possibility of non-feminist motivations for climbing and of non-gendered inspirations that entice both women and men to head for the hills. He defines the female climbing experience as “the idealized politics of a feminist utopia.”⁸ But not all American women mountaineers climbed with politics and/or feminism as their motivating forces. Thus, although feminist Fanny Bullock Workman indeed had a picture of herself taken in 1900 with a placard that read “Votes for Women” she described her mountaineering specifically as a climber, emphasizing the details of the climb and of the mountain, and establishing herself as an experienced mountaineer. In short, feminist philosophy is part of—not definitive of—women’s climbing history. Similarly, when Sybille Hectel made the first all-women’s ascent of El Capitan in Yosemite, she wrote “Doing an all female ascent was not a consideration, I simply knew Bev much better than any of the men interested.”⁹ Therefore, we must interpret climbers’ experiences from their individual perspectives before automatically injecting feminist consciousness into their world-view.

An important comparison could be made to other female pioneers such as Amelia Earhart who excelled in aviation in the 1930s during a post-suffrage, post-WWI context that offered increased opportunities for many women. (The historical context of her experience is essential). Susan Ware’s *Still Missing* examines Earhart as an individual in pursuit of her passion and who secondarily identified with feminist objectives. Earhart did not fly specifically for what it might represent to other women. This does not invalidate any feminist tendencies but rather equally emphasizes her identification as a pilot. That women athletes found inspiration in her efforts was a positive outcome, but public feminist gains were in many ways the aftermath of her private inclinations. Furthermore, it is often the historian’s task, not the pilot’s—or climber’s—to contextualize a woman’s actions into a wider feminist framework. Earhart was simply a woman who yearned to fly. Ware writes, “Amelia Earhart demonstrated that women could be autonomous human beings, could live life on their own terms, and could overcome conventional

⁸ Mazel, 18.

⁹ Sybille Hectel, “Untitled,” *American Alpine Journal* 48 (1974): 63.

barriers. This message, while not always specifically labeled ‘feminism’ provided a highly individualistic route for exceptional women to excel.”¹⁰ In the same vein, this work evaluates the feminist aspects of women’s climbing history without neglecting women’s strong association as climbers.

Where Mazel portrays a narrow perspective of women’s climbing history, Cicely Williams cannot claim even that accomplishment. Her text, *Women on the Rope: The Feminine Share in Mountain Adventure*, seems to disregard these historic climbers’ very distinct experiences as women, and certainly for some, as feminists. Williams insists—rather disingenuously—that sexism had rarely been a limiting factor for women climbers. As early as 1910, she claimed the position of women generally and women climbers in particular had been “recognized and applauded on all sides; no longer need they struggle for their freedom; that contest had been fought and won.”¹¹ By the time Williams’ book was published in 1973, she felt confident enough to claim that women climbers had “won for themselves the respect of even the most anti-feminine members” of the prestigious—but still significantly male—Alpine club.¹² Evidently they had not yet won enough respect to be included in Chris Jones’ book in 1976.

Cicely Williams’ book does a disservice to the depth and triumphant nature of a woman’s climbing history. She does not cite a single source in her book and makes sweeping generalizations about women’s climbing without the appropriate research. “The story of women mountaineers is so fascinating,” she writes, “that it seemed that it should be a rather light hearted, sometimes personal, and always essentially feminine book rather than as a historical survey resulting from detailed research.”¹³ Is she implying that detailed research is ‘unfeminine’ or in this case that ‘feminine’ means lack of professionalism? While Mazel exaggerates the possibility of women’s climbing as a “feminist utopia,” Cicely Williams places her “feminine” climbers into

¹⁰ Susan Ware, *Still Missing* (New York: W.W.Norton and Company, 1993) 24.

¹¹ Cicely Williams, *Women on the Rope* (London: George, Allen and Unwin, 1973) 17.

¹² Williams, 48.

¹³ Williams 16.

a patriarchal Eden in which “There was no rivalry between men and women climbers...and the atmosphere in which one climbed was supremely happy when husbands and fathers brought their womenfolk to the mountains.”¹⁴

Historian, feminist, and world-class mountaineer Arlene Blum describes Cicely Williams’ text as a “ladylike history” in which Williams’ feminine antics make a subtle mockery of women climbers—or “womenfolk” as she dubs them—by ignoring the unique challenges they faced.¹⁵ For instance, in her description of Marguerite Brevoort, one of the first American female mountaineers, Williams fails to mention that Brevoort published her only work in *Alpine Journal* in 1872 under a male surname, W.A.B. Coolidge, because Brevoort knew it would not be published under her own name. Williams proceeds to describe Brevoort’s articles as “delightful readings [that] contain the nice little details and descriptions which women can do so well.”¹⁶ After reading Williams’ book, one would probably conclude that the “Feminine Share” of mountaineering—as her title suggests—is more suitable for maidens at a tea party than on a side of a mountain.

Where does this leave us then? If Mazel’s work is “one-dimensional feminism” and Williams’ work is “anti-feminism” what conclusions can be made about the history of American female mountaineers? In analyzing American mountaineering literature from 1890-1980, it becomes apparent that the connection between a women’s climbing history and feminist associations is two-fold. I argue that the history of American female climbers—and the convergence of mountaineering and feminist ideology—is not determined by American feminists who climbed for feminism’s sake, as Mazel suggests, but rather it is a story of women who climbed, influencing both women’s history and climbing history. Thus, the interaction between mountaineering and feminism is an exchange in which the accomplishments and perceptions of individual climbers, and the historical—and at times feminist—context of their experience have

¹⁴ Williams, 17.

¹⁵ Williams, 227.

both contributed to the evolution of a unique American women's mountaineering history.

Finally, the question of "intention" becomes an essential component of this history, accommodating a crossroads where "feminism" and "mountaineeringism" bisect. Put simply, that some women did not climb with feminist intention (or as feminists) can be separate from the historical assessment of their actions. In other words, many women climbed mountains and as a result *became* examples for other women; they did not necessarily climb mountains to *become* examples for other women. The distinction is subtle but necessary.

¹⁶ Williams, 51.

MOUNTAINEERING AND THE AMERICAN (MALE) IDENTITY

If adventure has a final and all embracing motive it is surely this: we go out because it is our nature to go out, to climb the mountains and sail the seas...By doing these things we extend our horizon, we expand our being, we revel in a mastery of ourselves which gives an impression that we are masters of our world. In a word we are men, and when man ceases to do these things he is no longer man.

--Wilfred Noyce¹⁷

Why mountains? There are many different types of climbing, not all of which occur in the mountains. Some of the best female “climbers” have never even been to the summit of a mountain. “Sport” climbing, gym climbing, or “crag” rock climbing is an activity that focuses primarily on doing many short, gymnastic type rock climbs at established climbing areas.¹⁸ Mountaineers often engage in other climbing styles, but a mountaineer (or alpinist) consciously marries herself to the ethic that surrounds climbing to the top of a mountain.¹⁹ Mountaineering is about striving for the summit and returning safely from it. True mountaineering is an absolute wilderness experience. It can consist of days, weeks, or months of carrying heavy packs through challenging, almost impenetrable terrain. It depends on an individual’s will to endure cold or uncomfortable situations, on her good judgment to avoid hazards, and on her stamina to survive the unpredictable. Climbing to the top of a peak is about good old-fashioned hard work. It has

¹⁷ Joan Welsh, ed. Readings from the Hurricane Island Outward Bound School (Maine: Outward Bound) 37.

¹⁸ The distinction between various styles of climbing is not a clear line because many climbers do both. In very general terms, rock climbing and/or modern “sport” climbing tends to be a more anaerobic, muscular intensive activity where one must figure out the “moves” of a single short climb by examining the rock and balancing/pulling her way up the face. Then the climber can come back down and try a different climb. In contrast, climbing a mountain is highly variable and can include either rock, snow, or ice. The ascent is often unknown because the climber can not see the entire route, and weather can alter the nature of a climb. Furthermore, elevation gain, high altitudes, and long distances require excellent fitness levels.

¹⁹ Do note however that throughout this thesis I use the terms “mountaineering” and “climbing” interchangeably.

emerged as the mythical essence of upward mobility, self-determination, and self-sufficiency. In other words, it is the quintessential metaphor for the qualities of the American “self-made man.” My goal in writing about mountain climbing—rather than other kinds of climbing—is to determine how or if “the self-made woman” belongs in that metaphor.²⁰ [Plates 1 and 2]

Throughout the 1800s “conquering” the western wilderness justified America’s newly won freedom and asserted principles of independence and hard work in the common man. But ironically, as “civilization” spread, American moral development seemed to falter in the cities. As Washington Irving wrote in 1832, “We send our youth abroad to grow luxurious and effeminate in Europe; it appears to me that a tour on the prairies would be more likely to produce that manliness, simplicity, and self-dependence most in unison with our political institutions.”²¹ Thus, a distinct connection persisted between frontier principles and what it meant to be an American man. But by the end of the nineteenth century, Frederick Jackson Turner announced that the west had been conquered, the frontier was “closed.” However, the American *man* still needed a place and a metaphor to shape his tormented identity. Thus, *conquering* a once feared wilderness suddenly became *adventuring* in a now revered wilderness. The goal was no longer to “civilize” the west, but to rekindle the moral fibers in a man that once *enabled* him to civilize it. As Jackson noted, a return to wilderness “fostered individualism, independence, and confidence in man that encouraged self government.”²² For some, there was no better way to rediscover those qualities than to climb a mountain.

²⁰ One issue I spend very little time addressing throughout the work is the question of race and class. The myth of the “self-made man” is certainly gendered; by evaluating whether or not women fit into or reshape that myth enables historians to question who benefited from and/or wrote this “master” American narrative. But to fully reinterpret that narrative one must also recognize the ways in which race and class are included in or absent from American ideology. Our conception of history, American values, frontier mythology, and even our perception of mountain climbing have been created primarily by white men. For instance, Native American interpretations of wilderness and mountain climbing are rarely included in this master narrative or mythology. Understanding that Native Americans have not historically participated in mountain climbing as a sport is equally important to evaluating why white Americans have. Furthermore, the sport of mountain climbing has been almost exclusively dominated by middle to upper class Americans because it is inaccessible without excess funds for such an expensive “leisure” activity. While my work focuses on questions of gender, scholars have begun to examine the way in which different cultures and classes interact with the sport of mountaineering such as the contrast between American climbers and Tibetan “Sherpani” porters.

²¹ Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982) 72.

²² Nash, 146.

Mountain climbing has evolved as the modern concept of the American frontier turned vertically onto the steepest backbones of American landscapes. Men would now simply go “up” rather than “west.” But what of women? According to Washington Irving, “self-dependence” was the opposite of what was “effeminate.” In other words, “womanliness” is everything that the frontier—or mountain climbing—was not. As Wilfred Noyce suggests in the epigraph, it is the *male* American who “ceases to be a man” when he does not “climb the mountains or sail the seas.” After all, why would a woman—supposed to be the “life-giving” rather than the “life-risking” of the sexes—choose to challenge gravity, rock, and ice to climb a mountain? As late as 1978, a Himalayan climber and American Alpine Club member asked the same question when deciding whether or not to grant support to an all women’s climb of Annapurna. Essentially, he argued that women should stay off the highest peaks not because they were underqualified, but because in some vague moral sense they were overqualified. Barnes said the following:

One can understand the macho heroics of young and sometimes not so young men who continue to push their personal limits till they are dead or disabled—their absurdity is socially and maybe hormonally programmed.... But women, in the name of all that is supposed to be superior about the sense of values and emotional maturity of women...you should not sacrifice life on the same altar of egoism that causes men to join Marines, shoot buffalo, fight over women.²³

And yet American women, those temples of purity and fear, have been climbing mountains for almost two centuries. Historically, this has been an irreconcilable paradox that women climbers have confronted in one way or another depending on the time period in which they climbed.²⁴

But, it is possible that the need for challenge, the desire for wilderness, the pursuit of risk, and the quest for self-sufficiency (among other “frontier values”) is a *human*—not a gendered—inclination, though we have created it as such.

What, then, is this mountaineering ethos that entices people—women and men—to climb mountains? Let me first contextualize this question. In the introduction I recognize the potential

²³ Blum, 2-3.

for feminist aims in women's climbing history. Here, the goal in defining a mountaineering "ethos" is to establish the possibility of non-gendered aspects of climbing mountains. This is not to say that feminist intentions in climbing are the opposite of that ethos. However, to define *all* women's motivations as exclusively feminist is to imply that women climb only for some ulterior motivation other than the intrinsic value of climbing; or perhaps, to imply that women cannot climb for the same reasons that men climb.²⁵ Thus, to answer my initial question, women and men climb mountains because it is the synthesis of physical, personal, and spiritual actualization in the most breathtaking and extreme of environments. Mountaineering, as an American (western) endeavor and as an ethic, embodies personal achievement, pushing physical and mental limits, the pursuit of challenge, an immersion into wild places, a journey into the unknown, and a strong association with the mountain itself.²⁶ "Achieving the summit" is a moment to which any mountain climber can relate. Two world class mountaineers articulate their experiences as follows:

I heard the geese flying over the summit ridge at more than 25000ft...I wondered why they chose this route. Perhaps it was because there were no distractions up here...Whatever the reason, they chose the hard way...Why were we up here? To climb a mountain, test our limits, know ourselves. Were [the geese] wheeling among the high peaks for the view? For the glory? I smiled and thought, "I bet they are doing it for the fun of it."²⁷

So if you cannot understand that there is something in us which responds to the challenge of this mountain and goes out to meet it, that the struggle is the struggle of life itself, upward and forever upward, then you won't see why we go. What we get from this adventure is just sheer joy. And joy is, after all, the end of life.²⁸

²⁴ In other words Victorian women climbers at the end of the nineteenth century faced a different set of myths than women who climbed in the context of the 1950s domesticated housewife.

²⁵ This is not to say that women always climb for the same reasons that men do, or even that women climb the same way that men do—a possibility that will be explored later in this paper.

²⁶ Certainly people climb for a variety of reasons but the above description captures the essence of a mountaineering ethos. Most climbers (American) would articulate something similar and attest to these philosophical elements of climbing. In other words, noting a specific source is inconceivable because I am merely consolidating the spirit of mountaineering into a few brief statements; an entire paper could address the evolution of this spirit. Most accounts written by mountaineers allude (in part) to the ethic I have briefly described. Suggested reading includes: *Beyond the Limits*, Stacy Alison; *Into Thin Air*, John Krakauer; *Annapurna: A Woman's Place*, Arlene Blum; *Annapurna*: Maurice Herzog.

²⁷ Welsh, 43.

²⁸ Welsh, 35.

The message is similar in these two statements. They indicate both challenge and joy, but what they do not implicate is gender. Is it at all apparent that the first passage was written by a female, Arlene Blum (the first all-female ascent of Annapurna, 1980) and that a male, George Mallory (the first attempt of Mount Everest, 1922) wrote the second passage? Their inspiration for climbing transcended their sex. This is not to say that women and men climb with the same world-view, but they both climb as climbers. The fact that Arlene Blum is also a feminist cannot take precedence over her passion as a mountaineer even though her experience as a woman or as a feminist certainly influences her climbing.

Finally, I want to re-emphasize that concepts such as individual pursuit and the acceptance of risk are traditionally absent from accepted female stereotypes such as passivity, weakness, and dependence.²⁹ But as Blum and many others indicate, their reasons for climbing mountains are often synonymous with those concepts that American culture has historically seen as male. Again, this is in part rooted in republican notions of independence and self-sufficiency.³⁰ Does this mean that women who climb mountains are man-like as the epigraph of the introduction implies (i.e. that women are not “real women” if they are “good climbers”)? Of course not. Nor does it mean that women have completely conformed to some male ideal even though they may be driven by similar values. And, as I will demonstrate later, even if some women climb for the same objectives that men do, in climbing as “women” they have helped to shape modern climbing and even change traditional practices. Thus the outcome of writing a women’s climbing history is to uncover how (and if) women fit into a mountaineering paradigm, or create their own paradigm, as climbers, as women, or as feminists.

²⁹ According to Clifford Knapp, in his article *Escaping the Gender Trap*, our culture typically associates characteristics such as “caring, nurturing, following, dependent or interdependent, gentle, expressing feelings and passive” with femaleness, while maleness has been traditionally assigned characteristics such as “competing, dominating, achieving, risk taking, initiating, aggressive, independent and active.”²⁹ From *The Journal of Experiential Education* 8 (Summer 1985) 17.

³⁰ This association with mountaineering is in many ways a western concept. Tibetan sherpas who climb in the Himalaya view and describe their experiences through a very different lens than their American patrons.

“FEMINISM” AND MOUNTAINEERING

\fe-me-ni-zem\ n. 1. theory that women should have political, economic, and social rights equal to those of men; 2. the movement to win such rights for women; 3. any organized activity on behalf of women's rights or interests.

\fem-i-nist\ n. an advocate or supporter of feminism.

--Webster's Dictionary, 1994³¹

This is not a paper about feminist theory; it is about mountain climbing. Nor is it a paper about feminists specifically; it is about mountain climbers. But the history of women's climbing weaves so consistently through feminist history that it would be an incomplete story to disregard the relationship. In the pages that follow I continually assert both the “feminist” and “non-feminist” characteristics of women's mountaineering. In order to do this reasonably, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of those terms within the context of this paper.

As Webster's indicates, feminism is a “theory that women should have political, economic, and social rights equal to those of men.” This definition is appropriate for the use of the term in my thesis but it is important to recognize that the term does not apply just to broad-scale political movements. It is also a way of thinking, a world-view in which women's “social rights” translate into equality of opportunity in daily life—or on a mountain. In terms of mountaineering—and in the context of this paper—feminism can refer to the feminist goals of a climber or of an expedition. In evaluating sources I determined whether or not there were explicit links to a woman's “equal rights” in climbing or if she had a wider feminist agenda. But beyond

³¹ Victoria Neufeldt ed., Webster's new World Dictionary 4th ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc. 1994) 378.

specific rights or goals, feminism in mountaineering can also pertain to the general “tone” of an expedition or of an individual climber’s motivations. Thus, there may not be vocalized connections to feminist aims but nevertheless a feminist component can still exist. Furthermore, it is important to evaluate an outsider’s view of an expedition as a separate perspective from the way in which the climbers themselves perceive it. In other words, women on an expedition may be politically or socially aligned with feminist ideals without climbing mountains for a feminist objective, but others may perceive those two concepts as one in the same and inevitably name the climb as a feminist activity. The irony, of course, is that whether or not a woman is “feminist” should not preclude someone’s assessment of her as a mountaineer.

As part two of Webster’s definition indicates, feminism also refers to the movement that attempts to “win such rights for women.” Understanding the historical context of the feminist movement itself is critical for recreating a women’s climbing history. For instance, the resurgence of the feminist movement in the 1960s directly influenced the numbers of women who entered the sport. This does not imply that the feminist movement was the only factor to affect that change; nothing in history exists in a vacuum. But to ignore the fact that the feminist movement played a key role is to essentially deny the process of history. This is the complex intersection where women’s history, climbing history, and feminist history meet. Yet it is equally valuable to recognize that while the feminist movement grew and feminist ties in climbing became more explicit, not all women who climbed during that period were feminists—and some specifically distanced themselves from the movement—as I will demonstrate later on in this paper.

Part three of Webster’s definition associates feminism as “any organized activity on behalf of women’s rights or interests.” This definition is particularly interesting as it relates to women’s climbing. If feminism is any activity on behalf of “women’s interests”—as this definition indicates—then is any activity that includes women (or is for women) a feminist one? Male guides used to take women climbing in the Alps; these trips were designed for “women’s interests” but it was not feminist. There is a tendency—due to both misconceptions about

feminism and more modern, inclusive definitions of the word—to assume that all-female related endeavors represent feminist goals. (Again, refer to part one of the definition). But this is not necessarily so. Even if as the historian I place an event in the larger context of feminist history, the women involved may not have participated through a feminist consciousness. (This is the concept of intention that I will explore later as well). In mountaineering the problem with associating “women’s interests” with outright feminism is that some members of the mountaineering community—or American culture at large—may assume that a group of women could not possibly climb for the inherent value of climbing, but rather for an alternative “women’s” agenda.

A “feminist” is defined as any “advocate or supporter of feminism.” Therefore, men too can be feminist. But someone who is “feminist” can represent certain implications and stereotypes that exceed being a mere “supporter.” Thus, to claim *all* women climbers as feminist disregards the complexity of their history. In this paper I use the term “feminist” somewhat loosely based on whether or not a climber voiced or promoted feminist concerns in her writing. But there is a tendency to view the word “feminist” as rigid, making it difficult to use in such an organic history. In other words, a climber is not necessarily a “feminist” or a “non-feminist”; it is not that simple and women’s mountaineering history should not need to place women into specific factions. Furthermore, every woman seems to have her own definition of the word, making it impossible to characterize what a feminist is in black and white terms. While some of the women outlined in this work specifically define themselves as “feminist” or “non-feminist,” for most women climbers the distinction is not explicit. One can be feminist but not climb for feminist reasons. Finally, it is imperative that we recognize that “feminist” is not the same word as “woman.” Just because a climber was not a feminist per se does not mean that she ignored the specific challenges she faced as a woman climber.

BEGINNINGS: THE EUROPEAN TRADITION

I accomplished the task which I marked out for myself, and now feel amply repaid for all my toil and fatigue. Nearly everyone tried to discourage me from attempting it, but I believed I should succeed; and now, here I am, the first woman who has ever stood upon the summit of this mountain and gazed upon this wondrous scene.

--Julia Archibald Holmes, *Pikes Peak*, 1858.³²

Women have been climbing high mountains for a long time, since at least 1808, when a French servant named Marie Paradis whined, crawled, and dragged her way up the 15,771ft. summit of Mt. Blanc.³³ While much of her climb occurred on the shoulders of the men who accompanied her, she nonetheless demonstrated that women were at least capable of such feats. Thus, by 1838, Europe's first "recognized" female alpinist, Margeurite D'Angeville, climbed Mt. Blanc, slipping women into a strong tradition of climbing in the Alps that spun through circles of Europe's gentry. [Plate 3] While these women certainly engraved their presence on the European climbing world during the nineteenth century, they simultaneously climbed within the context of an adverse reality which remains true for women mountaineers today: No matter how talented a climber was or how much respect or disrespect she received from the climbing community, she climbed in a male dominated sport that often presented distinct barriers for the

³² Julia A. Holmes. *A Bloomer Girl on Pikes Peak*, ed. Agnes Wright Spring (Denver: Denver Public Library 1949) 4.

³³ Note that this statement refers somewhat exclusively to Western women because there is no record of indigenous peoples such as Sherpani women in Tibet who climbed high peaks. Even if they did ascend high mountains—for instance many Tibetans and Peruvians live on high plateaus at elevations well above 14000ft—there is no evidence that women, or men, climbed for the recreational purpose of mountaineering until after contact with westerners.

female mountaineer. For instance, D'Angeville made the first ascent of 10,820ft. Vignemale in the Pyrenees with a local guide named Cazaux. But when Cazaux stumbled across the opportunity to guide the Prince of Moscow up the peak, he lied, assuring his wealthy client that D'Angeville—a woman—had not climbed all the way to the summit. Margeurite D'Angeville discovered the false claims and hired a lawyer, in turn forcing Cazaux to sign an affidavit verifying that she indeed made the first ascent of the mountain.³⁴

Despite obvious challenges for women who entered the arduous, male-centered world of mountaineering, such hurdles have not predetermined a singular perspective through which women climbers have viewed gender adversity. In particular, a feminist thread wove itself through the beginnings of American mountaineering that did not initially appear in Europe's long climbing history. The European tradition, which began decades before an American climbing movement, included a conservative tendency among female mountaineers that stemmed from the rigid, upper-class status of Europe's climbing scene. In short, women could climb mountains, but they must do so as ladies. British climber Lucy Walker—who later became president of the Ladies' Alpine Club in 1913—religiously climbed in a dress, unwilling to adopt the practice of hiding climbing breeches under her dress for the ascent. Walker conscientiously attempted to disassociate herself from feminist claims of female equality and seemed not to consider her mountaineering as part of a larger effort to improve the general status of women.³⁵ For example, Walker explained that the reason she chose not to climb one particular summit was because another female climber had made the first ascent and afterwards remarked to a certain male guide, "You said no woman could manage it!" He replied, "I said no *lady* could."³⁶

³⁴ David, Mazel, Mountaineering Women (College Station: Texas A&M, 1994) 3.

³⁵ In her years as president of the Ladies' Alpine Club she spent as much time clarifying the appropriate manner for women to "conduct themselves" while on climbs as she did talking about the actual climbs.

³⁶ Birkett and Peascod, Women Climbing (Seattle: Mountaineers, 1990) 22.

In contrast to the European climbing legacy, mountaineering caught on more slowly in America for men and women alike.³⁷ As a result, American women did not begin climbing more abundantly until the end of the nineteenth century when traditional female roles in white upper class America began to shift. It was a modern age in which women battled or adventured alongside their husbands in a closing frontier; women entered the work force and attended college during the Progressive Era; and they were fought hard to win the vote within an exploding feminist movement. “Bloomer Girl” Julia Archibald Holmes—a pioneer mountain climber and an advocate for more sensible dress for women—made the first woman’s ascent of Pike’s peak in Colorado in 1858. Holmes published the account of her climb in *The Sibyl*, a women’s journal, which simultaneously suggests the difficulty women climbers had in gaining recognition in traditional climbing circles as well as a link between mountain climbing and a degree of feminism that would prove characteristic in America. None of the early American ascents could match the accomplishments of British women, but if standards in technique lagged behind in North America, social acceptance of women’s climbing seemed to be slightly ahead. (This was especially the case in Canada as footnote four in the introduction indicates). Following the heels of an industrial tailwind, the turn of the century in the United States was marked by possibilities for some women to live, work, be educated—and even climb—on their own. Whereas the Sierra Club and the Appalachian Mountain Club admitted women before the turn of the century, Britain’s Ladies’ Alpine Club did not appear until 1907, almost one hundred years after Marie Paradis made her famous ascent.

It is within the perspective of this larger climbing history that American female climbers established a mountaineering history that is distinct from their European sisters. The history actually begins with Julia Archibald Holmes and another American pioneer, Marguerite Breevort. These women deserve recognition as the first Americans to make noteworthy ascents—Archibald

³⁷ It is also important to note that until the beginning of the 20th century few written accounts exist that describe American climbs by women.

on Pikes Peak and Breevort in the Alps.³⁸ However, while these women opened a door for American women to step through in the 1850s, they were not avid mountaineers. In other words, they made a few ascents for the “experience” but did not continue climbing, nor did they view themselves as climbers. Thus, for the purpose of the history, my focused research began with two women who started climbing in the 1890s and whom I recognize as the first distinguished American female mountain climbers, Fanny Bullock Workman and Annie Peck.

³⁸ American Meta Breevort, like Holmes and unlike Lucy Walker, was more than willing to wear trousers on climbs.

PIONEER AMERICAN WOMEN CLIMBERS

My recollection of the descent is as of a horrible nightmare. Several times I declared that we should never get down alive. The cold and fatigue, the darkness and shadow, the absence of climbing irons, the small steps, the steep glassy slopes...

--Annie Smith Peck, Mt. Huascaran, 1908³⁹

Americans were among the first mountaineers to perceive feminist potential in mountain climbing.⁴⁰ Two wealthy American explorers, Annie Smith Peck and Fanny Bullock Workman, both climbed extensively at the end of the nineteenth century and wrote in detail about their experiences. While both women allude to “feminist” goals, it is important to recognize that their agenda to increase opportunities for women was peripheral to their climbing agenda. Thus as the introduction of this thesis suggests, one outcome of Peck and Workman’s climbing is that they emerged as symbols for women climbers after them, which is distinct from climbing *to be* symbols for other women.

The problem with assuming that strong, independent women automatically assert feminist objectives into their activity, is to suggest that women could not possibly climb (or fly planes, or sail) for the inherent value of the activity itself. David Mazel writes that “Women climb to challenge not just individual male egos but the whole constellation of assumptions about gender in our society.”⁴¹ But to presume that *all* women climb for reasons other than climbing is

³⁹ Annie Smith Peck, A Search for the Apex of America: High Mountain Climbing in Peru and Bolivia. (London: T. Fischer Unwin, 1911) 115.

⁴⁰ Frances Cogan, in her book All American Girl, argues that the prevailing nineteenth century ideal of femininity—the ‘Cult of True Womanhood’ which held that women should be delicate, submissive, and wan—was challenged in the United States by an alternative ideal that stressed robust health, strenuous physical activity, and even outdoor recreation. (Athens: University of Georgia Press) 3-4.

⁴¹ Mazel, 14.

to assume that women need an alternative reason to put themselves at risk. In the case of Peck and Workman there is no doubt that they sympathized with feminist interests in a manner that their European counterparts did not. But we can not lose sight of the fact that they were climbers first, feminists second.

Annie Smith Peck and Fanny Bullock Workman climbed internationally at the end of the nineteenth century, Peck in the Andes and Workman in the Himalayas, each claiming dozens of first ascents and setting world altitude records. They were products of their time, rooted deeply in the age of exploration. They both wrote enthusiastically about their actual climbs, and about their desire for the unknown and the undiscovered. As the editor of the *Independent* speculates about Fanny Bullock Workman in 1916, “she is proud of her many important geographical discoveries in her twenty-five years of mountain climbing and exploration among the peaks and glaciers of the Himalaya.”⁴² That Peck and Workman’s fascination stemmed from exploration does not minimize their identification as mountain climbers; it is important to realize that mountaineering in the nineteenth century meant something very different from what it does today. There were no guidebooks that furnished every detail of a route; the name of “exploration” was the means to chasing high mountains. Moreover, even though climbing pioneers climbed less challenging terrain than elite alpinists do today, they did so at greater risk.⁴³ Porters died daily, crevasses that modern mountaineers bridge with ladders were uncrossable, and they had only mediocre, primitive equipment. Imagine climbing those immense, glaciated mountains in a dress, wearing uninsulated leather boots, and using homemade climbing hardware. Thus, while the modern climbing community might consider the actual peaks that Peck and Workman climbed to be “walk-ups” according to today’s standards, at the turn of the century these women were achieving the impossible.

⁴² Fanny Bullock Workman, “Exploring the Rose,” *Independent* January 1916: 54.

⁴³ Today one can fly to the base camp of Mt. Everest at 17,000ft. in a helicopter to begin an expedition, lessening the “remoteness” of the experience. When Fanny Bullock Workman climbed in the Himalaya, it took months just to get to the base of the mountain...and this after a trans-continental voyage without the luxury of a twelve-hour airline flight.

Annie Peck first gained a measure of fame by ascending the Matterhorn in 1908, then turning her interests southward to the Andes, where she became the first female to climb in South America. [Plate 4] Her career culminated in ascending the 21,831ft. summit of Huascaran in Peru. While reflecting upon her climb of Huascaran, Peck's feminist inclinations peek through. She wrote the following in her book *A Search for the Apex of America*, "...being from earliest years a firm believer in the equality of the sexes, I felt that any great achievement in any kind of endeavor would be of advantage to my sex."⁴⁴ Peck was more than aware of her unique position as one of two American world-class female mountain climbers and from that position, vocalized the potential for women to achieve the same successes as men. But the priority of her passions should not be lost behind this unmistakably feminist statement. In an article written for Harper's Bazaar magazine in 1909, Peck described her climb of Huascaran, and indicated that she had hoped to "reach a higher point than where any man had previously stood."⁴⁵ She was in pursuit of the world altitude record for climbers, not for *women* climbers; she did not intend to just equal men in climbing but perhaps to surpass them as a fellow mountaineer. In this way her writing is double faceted. She was both mountaineer and feminist. Her voice as a climber—i.e., her internal desire to "reach new heights"—can not be diluted. This association is evident throughout her book in which the pulse of the mountain becomes a minutely described epic work of a mountaineer. For instance, when asked how she came to pursue high mountain climbing, she replied as follows:

My reasons for climbing have varied somewhat as time has progressed...the exercise is invigorating. The joy in the exhilarating atmosphere, the charm of the ever varying vista, both near and remote, must be felt to be understood...the moraines and glacier, the rocks and cliff, the snow fields, the cornice and crevasse, the wide expanse of earth and heaven, the stillness and the solitude, the calm and the peace.⁴⁶

Her answer is a non-gendered climber's response. As the historian, I know that Annie Peck was feminist—and she would even acknowledge her role in inspiring other women—but that

⁴⁴ Peck, "Exploring" 105..

⁴⁵ Annie Smith Peck, "The First Ascent of Mount Huascaran" *Harper's Monthly Magazine* Jan. 1909: 85.

association is surrounded by her need to assert herself as a mountaineer. For instance, regarding the summit photos from her trip to Peru Peck remarked, “after all, it is the pictures from the *summit* that tell the tale, not the picture of someone standing on a bit of rock and snow which may be anywhere.”⁴⁷ Reaching the top of the mountain was Peck’s *summum bonum*.

Like Peck, Fanny Bullock Workman actively promoted herself as a committed mountaineer with an unharnessed yearning for the world’s highest places. [*Plates 5 and 6*] “As every alpinist knows,” she wrote referring to a Himalayan summit, “such moments are stupendous, more awesome than months of ordinary existence.”⁴⁸ She claimed the summits of several untrammled Himalayan peaks as her own. And, like Peck, she too was a feminist. As the introduction of this paper notes, it was Workman who took a photograph of herself in the Himalaya holding a “Votes for Women” sign, in turn linking her love of the sport to other possibilities. [*Plate 7*] She was also an avid explorer, intending, I think, to create a well known, public legacy of her adventures. In the early 1890s, at the age of thirty, Mrs. Fanny Bullock Workman and her husband Dr. William Workman biked over 14,000 miles throughout India and Asia.⁴⁹ Workman did not even begin climbing high mountains until the end of the century when she was in her forties. Dorothy Middleton in *Victorian Lady Travelers* describes Mrs. Workman as the quintessential, active “New Woman.” The New Woman, viewed as either formidable or foolish, was a late Victorian phenomenon and denoted a woman who wore “sensible clothes and aspired to the professions, was broad-minded in matters of art and literature; she...nearly always bicycled; she always believed in women’s suffrage.”⁵⁰

Clearly Workman supported women’s suffrage and even used her mountaineering as a symbol for women’s capabilities. Is that why she climbed? Not necessarily. This is a woman

⁴⁶ Peck, *A Search* ix.

⁴⁷ Peck, *A Search* 112.

⁴⁸ Fanny Bullock Workman, “Exploring” 56.

⁴⁹ People often recalled Workman’s extreme independence and strength. She—not her husband—was in charge of most of the climbing expeditions. Furthermore, people never titled the couple as “Dr. and Mrs. William Workman”; instead, friends and writers referred to them as “Mrs. Fanny Bullock Workman and her husband Dr. William Workman.” *From*: Dorothy Middleton, *Victorian Lady Travellers* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965) 83.

who crossed ten rivers a day, suffered frostbite, and fell into crevasses, in order to reach her summits in the Himalaya. “We plodded along,” she described, “despite that we were constantly in snow above the knees or in crevasses...I will soon not forget the sensation I felt on disappearing up to my shoulders in one of the latter.”⁵¹ In her writing she described her mountaineering experiences in almost “genderless” terms, focusing intently on the mountain and the actual climbing. One can only speculate why she does not allude to her experience as a woman and why there is a notable absence of feminist language in her writing about mountaineering. Instead, her literature reads like that of a seasoned “male” guide, detailing geographical, goal oriented descriptions of mountains and the quest of a dedicated adventurer. “I turned away,” she wrote, “perched on a snow cornice overlooking an uncrossable precipice of 2,000 feet sheer...but the lure of unexplored mountain wastes held me...and I determined someday to reach the snow giants between which nature had here placed such a formidable barrier.”⁵² At this moment, these are the words of an anguished climber, not a driven feminist.

It is possible that both Peck and Workman’s writing may lack specific “feminist” disposition—even though they were both feminists—because the women knew who their audience would be: climbers of both genders, not women specifically. There has been a historical tendency in the climbing world to ignore or defuse one’s claims as a feminist in order to maintain status as a woman who can climb among or equal to men.⁵³ But it is also possible that feminist goals did not shape their mountaineering experiences, climbing did. Peck and Workman do not deny their feminist aims but in their writing about mountaineering they emphasized their experiences as mountaineers. In speaking as climbers, the reader may perceive them as climbers, not just as determined women attempting to enter a man’s world in the name of equality.

⁵⁰ Middleton, 75.

⁵¹ Middleton, 85.

⁵² Fanny Bullock Workman, “Recent First Ascents in the Himalayas” *Independent* Jan. 1916: 56.

⁵³ This concept will be discussed later in the paper as it relates to Elizabeth Cowles Partridge and the Denali Damsels. In general it stems from a fear among some women climbers that if they focus on feminist related issues in climbing they will be labeled as women who make excuses about why they can or can not climb a certain route. *From “Ideas,” Climbing* August 1987: 44.

CLIMBING AT HOME

That year I was very anxious to reach the summit but was allowed to go only a certain distance and then expected to return to camp. It was a great disappointment, and one that made me resolve that some time I would go as high as possible, but hardly daring to know what that might mean.

--Fay Fuller, Mt. Rainier, 1887⁵⁴

The stage had been set. Fanny Bullock Workman and Annie Peck placed American women permanently in the international climbing arena and demonstrated their abilities to climb to new heights in remote corners of the earth. But what about climbing at home? Moreover, what about women who did not possess the same compulsion for exploration or the funds for it?⁵⁵ At the turn of the century, Fay Fuller of Washington and Eleanor Davis of Colorado revealed that women were active in reaching the highest points on the American frontier, not just an international one. As a result of their homespun mountaineering, they both emerged not only as superior American climbers, but as symbols for average women who wanted to climb in their own backyards. Fuller ultimately became the first female historian and the first vice president of the Pacific Northwest's Mazama climbing club, while Davis was the first female member of both

⁵⁴ Fay Fuller, "A Trip to the Summit," Every Sunday, 23 August 1890: 126.

⁵⁵ Again, race and class are significant when addressing this question. To begin, all the women in this thesis are white; this was not necessarily by choice but the sport of mountaineering in America has been almost exclusively so. (And until recently, all of the top mountaineers were white). This is due in part to both financial constraints as well as cultural ones. Native Americans do not even have a word for "wilderness" much less mountain climbing. Ascending a mountain for "recreation" is not part of their historical world-view because mountains were part of daily native life, not a place to escape to. Ignoring the fact that there were virtually no people of color at the cutting edge of the sport, it is equally difficult to find evidence of average non-white citizens who participated in the art of mountaineering. Photographs from mountain club archives such as the *Mazamas* and the *Mountaineers*, portrayed only white participants and at least until the 1960s there were no black members in the Appalachian Mountain Club. Thus, the question of women's marginality in a male domain becomes even more complex when juxtaposed with the non-existence of women of color in what is in fact a predominantly *white* male sport.

the Colorado Alpine Club and the American Alpine Club. Both women—in their own way— influenced other women to join alpine clubs, which created a network for aspiring female mountaineers.

Fay Fuller's mountaineering career began in 1890 when she became the first woman to climb Mt. Rainier in Washington, which at the time was believed to be the highest peak in the United States. [Plates 8 and 9] She was a schoolteacher from Olympia who at the age of twenty-one determined to work her way up the unforgiving peak. "It was a heavenly moment," she wrote, "nothing was said—words can not describe scenery and beauty, how could they speak for the soul! Such sensations can be known to only those who reach new heights."⁵⁶ This experience crept into Fuller's spirit, her daily life, consuming all her thoughts and activities with mountains. She was a tenacious mountaineer, also becoming one of the first women to climb Mt. Adams which she completed by crawling to the summit while she suffered from the flu, (which probably means she had altitude sickness). Fuller was certainly not shy about her accomplishments, pronouncing in one article "I [am] a Mazama, one of the mountain climbers of the Pacific Northwest, whose daring exploits have attracted attention the world over."⁵⁷ She continued by scoffing at the assumption that climbing in the Alps was the supreme test of a mountaineer's ability because in her opinion western ranges presented equal difficulties—of course, she had never climbed in the Alps. She presumptuously declared that "these peaks are not already conquered with ropes and shackled with chains, made accessible by ladders, or comfortable with inns, nor are the climbers led by careful guides." She even continued with a hint of Yankee pride by proclaiming that "The Mazamas think they could show European climbers a little genuine work here in America."⁵⁸ Perhaps Fay Fuller deserved her hubris; by 1900 she had made dozens of ascents on Washington's highest peaks and is still recognized annually with a *Fay Fuller Anniversary Climb* of Mt. Rainier.

⁵⁶ Fuller, "A Trip" 135.

⁵⁷ Fay Fuller, "A Woman Mountain Climber's Exploits," New York Journal, 20 September 1869, 69.

Following in the footsteps of Peck and Workman, Fay Fuller also furnished ties to feminist objectives. Fuller published articles in her father's newspaper encouraging women to join the Mazamas—all they had to do was climb a peak over 10,000ft. In order to ensure that women would not be discouraged from mountaineering for “petty” reasons, in her articles she often described the most functional dress for women to climb in and printed images of herself wearing trousers. Following her ascent of Mt. Rainier she stated, “I expect to have my example followed by a good many women.”⁵⁹ Indeed, it was; Fuller personally organized several Mazama trips that included over one-third female participants.

While Fay Fuller consciously solicited other women to join Mazama climbs, she fanatically indulged her passion in Washington's glaciated playgrounds. Her writing emphasized the nature of mountaineering and of her own experiences, determined to prove her ability as a climber. “It was not gentle work,” she wrote, “It requires strong bodies, unflinching determination, plenty of pluck and an almost inconceivable amount of endurance.”⁶⁰ Fuller thrived on such challenge and continually returned to the mountains to push herself. In response to skepticism regarding her solo descent to Wizard Island in Crater Lake, she questioned, “Why should not I, an acknowledged Mazama, a mountain climber of long experience, one who had passed a night where woman had never passed a night before...why, indeed could I not clamber down 2,000 feet of sheer cliff, and there alone spend the long night?”⁶¹

Unlike Fay Fuller, Eleanor Davis did not explicitly recruit women into clubs, but merely through her own achievements inspired them to explore the vertical world that defined Colorado. She was a true mountaineer, unable to last a week without scrambling up one peak or another, and willing to do anything to reach her goal. [*Plate 10*] Eleanor and her climbing friends (mostly male but not exclusively so) “camped out in mine tunnels or on open ground” to wait for truck-

⁵⁸ Fuller, “A Woman” 68.

⁵⁹ Fuller, “A Woman” 68.

⁶⁰ Fuller, “A Woman” 68.

⁶¹ Fuller, “A Woman” 69.

rides to the mountains. Once, in order to let a storm pass so she could attempt a peak the following morning she “used her packhorse’s saddle for a pillow while sleeping out, unprotected in a hard rainstorm.”⁶²

Davis differed from the mountain women who preceded her in that she was a trained athlete.⁶³ She graduated from the Boston Normal School of Gymnastics in 1911 and moved to Colorado Springs where she ultimately became a teacher in the Department of Physical Education at Colorado College and where she began her illustrious climbing career. Her physical abilities enabled her to climb harder routes alongside her male climbing partners. Her predecessors such as Peck and Workman were, of course, accomplished climbers, but the climbs they did were essentially long, steep walks on snow or ice at high altitudes. The style of climbing that Davis engaged in required much more acrobatic, dynamic capabilities in order to negotiate vertical rock routes. Climbing partner Bob Ormes applauded Davis for “attacking cliffs and peaks by their most difficult routes and for exploring them in general.”⁶⁴ A rawness surrounded Davis’ climbing life that was determined by a simple need for mountains and for physical challenge. Her climbing trips also lacked the extravagance of upper-class international climbing and instead conceived a rugged, local ethic that was rooted in her love of climbing. They did not take guides and according to Eleanor the practice was simply that “you saw your peak and went to it.”⁶⁵

While Fuller actively encouraged other women to join the Mazamas in her writing, Davis inadvertently mustered a following simply by being an accomplished, inspiring climber.⁶⁶ In fact, when asked if she would enjoy climbing with other women she replied “yes” but qualified her statement by saying that “all women should try climbing, but not all women will climb

⁶² Janet Robertson, Magnificent Mountain Women (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990) 35.

⁶³ Women in general were not encouraged to be athletic until after the turn of the century. Thus, most mountaineers who climbed before Davis had stumbled across mountaineering because their husbands climbed, and they were not in appropriate physical condition for their first ascents.

⁶⁴ Robertson, 36.

⁶⁵ Jane Koerner, “Peaking at History: Colorado’s Greatest Woman Mountaineer,” Colorado Springs Magazine May 1983: 1.

⁶⁶ Many of the women who did join the Colorado Climbing Club as a result of Davis’ influence were her students from Colorado College, no doubt awestruck by their gifted teacher.

well...you either have it or you don't.”⁶⁷ Thus, unlike Fuller, Eleanor Davis did not blatantly pursue climbing with women—or recruit female climbers—because her ability to climb more difficult routes placed her in a league of her own. Davis’ career was impressive, including multiple first ascents on 14,000ft. peaks in Colorado, first ascents on difficult granite peaks in the Wind River Range, and in 1923 she became the first woman to climb the Grand Teton. Colorado climber Albert Ellingwood—who was leading the hardest routes in Colorado at the time—frequently climbed with Davis and described her as “very tough and strong and not disturbed by altitude...and a damn good climber, and nervy!”⁶⁸ It seems all that Colorado women needed who climbed after Davis was the simple possibility that a woman could be a “damn good climber.” Nonetheless, whether or not Davis consciously invited women to try mountaineering, she created a standard that influenced women to join the climbing ranks on their own landscapes simply by climbing herself.

⁶⁷ Koerner, 2.

⁶⁸ Robertson, 32.

WOMEN TAKE THE LEAD

The usual custom for a guided party then was to have the tourist swing across the rope to the middle platform, but today [the guide] Armand refused to allow Guido [the client] to do this... "I do not think that today monsieur," Armand suggested to Guido, "since two ladies have climbed the crack from the bottom that it would be appropriate for a man to take an easier route."⁶⁹

*--Miriam Underhill, *The Grepón*, 1929.*

By WWI the growing wilderness ethic that swelled in response to the confines of city life inspired more of the early twentieth century's middle class to head for the hills. According to Roderick Nash in *Wilderness and the American Mind*, a "Wilderness Cult" appeared in response to a drowning "American male [who] was suffering from over-civilization."⁷⁰ But Nash ignores that women, too, were drowning, and as the numbers of wilderness adventurers increased, more women were also choosing to escape into the mountains. By this time as well, women's climbing organizations had been around for a decade, the potential for women's suffrage was closer than ever, and some women were enjoying post-Victorian freedoms at work and in the home during and after WWI.⁷¹ A combination of these shifts on the "wilderness" and the "women's" frontiers influenced a transformation in the way in which women climbed mountains. Two women in particular, Miriam Underhill and Alma Wagen, shed light on the changes that were taking place

⁶⁹ Miriam Underhill. *Give Me the Hills* (Riverside: The Chatham Press, Inc. 1956) 156.

⁷⁰ From Nash, 152. Nash' book is an excellent discussion of a distinctly American wilderness ethic and provides a rich history of the physical, psychological, and spiritual development of American Wilderness. Its major misgiving is that it is a one-dimensional history because Nash completely excludes women from its pages.

⁷¹ According to Sara Evans, author of *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America*, "Between 1900 and WWI the old 'Victorian Code' crumbled...Labor unions, women's clubs, and settlement houses all represented arenas in which (women) could experiment freely with new ideas and actions...The women's movement reached the apex of its political power...and the older images of the pure, submissive Victorian woman and her benevolent patriarch began to soften around the edges." (New York: The Free Press, 1989) 160.

in both climbing history and in women's history. These two women climbed in distinct styles on very different mountains, but they both became the first accomplished American female mountaineers to climb without men. Thus a distinction exists between their intentions in mountaineering and what their gendered achievements ultimately came to symbolize for women climbers (and women in general).

Alma Wagen was the first professional female mountain guide in the United States. The U.S. government hired her during WWI to guide clients up Mt. Rainier. [*Plate 11*] She was not a "famous" mountaineer though she excelled as a guide despite being the only female. One can not help but wonder if the Park Service would have hired her if her male counterparts were not off in Europe; however, in an interview with *Sunset Magazine*, her supervisor emphatically stated the following:

Just dismiss all considerations of sex when dealing with the case of Miss Wagen. Forget, too, that she is a young woman, highly educated, with a most charming personality. Let us instead talk about mountain guides. Miss Wagen is capable, resourceful, has nerve, judgment, discretion. Miss Wagen is holding her place on Mt. Rainier year after year for the reason that she is a superlative mountaineer.⁷²

As a child, Alma Wagen felt the lure of high places and responded to it by scaling windmills near her grandmother's farm where neighbors designated her the "little windmill climber".⁷³ Wagen felt herself being pulled by the open and natural landscapes of the west and so she moved to Washington to become a school teacher. But the view of Mt. Rainier from her classroom window worked its way under her skin. Wagen quit her job as a school teacher to learn to climb, inspired by "[Rainier's] 14,408 feet of snow-fields, glaciers, hair-breadth ridges and yawning crevasses which offered perpetual challenge...[she] was determined to climb them."⁷⁴ She initiated a training regiment by climbing other peaks in the Cascades with the Mountaineers—a Seattle based climbing club—which culminated in a two week, one hundred

⁷² Herman Matteson, "How Much of a Coward are You?" *Sunset* June 1922: 38.

⁷³ B.S. Adams, "Would a Girl Guide Keep You Going?" *Illustrated World* Dec. 1922: 548.

⁷⁴ Adams, 548.

mile circumnavigation of Mt. Rainier. When she and her hiking partners finished the trek she decided that she was ready to climb the peak. She proceeded to climb the mountain alone on the rarely attempted north side. This virtually unknown mountaineer from the Pacific Northwest (and ex-windmill climber) became a pioneer by doing what no American female alpinist had done before—not only did she climb a mountain alone, but the more publicly daring act is that she climbed it without a man.

In the same vein as John Muir, Wagen thus delved completely into mountain life, evolving as the archetypal—female—“rugged individualist” by committing her life’s work and pastime to the pursuit of wilderness and mountains.⁷⁵ Wagen ultimately climbed Rainier over one hundred times via several different routes, not to mention her ascents of dozens of other Washington peaks. She became a coveted guide into the late 1920s whom repeat clients requested for climbs. In spite of her obvious position as the only female guide and as a woman who repeatedly climbed Rainier by herself, there is little evidence that Wagen connected her climbing to feminist objectives or that she felt compelled to, which is perhaps different from many women in history who have pioneered into male professions. In fact, reporters, clients and even fellow guides continually prodded her about being the lone female and about the differences between men and women in mountain climbing. She always answered plainly that she loved to climb mountains or that she shared a mutual respect with all her clients. It seems that Miss Wagen perceived the matter as a non-issue. When asked by a reporter about how the women clients compared with the men she replied in terms of their abilities as novice climbers and her perception as a mountain guide. In other words she diluted “gender” in her response. She stated:

There is no denying that man may be physically stronger than woman...but just as many shaky masculine hands as feminine are put out to me for assistance across chasms...I recall a number of amusing episodes all of which were due to temporary loss of nerve, and they are about equally distributed among the sexes.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ As George S. Evans wrote in 1904, “[Wilderness] will turn you from a weakling into a man.” President Roosevelt advocated this at the turn of the century, calling upon his countrymen to lead a “life of strenuous endeavor.” Alma Wagen fulfilled that call despite its gender (male) specific intentions and demonstrated that one could also turn from a “weakling” into a woman! *From Nash*, 141 and 150.

⁷⁶ Matteson, 38

Obviously Wagen recognized her position as the only female guide on Rainier, but she did not climb for notoriety, nor for a public (or even personal) feminist end. She climbed simply because she had to, because she cherished teaching others how to do so, and because she was entrenched in her own mountaineering ethos.

Alma Wagen even seemed conscious of her own unwillingness to think about climbing in any other terms but climbing. Again, in response to a reporter who inquired about what it was like to be a female guide in charge of male clients she said, “There was only one time that the woman of me exulted and was proud; patronizingly proud, offensively proud.” Wagen explained that her “one time” feelings occurred when a famous college athlete became deathly afraid on a climb. Wagen guided him safely up and down the mountain, and after they finished the climb she overheard the college athlete tell someone that he never would have made it down the mountain had it not been for a female guide. Thinking that this was a compliment Alma Wagen smiled, only to hear him qualify his statement, “I just couldn’t bear to have a girl see me quit.” Yet, even as the “woman” in her was “offensively proud,” Wagen’s agenda still returned to the topic of climbing and her affinity for guiding others by telling the reporter that she was “proud” of the young man because he “overcame his fear, mastered it, and finished the climb.”⁷⁷

In my attempt to reclaim a more nuanced women’s climbing history I am not suggesting that just because a woman “climbed for climbing’s sake” or that she “simply loved to climb,” she was unaware of women’s unique experiences in mountaineering. Thus, while women like Annie Peck climbed with some level of conscious feminist design, not all female climbers ascended mountains for that purpose, such as Alma Wagen who viewed her goals through a narrowly focused climber’s lens. The notion that one can climb as an individual or climb in the name of an engrained mountaineering ethos and still climb as a feminist supports the feminist philosophy

⁷⁷ All quotes from Matteson, 38-41. This kind of humility was, I think, one of Wagen’s most remarkable traits. Despite her tremendous accomplishments, she rarely talked about herself in articles and instead remarked on her clients’ achievements. On one solo climb she slid, crawled, and walked her way down the mountain with a broken hip until she

that the “personal is political,” which advocates that a woman’s private act (i.e. to climb in an overtly male arena) becomes a feminist act due to the larger, collective implications of her endeavor.⁷⁸ But women’s actions are not always “political” until we reflect on their experiences and place them into a larger context. It is possible that some women climbers make extreme choices about their climbing that are based on their intense desire for the sport itself—and that are rooted in a gendered interpretation—but that are not explicitly feminist. Such was the case with Miriam Underhill, whose “gendered” act in mountaineering by deciding to climb without men, was not, at the time, a deliberate step towards feminist aims. The objective is to regard women as climbers, not just as women who climb even though—despite their own intentions—as a historian I might view their accomplishments as contributing to feminist goals and certainly to feminist history.

Miriam Underhill was the premier woman climber—American or European—of the post WWI period and deserves credit for revolutionizing women’s climbing.⁷⁹ [Plate 12] Until Miriam Underhill began climbing, women never led the climbs but followed the men, completely protected by a rope. Thus, men did all of the route finding and were at the greatest risk of injury.⁸⁰ The common assumption became that men “dragged” or “took” a woman climbing which implies a passivity among the women that is not accurate—they had to climb the same exact rock that the men climbed. This standard worked to prevent women from being anything but second rate climbers. Mountaineers do not develop sound judgment by being watched over, but only by being watchful themselves, by observing and responding appropriately to the details

reached another party several thousand feet below her. When a reporter asked her about the incident all she could do was talk about the man who dragged her the rest of the way down the mountain.

⁷⁸ In the 1960s, feminists bridged the individual lives and actions of women through the notion that the “personal is political...by repoliticiz[ing] the bonds among women and rediscover[ing] the grounds for collective action.” *From Evans*, 280.

⁷⁹ Ironically, Chris Jones’ “comprehensive” history includes an entire chapter on Miriam Underhill’s climbing husband Robert, but does not mention her despite the fact that she and Robert climbed many first ascents together.

⁸⁰ Both leader and follower are attached to the rope but the leader develops a lot of slack in the system. Thus, if he falls he is not caught immediately by the rope. If the slack does not tighten before the leader hits a rock or the ground he can easily be injured or even die. The leader also has to be strong enough to “hang out” in difficult spots without falling while he connects himself to metal pieces of protection—called pitons—that he embeds into the rock, which can

of an ascent. To become fully competent, women would have to do more than merely travel up peaks; they would also have to find the safest route, assess weather, assume the risks and responsibilities of climbing at the front, or “sharp” end of the rope, and develop enough strength and stamina to potentially “drag” others up climbs. In other words, women had to *lead*. In 1929, Miriam Underhill realized this and became the first woman to achieve and encourage this notion.⁸¹

Miriam O’Brian (Underhill)—whose greatest love as a child was climbing trees—was six years of age when her parents took her into the wildlands of New Hampshire. “I got there my first taste of the wild, uncrowded places of the earth, and even at six years old I liked it.”⁸² She began hiking with the Appalachian mountain club in 1920, and then spent several seasons climbing modest ascents in New Hampshire and the Alps. But by 1926 she was climbing the most difficult rock routes in the Italian Dolomites and the Aiguilles in Chamonix with the most outstanding guides of the day, that in itself an unprecedented achievement for an American woman. Underhill was famous for her love of exposure—the feeling of being out in space with nothing but air beneath your feet—and she seemed to be fearless. She acquired a “taste for exposure,” because for her “It spiced up the climbs enormously without adding an element of danger.”⁸³ But perhaps exposure was not enough to spice up climbs; Miriam Underhill wanted to lead.

Underhill carried the prevailing ethic of the time—to climb without a guide, or “guideless climbing”—to the next level, which was for her climbing without men, or “manless climbing.”⁸⁴ In Underhill’s book, *Give Me the Hills*, she describes this decision not in distinct feminist terms but as a necessary step to improve her abilities as a mountaineer. “The person who invariably

sometimes take several minutes. The follower can climb directly up the climb on a “tight” rope so that if she slips there is no risk of injury. Generally in mountaineering the rule of thumb is that the leader does not fall.

⁸¹ Metaphorically at least, the reasons that Underhill wanted to lead in mountaineering resemble women’s efforts to win the vote a decade earlier—put simply, women wanted a say in the matter

⁸² Birkett and Peascod, 34.

⁸³ Birkett and Peascod, 35.

⁸⁴ The turn of the century not only brought changes in women’s climbing but in general climbing history. The best climbers no longer hired guides to take them up climbs but they led their own first ascents. Pioneering a route added to the reputation of one’s climbing ability.

climbs behind a good leader...may never really learn mountaineering at all.”⁸⁵ So why did she choose to climb “manless”; why not have a man follow her up a climb? She explained that she “saw no reason why a woman should be incapable of leading a good climb. *However*, if women were really to lead, that is, to take entire responsibility for the climb, there couldn’t be any man at all in the party;...in any emergency what man wouldn’t spring to the front and take over.” With that, Miriam Underhill climbed the Grépon with her partner Alice Damesme and single-handedly changed the course of climbing history by initiating the concept of *en cordée féminine*, the women’s rope team. Underhill made dozens of ascents *en cordeé féminine*, including the first all women’s ascent of the Matterhorn in 1932. Miriam planted the seed—women could lead climbs on the same routes that men did. Thus, in the same vein that Amelia Earhart opened the doors to aviation for women after her, Underhill opened the mountains.

While the political, social, and cultural climate influenced the landmark achievements of Miriam Underhill and Alma Wagen, their own climbing was not necessarily intended as a conscious statement about that climate. However, even though these women were not self-proclaimed feminists, they still wanted to redefine what it meant to be a woman climber by leading and climbing without men. Certainly, many women in climbing do feel the need to prove that women can climb as hard as men do. But Underhill and Wagen did not specifically climb or speak in those terms. Their efforts, though guided by a gendered intention, were embedded in their aspiration to be better mountaineers, not by an explicit need to equal men. It is understandable why people have made assumptions about women’s alternative motivations in climbing because the climbing community often did not view female achievements as equal. For instance, after European climber Etienne Bruhl heard about Underhill’s all-female ascent, he said, “The Grepón has disappeared.” He admitted of course that there were still some rocks standing

⁸⁵ Miriam Underhill, *Give me the Hills* (London: Methuen, 1956) 149

there, “but as a climb it no longer exists. Now that it has been done by two women alone, no self respecting man can undertake it. A pity, too, because it used to be a very good climb.”⁸⁶ How could the Grepon be demoted from the status as the most difficult climb in the Alps to a rock heap in a matter of minutes? No wonder so many women climbers feel compelled to prove their worth. In short, one can not separate the “woman” from women’s climbing, but one can not neglect the “climber” in it either.

⁸⁶ Similarly, A.F. Mummery, the first person to climb the Grepón in 1881 wrote that “It has been frequently noticed that all mountains appear doomed to pass through three stages: an inaccessible peak—the most difficult ascent in the Alps—an easy day for a lady. I must confess that the Grepón has not yet reached this final stage, and the heading...must be regarded as prophetic rather than as a statement of actual fact.” Obviously he was mistaken. *From Underhill*, 165.

THE FEMININE CLIMBER

*Some mysterious grapevine had brought the news to San Sabastian, long before
our arrival, that two American women were on their way to climb the mountain,
and in pants, It created quite a sensation!*

--Elizabeth Cowles Partridge, Santa Marta, 1941⁸⁷

Elizabeth “Betsy” Cowles Partridge stunned her old college friends when she took up mountaineering because at Vassar she had never shown the “slightest interest or aptitude for athletics of any kind.”⁸⁸ As the daughter of a prominent Connecticut family, she was well versed in the details of appropriate feminine antics, which did not include sports or the ruggedness of mountaineering. When she arrived in Colorado Springs at the age of twenty-one, Betsy Cowles was merely an attractive, poised, cultured, and charming bride who gave no indication that she would one day become Colorado’s foremost mountaineer of international stature. [Plate 13] Just two years after she began climbing in Colorado she became the first woman to traverse the Grand Teton and to climb extensively in the Tetons. By the end of the 1940s she made multiple international ascents and in 1950 became the only female member of the first American expedition to Mt. Everest. During the 1950s she continued to climb extensively and claim several first ascents. However, throughout Cowles’ climbing career she adamantly maintained her well-bred “femininity” while she emerged as one of America’s leading female climbers in the mid-twentieth century. In doing so, she inadvertently represents an ironic box that many premier female mountaineers still find themselves in, a box that is confined by being either too feminine,

⁸⁷ Cowles, Elizabeth. “More About the Santa Marta,” *American Alpine Journal* 8 (1941): 363.

⁸⁸ Janet Robertson. *Betsy Cowles Partridge: Mountaineer* (Boulder: University of Colorado, 1998) 1.

or not feminine enough. Moreover, her regard for the “feminine” is indicative of the era in which she climbed, an era that revered the domestic, but feminine June Cleavers of middle America.

Elizabeth Cowles was the antithesis of the male “climbing bum” who appeared within Yosemite and Teton climbing circles at the same time and who slept in cars, begged for food, and did not shower for weeks. Yet, she was no less a climber. She climbed with the best male climbers of her day and was known to prefer climbing without a rope even in steep terrain as long as the hand and foot-holds were firm. Glenn Exum, founder of Exum Mountain Guides in the Grand Tetons, rated her as the “most outstanding and best woman climber in North America.” But, at the same time that Cowles demanded respect as a mountaineer, she also seemed to go out of her way to assert her femininity. This was in contrast to women like Eleanor Davis, or even Alma Wagen, who according to Albert Ellingwood, was not “inclined to ramble on about beautiful scenery when climbing or worry about her looks.”⁸⁹ Although Cowles fully accepted the fact that one sometimes had to “wear the hairshirt” while climbing, she had strict standards about how a woman should look while she wore it. “I have a white tailored nylon blouse, easily washed and fresh looking that should be nice for fancy with a bright sweater.” She continued by declaring “I’ve never been one to feel that the rough life became more and more delightful the worse you look.”⁹⁰ Elizabeth Cowles Partridge did not feel the need to be “brutish” in order to be a good climber; this is not always the case for female mountaineers. There has been a tendency in mountaineering for women climbers of equal ability to be “one of the guys.” Cowles was most certainly not. In reference to a spectacular first ascent in the Santa Marta range, her climbing partner Paul Petzoldt described one gripping moment as “the most dangerous of his life,” all she could say was that it was “the dirtiest of [hers].”⁹¹

⁸⁹ Robertson, *Magnificent* 32.

⁹⁰ Robertson, *Magnificent* 149; Robertson, *Elizabeth* 5.

⁹¹ From Robertson, *Elizabeth Cowles Partridge*, 5. Cowles’ less deliberate effort to preserve her “femaleness” was her obvious love of mountaineering for its “fringe” benefits—an abundance of men. When she described her first ascent in the Alps she remembered thinking that the guide was not as “good looking as she had hoped he’d be.” In response to Betsy’s divorce from her husband in the 1930s, due to an “affair of the heart,” her sister remarked that “part of Betsy’s magic was that she was frequently—though not lightly—in love.”

In labeling America's best climbers as wholly feminist, someone like Betsy Cowles Partridge is placed into a difficult corner because preconceived notions exist about who a "feminist" is that preclude one's ability to evaluate individual climbers as they really are.⁹² As previously discussed in relation to Miriam Underhill, it is one possibility to consider Cowles' choice to climb as a "feminist" act in itself because she successfully crossed gender barriers. But, again, a person's private choices do not automatically become political. Cowles, too, simply loved to climb—and climb well—in a distinctly "feminine" manner. Cowles can be juxtaposed with many premier athletes of the mid-twentieth century such as track star Babe Didrikson who was "a tomboy who never more make-up, who shingled her hair until it was as short as a boy's...who didn't care about clothes and despised silk underthings."⁹³ She climbed during a post-war prosperity in the United States that was characterized by two-car garages, house wives, dishwashers, facial creams, and other ingredients of Betty Friedan's "Feminine Mystique."⁹⁴ Just because Betsy Cowles participated in an unconventional activity for women, does not mean that she did not appreciate, or at times even adore, convention.⁹⁵

The complexities of the "feminine" in climbing go beyond recognizing Cowles as both accomplished climber and ladylike woman. True, this talented climber was only the second woman to ascend all fifty of Colorado's 14,000ft. peaks and she did not climb a single one of them without her favorite red lipstick.⁹⁶ But Cowles in particular did not seem to struggle with the same paradoxical dilemma that many prestigious female climbers face. Being either "too feminine" or "not feminine enough" has been a double-edged sword that both male and female climbers have embedded into women's climbing experiences. It is no accident that Betsy Cowles

⁹² Today there is a much broader understanding of what it means to be feminist, i.e. one can be feminine and still be feminist. But the archetype still exists. In Cowles' case she did not climb with feminist concerns in mind.

⁹³ Susan Ware. *Still Missing: Amelia Earhart and the Search for Modern Feminism*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993) 275.

⁹⁴ Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* rebelled against the post-WWII ideology that "the highest value and only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity." From Susan Ware. *Modern American Women* (New York: McGraw-Hill Companies, 1996) 243.

⁹⁵ Based on her writing, Cowles' femininity appears to be choice, or even part of her personality, but it would be naïve to assume that she was not influenced by the mystique of the period in which she lived. Cowles tangoed with the myth of the 1950s alongside the majority of white middle class women in the era.

was a charming female and a respected American mountaineer during the 1940s and 1950s. Historian Janet Robertson, author of Cowles' biography, speculates that had she been lackluster and unfeminine it is possible that she might not have been chosen to join the American expedition to Everest. One of the male expedition members described her as "a strikingly attractive, captivating, articulate, witty, a raconteur, a charming and unforgettable person."⁹⁷ Unfortunately, her climbing partner failed to describe her as a skilled mountaineer. There is no doubt that she was a phenomenal, deserving alpinist, but she climbed in an era when male climbers dictated the standards. And because most of those males were well-educated, groomed Easterners, they felt at home with someone like Cowles. Janet Robertson also suggests that Cowles' contemporaries such as Montana local Polly Merrick and Elizabeth Knowlton—both superb climbers—would never have been considered for such a high profile climb because of their less feminine demeanor and outward feminist associations.⁹⁸ Thus, an unwritten assumption has evolved in climbing history that speculates whether or not women become less female if they adopt what are traditionally viewed as male traits such as strength, independence, and physical prowess.⁹⁹ Perhaps Elizabeth Cowles Partridge—either consciously or unconsciously—avoided the double standard altogether by climbing as the quintessential female.

The other edge of the sword poses the opposite question: does climbing or do women climbers become less credible, (or less male), if women are too feminine? Cowles represents that there is not a single image of female mountaineers, but many elite female and male climbers consciously separate themselves from the distinctly "female" image that she portrays. In 1932, the first all-female Mazama trip reached the summit of Mt. Hood known as a 'Powder-puff' climb. "Prizes, fudge, cookies, grapes and a watermelon" were hauled to the top for celebration.

⁹⁶ Robertson, Betsy Cowles Partridge, 2.

⁹⁷ Cowles, Elizabeth. "North to Everest" American Alpine Journal 1951: 2.

⁹⁸ A similar theme can still be witnessed today. In the 1997 Women's Climbing Calendar depicted eleven out of twelve women in bikini-type tops. Only one woman was pictured with dirt, sweat, bruises, and a wearing a t-shirt.

⁹⁹ This has been a long-standing challenge in the history of women's sports. In the case of the "slim, muscular, curveless" Babe Didrikson, one sports reporter felt compelled to qualify that despite the fact that Babe "looked and

Margaret Lynch recalls being quite pleased that “boy guides carried all the ropes and pickets, strung handlines, and waited at each picket to see us safely to the top.” Among other prizes, the “most all-around dolled up cutie” prize went to Cynthia Miner. In an article written for *Mazama* in 1975, high altitude climber Dorothy Harrington stated the following: “It pleases me to see women climbing together both in history and in modern times, but “Powder Puff” climbs make a mockery of the serious female mountaineer. We do not climb summits to have a party and we do not let men place our pickets for us.”¹⁰⁰ Most female mountaineers do not want to be seen as “dolled-up cuties” nor do male climbers want to climb with incompetent partners. In Harrington’s case, she felt compelled to aggressively disconnect herself from anything that might be viewed as stereotypically female to gain respect. I wonder if she would have criticized Elizabeth Cowles Partridge—an equal in terms of mountaineering accomplishments—for wearing lipstick on climbs.¹⁰¹

The goal in dubbing Elizabeth Cowles Partridge as a “Feminine Climber” is not to mark her as such and ignore her exceptional climbing abilities. After all, she did not necessarily intend to contribute to this paradox. Cowles should be remembered for her Everest expedition, her first ascents, her mastery of the Tetons, and her astonishing declaration at the age of thirty-eight to “make mountaineering [her] calling.”¹⁰² But what she also did through her natural climbing ability, her love of the sport, and her penchant for femininity, was stick a thorn in both historical and modern conceptions of what it means to be a woman mountaineer.

acted more like a boy than a girl...she was in every respect a wholesome, normal female.” The author intended to reassure his readers that Didrikson was not a lesbian. *From Ware, Still Missing*, 275.

¹⁰⁰ Dorothy Harrington, “Adams and Eves,” *Mazama* December 1975: 13.

¹⁰¹ I have witnessed this tendency in my experience as a mountain climber and guide. Female instructors often hesitate to ask men for help, they try to carry as much weight as male climbers even if they are smaller, and certainly, few of them would ever be caught wearing something as “feminine” as lipstick.

¹⁰² Koerner, 2.

THE BIRTH OF MODERN CLIMBING

I'm going to be one of the best women climbers in America.

--Molly Higgins, 1975.¹⁰³

We were not out to prove that we could do the same as men. We had no plans whatsoever to carry the same loads up the mountain as men are able to in the same amount of time. No, we envisioned an opportunity to an experience, to climb a mountain.

--Grace Hoeman, Mt. McKinley, 1974.¹⁰⁴

Similar to the effects of the “wilderness cult” at the turn of the century, the passage of the Wilderness Act in 1964 significantly influenced the numbers of people—and women in particular—who pursued mountaineering. What once consisted of a small group of extraordinary individuals was now an actual community of climbers, both novices and experts, who entered the mountains with an almost crazed amount of enthusiasm and determination. As a result, the level at which women climbed increased exponentially. Women had been leading climbs since 1929, but now women’s physical abilities and raw climbing skills enabled them to ascend some of the most respected climbs in the world, making them less of an anomaly and more of an integral part of the climbing world.

My previous assessment of Miriam Underhill and Alma Wagen attempted to assert their individual voices as climbers without presumptuously inserting feminist sensibilities even though on some level they had to confront the realities of feminist ideology. It is more difficult—and perhaps not necessary—to do this when examining climbers in the 1960s and 1970s because

¹⁰³ Birkett and Peascod, 116.

along with the growing wilderness movement, the decade was characterized by an outspoken, booming, and pointed feminist movement. Thus, as the most talented climbers of the era made climbing history many of them connected their climbing to the intense movement that enveloped them. But, among the climbing elite, even the most feminist climbers of the decade did not emphasize feminist ideology at the expense of their climbing agendas. For instance, organizations formed such as *Woodswoman U.S.A.* that taught novice women to climb—specifically in an all female environment—because it “empowered” them and was “a great confidence builder.”¹⁰⁵ But the best women mountaineers placed climbing, not confidence building as their priority. Thus, the top athletes rarely climbed with other women because they wanted to climb at the highest level possible, and usually that meant climbing with men. Accomplished women climbers were not willing to give up their goals in order to climb with another woman, even though the literature suggests that women hoped to pursue high levels of mountaineering with other women because they approached climbing differently.¹⁰⁶ More importantly, though the feminist movement was a defining force in the late sixties and early seventies, not all top climbers supported the movement or declared feminist objectives in their own individual climbing. Molly Higgins, the first woman to climb the Nose in Yosemite, and Grace Hoeman, leader of the first all women’s ascent of Mt. McKinley, illustrate the diverse responses among world class climbers to either absorb or reject the modern feminist movement.

It was July 1974, in the Russian High Pamirs, and American Molly Higgins “stooped down against the roar of the avalanche and covered [her] face, remembering everything [she] had ever learned about avalanches.” Her climbing partners were shocked that somehow Higgins survived the slide. Back at base camp she insisted that she still wanted to climb the summit of Mt. Krylenko even though expedition members urged against it. And so, the next day she made her way up the 23,399ft. peak following the large steps kicked in the snow by a male climber.

¹⁰⁴ Grace Hoeman, “Mount Mckinley: The First All-Female Ascent,” *American Alpine Journal* 1971:326

¹⁰⁵ Denise Mitten, *Woodswoman Catalog*, Minneapolis, 1977.

“God damn these steps are so far apart!” she cursed, “Who the hell put them in?” Regardless of the long stride length of her climbing partners, twenty-four hours later, Higgins returned to base camp from the summit ahead of her male teammates. As English expedition member Doug Scott stated, Higgins had “whipped the arses” of her male companions, and was firmly making the point that “she was fit and strong, indeed stronger than they were.” A couple weeks later, on the same international expedition, Higgins was in the base camp of Mt. Lenin when a storm hit and the call came from her Russian role model Elvira Shataeyava. The eight Soviet women on the first all women’s ascent of Mt. Lenin could not descend the mountain and were perishing at 23,400ft, squeezed into the two remaining tents that were being ripped apart by gale force winds. For forty-eight hours Higgins listened to the radio as Shataeyava announced the deaths of her comrades one by one. One last call came late on Dec. 6th and Shataeyava whispered, “The others are all dead—I am too weak to push the button on the radio any longer—this is my last transmission—goodbye.”¹⁰⁷

As a result of these experiences, Molly Higgins announced to her brother, “I’m going to become one of the best women climbers in America.” [Plate 15] Indeed, she did. Perhaps her quest to prove herself as a female climber was due to her liberal education at Colorado College, or growing up with two brothers, or her two years as an instructor for Outward Bound, or her superior athletic abilities, or perhaps it partly stemmed from the feminist climate of the day. Whatever it was, she clearly lined her goals in mountaineering with a feminist border. In the fall of 1974, Higgins determined to climb the most coveted route in the country, The Nose, on Yosemite’s El Capitan, a 3000ft. vertical rock wall. But she recognized that “unless some guy dragged me up it I was going to have to get pretty dammed good at leading 5.9 cracks.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ This is a topic I will expand on in relation to the Annapurna expedition.

¹⁰⁷ All quotes from interview with Higgins. Birkett and Peascod, 114-117.

¹⁰⁸ The number “5.9” refers to a rating system in climbing to assess the difficulty of vertical rock routes. The scale begins at 5.0 (an easy vertical climb with plenty of holds). Now people climb all the way up to 5.14—an overhung climb with almost no features to hold on to—but at the time Molly was climbing no one had climbed anything harder than 5.11. In other words, the fact that Higgins was leading 5.10 consistently in the 1970s meant that she was a superb climber. *From* George Meyers. *Yosemite Climber* (Modesto: Diadem Books, 1979) 62.

Higgins spent the next three years preparing for the ascent, determined to climb The Nose with another woman. Clearly Higgins' efforts to place women on the climbing map were intentional; she did thirty pull-ups a day to ensure that her "arms were as strong as any man's"—and it paid off.¹⁰⁹ She and her climbing partner Barb Eastman made the first women's ascent of The Nose in 1977.

Molly Higgins is an example of a woman mountaineer who climbed with *both* a climber's and a feminist's intentions. Her agenda to be the best woman climber is balanced by her desire for the sport itself. "I climb for three reasons," Higgins wrote in her diary, "To be with nature and appreciate the mountain environment; because of the people (fellow climbers); and just for the climbing."¹¹⁰ In addition to her experience on the Nose, Higgins continued to indulge her appetite for high, difficult routes and established herself among the best by making the first all women's ascent of the Diamond on Long's Peak in Colorado, climbing Mt. McKinley in Alaska, and climbing Makalu and Peak 3 in the Himalayas. Her achievements symbolized a new era in climbing, an era that would consist of both men and women climbing the unimaginable and climbing at similar levels.

In contrast to Molly Higgins, Grace Hoeman did not openly welcome the feminist ideology of the 1960s and 1970s into her mountaineering with open arms. Hoeman led the first all women's ascent of Mt. McKinley (Denali) in 1971. The "Denali Damsels"—as the expedition was aptly named—represented an important first: that American women were capable of expedition style climbing on the most challenging mountains and on their own.¹¹¹ But what Hoeman asserted was that the Damsel's intention was to climb the mountain, not specifically to

¹⁰⁹ Meyers, 63.

¹¹⁰ Birkett and Peascod, 125.

¹¹¹ Expedition style climbing differs from single or multi day ascents on peaks in the Alps or the continental U.S. Members spend weeks, if not months, attempting to climb a single peak and must ferry loads to multiple camps at different elevations on the mountains. It not only requires excellent climbing ability and extraordinary stamina, but these trips are organizational nightmares. Belgian climbing legend Claude Kogan actually set the precedent in 1960 with the first all women's expedition to Cho Oyu in the Himalaya, but unfortunately the team was not successful and Claude died on the mountain. Until the Denali Damsels, there were no American all women's expeditions.

gain the title as the first all-women's ascent of the peak; since most expeditions did not allow women at the time, an all female climb was the Damsel's only ticket to the top.

Dr. Grace Hoeman, an Alaskan local, began climbing in her "backyard" with her climbing husband Dr. Vin Hoeman. Alaskan climbing in the 1960s was very much still true exploration, unlike the mountains of the continental U.S. or the Alps. Climbing was severe and weather was unpredictable. For many years the Hoemans were the inspiration and focal point of mountaineering in Alaska. Polly Welts Kauffman writes, "They were experienced, first class climbers, and with an intimate knowledge of the terrain."¹¹² Hoeman and her husband climbed dozens of peaks in the Brooks Range, The Talkeetnas, and the Chugach. Her name is one of the few household female names scattered throughout the American Alpine Journals of the late 1960s and 1970s. The mountaineering world was shocked when disaster overtook the American Dhaulagiri expedition and an avalanche swept away seven members—including Vin Hoeman. Grace Hoeman was devastated but she refused to be daunted by her loss and continued to climb.

Hoeman was always the only woman on her Alaskan expeditions. She climbed with "modern men" as she called them, who according to Hoeman, "expected their wives and girlfriends to share their work and leisure experiences to the fullest with them and who do not agree with barring women from adventures."¹¹³ Perhaps her particularly "coed" perspective has to do, in part, with the demanding nature of life in Alaska, where women had to share in the labor out of necessity and be able to endure long, harsh winters. Or perhaps—whether or not Hoeman would admit it—the concept of Hoeman's "modern man" is partly due to feminist ideology of the 1960s. Nonetheless, after the death of her husband, Grace felt compelled to initiate her first all women's expedition to climb Mt. McKinley. Yet in an article for the American Alpine Journal, she was inclined to clarify the Denali Damsels' intentions. Even though many expeditions still excluded women from participating, Hoeman viewed their ascent as merely an "opportunity to an

¹¹² Polly Welts Kauffman, National Parks and the Women's Voice: A History (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996) 127.

experience, to climb a mountain” as noted in the epigraph. In fact, Hoeman explicitly criticized elements within the feminist movement. She wrote:

Continued unjustified discrimination against women in some endeavors of society led to the formation of “Women’s Liberation” groups, which have gone to the extreme of demanding total equality—something obviously impossible, since woman is so different from man. These groups, provocative and almost militant at times, have done little to place the problem in its true perspective...Our first all-female McKinley expedition was earmarked as a “Women’s Liberation” project.¹¹⁴

“Liberation,” Hoeman assured “was not what we six had in mind at all when we organized this trip.” Clearly “women’s liberation” was only one part of the feminist movement and a mountain climb made of an all-female team may still embody aspects of a feminist vision.¹¹⁵ But Hoeman’s disassociation from (or backlash to) feminist links is reflective of the same concerns that I have raised throughout this thesis. The (male) climbing community—and American cultural norms—labeled the women’s expedition as a feminist ascent because it could not conceive that a group of women would want to take the risks to climb such an ambitious mountain for the climbing, for the challenge, and for the “experience” of it. But as we have seen, women can and do climb mountains for such reasons. Nor could the climbing world conceive that women had the ability to be successful, thus assuming that the women on the climb were out to “prove that [they] could do the same as men.” One response to Hoeman’s assertions could be that she was afraid to make any feminist connections in such an overwhelming male sport, a common fear among women in predominately male arenas.¹¹⁶ This could be true. But we must also recognize the other possibility that Hoeman did not fit into the same archetype of

¹¹³ Hoeman, 326.

¹¹⁴ Hoeman, 326.

¹¹⁵ Not all of the Denali Damsels worked as hard as Hoeman to disconnect themselves from feminist aims. Arlene Blum—who would lead the all-female Annapurna climb seven years later—would emerge towards the end of the decade as a strong feminist voice in women’s climbing. In fact, she immediately joined the Denali Damsels in 1971 because she read a notice that women would be accepted for standard Mt. McKinley expeditions “to assist in cooking chores...[but] will not be admitted on the climbs.” *From*, Kauffman, 127.

¹¹⁶ This “backlash” to feminist ideology became more apparent in climbing during the 1980s.

the liberal, feminist mountaineer that many of her climbing sisters, like Molly Higgins, represented in the 1970s.¹¹⁷

Regardless of Molly Higgins' and Grace Hoeman's differing views about the union of climbing and feminism, both women demonstrated that women could climb at the highest levels without men. But the 1960s and 1970s still did not produce enough expert women climbers for single gendered climbing to be a common, feasible opportunity. Most of these women chose to climb with men so that they could climb the most difficult routes. But as previously mentioned, there was a common desire among women climbers to climb with other women. This was very much a trend of the period in which women in multiple fields recognized the absence of other women, be it in the corporate world, public office, mainstream athletics, or climbing. The possibility was emerging that climbing with women was actually a unique experience from climbing with men because women might perceive climbing—or even climb—differently and still climb the most challenging mountains. For instance, Molly Higgins described a two-year period during which she and her climbing partner Barb Eastman prepared for their pioneer ascent. “It required a great deal of patience,” she wrote, “because we waited for one another and we really nurtured one another along.”¹¹⁸ The concept of “nurturing” was not generally associated with standard climbing metaphors which tended to muster more masculine images of independence and even conquest. What Higgins and Hoeman established was the potential for women to climb as well as their male-counterparts and still climb as women. This possibility would take shape throughout the seventies emerging by the end of the decade as a viable option and culminating in the all women's ascent of Annapurna in 1978, led by one of the Denali Damsels, Arlene Blum.

¹¹⁷ Sadly, Hoeman was killed in an avalanche like her husband two years after her successful ascent of Denali. Her eulogy read that “Grace died as she had enjoyed most to live—in the mountains; and one cannot wish for more than that.” *From Williams*, 213.

¹¹⁸ Birkett and Peascod, 127.

ANNAPURNA: A METAPHOR FOR THE FUTURE

The question everyone asks mountain climbers is "Why?" And when they learn about the lengthy and difficult preparation involved, they ask it even more insistently. For us, the answer was much more than, "because it is there." We had all experienced the exhilaration ...of the heights, and now we were on our way to an ultimate objective for a climber—the world's tenth highest peak. But as women, we faced another challenge. We had to believe in ourselves enough to make the attempt in spite of social convention and two hundred years of climbing history in which women were usually relegated to the sidelines.

--Arlene Blum, Annapurna, 1978¹¹⁹

In mountaineering, climbing an 8000 meter peak (over 26,000ft.) in the Himalaya is analagous to riding in the Kentucky Derby, racing in the Indy 500, or playing in the Superbowl. In 1978, the first all-women's expedition entered the world-series of mountain climbing by ascending the 26,545ft. Annapurna I.¹²⁰ This all-female ascent, led by American climbing legend Arlene Blum, would come to represent a unique, highly successful, women's climbing experience and become a model that would leave a permanent impression on the climbing world. [Plate 16] During the expedition, the ambitions of exceptional individual climbers converged with the broader spectrum of something both vividly female and feminist. But Annapurna and the summit-oriented expedition members did not become lost behind a label as a feminist whim as Grace Hoeman's Denali expedition had. The expedition is viewed very much as a "women's" climb but it is equally revered as an outstanding milestone in climbing history by both men and

¹¹⁹ Arlene Blum, Annapurna: A Woman's Place (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1980) xi..

¹²⁰ To give you a sense of how high that is, commercial airlines usually cruise around 28,000ft. If someone was taken to the summit of Annapurna from sea level in a plane (without weeks of slow acclimatization) and deposited on the summit without oxygen, she would die almost immediately..

women due to the sheer nature of an 8,000 meter peak. Unlike Miriam Underhill's Grepón, which "disappeared as a climb" after two women climbed it, Annapurna survived the women's curse and still remains one of the most challenging peaks in the world.

Perhaps the balance achieved on Annapurna stems from the fact that vision alone cannot carry someone to the top of an 8,000 meter summit; it requires refined skill, unbounded determination, and superlative physical ability. Until Annapurna, only eight women had even climbed an 8,000 meter peak and they were all members of overwhelmingly male expeditions. Thus, while Annapurna would ultimately come to change the entire nature of women's climbing—contributing, in many ways, to a feminist ideal—more importantly it proved that women were serious mountain climbers, had the skills to climb the world's highest mountains, and could be successful at it. As Blum wrote in her account of the climb, *Annapurna: A Woman's Place*, "We did not organize the Annapurna expedition to prove that women could climb high mountains. We already knew that before we began. But the publicized success of the adventure brought that message to people all over the world."¹²¹ Annapurna demonstrated the prospect that feminism and mountaineering did not have to be mutually exclusive.

Regardless of the fact that the Annapurna members were among the best climbers in the world, Blum was denied support from the American Alpine Club for two years. This was not a new predicament. Blum was introduced early in her climbing career to the issue of whether or not women can or should climb high mountains. In 1969, Blum applied to join a climb in Afghanistan. She received the following letter from the expedition leader who was "sorry as hell."

Not too easy a letter to write as your prior work in Peru demonstrates your ability to go high...But one woman and nine men would seem to be unpleasant high on the open ice, not only in excretory situations, but in the easy masculine companionship which is so vital a part of the joy of an expedition.¹²²

¹²¹ Blum, 7.

¹²² Blum, 1.

The next year she received the notice that women would be allowed to join base camp and “cook” on Mt. McKinley climbs but would not be permitted to climb the mountain, thus her impetus for joining the Denali Damsels. When she inquired about why women would not be allowed to climb, she was informed that “women are not strong enough to carry their share of the loads and lack the emotional stability to withstand the psychological stresses of a high-altitude climb.” But as Annapurna would come to demonstrate, this was simply not so.¹²³

Despite the lack of support, Arlene Blum managed to get the American Alpine Club’s approval and in August of 1978, ten women headed to the Himalaya wearing expedition t-shirts that read “A Woman’s Place is on Top,” a humorous indication that a feminist undercurrent flowed through the expedition from the beginning. By the time the women were finally ready to leave Kathmandu and trek toward the mountain, it took one and a half months for a party to reach the summit. After two weeks of nearly impenetrable forests, the women finally reached base camp at 14,500ft., an elevation that is higher than Mt. Rainier. From base camp the women had to establish five camps along the route, placing Camp 5 at 25,000ft. in order to be in position for the summit attempt. [*Plates 17 and 18*] For almost a month they shuttled loads, climbed vertical ice pitches, crossed avalanche paths, placed ropes along the route, and allowed their bodies to acclimatize to the oxygen deficient air. There was no mistaking their intent; they were there to climb the mountain. Finally on October 15th two climbers from the expedition stood on the summit becoming the first Americans and the first women to do so.

There is no doubt that from the outset these women—and certainly Arlene Blum—aligned themselves within a feminist framework, wanting very much to “further women’s climbing and what women could attain.”¹²⁴ But the Annapurna climb was able to assert these goals and concurrently show that women were driven by the same forces as any climber—i.e.

¹²³ Sir Edmund Hillary, the first person to climb Mt. Everest also had a strong opinion about a woman’s place on high-altitude expeditions. He wrote that “the problems and dissensions in multinational expeditions pale into insignificance compared with those that can be brought about by a single woman in a party.” But not all men believed that women did not belong on the high mountains. Maurice Herzog, the first person to climb Annapurna in 1950, supported the women’s ascent outright, claiming that it “commands the utmost respect and admiration.” *From* Blum, x.

men—to climb mountains, even if women approached climbs differently. There was no doubt about the seriousness of their intent. On August 16th, Alison Chadwick and Vera Watson died high on the mountain as a second summit team. Chadwick was the top female alpine climber during the period and had recently done a first ascent on Gasherbrum II without oxygen, leading all of the most difficult rock and ice pitches on that climb. When Watson and Chadwick chose to make the attempt, Blum was uncertain about a second try but did not prohibit these women from pursuing their goal. Furthermore, Chadwick did not want to climb the standard route but rather a more aesthetic, difficult rock climb. Blum notes, “The nature of our climb—using both Sherpas and oxygen—made it seem a lesser accomplishment to Chadwick; it would not rival Gasherbrum unless she could climb a new route.” Even though their climb would have been only the fourth successful climb of Annapurna out of thirteen previous expeditions, these women still wanted to break new ground and pursue further excellence in climbing. Alison Chadwick told Blum over the radio that “when you come along on an expedition you make a decision to take risks.”¹²⁵ When two days had passed and Arlene Blum did not receive a call from Camp 5, they sent a search party. Two Sherpas saw their bodies at 23,000ft. where they must have fallen over one thousand feet down a vertical ice face to their deaths. Unlike conventional perceptions, Alison Chadwick and Vera Watson were willing to take risks—the ultimate risk—for their climbing.

Therefore, it is evident that the Annapurna agenda was no less “success” oriented than any other expedition in mountaineering history. But there were important differences in the Annapurna expedition from the classic mountaineering expedition that led to their success, and in a distinctly “female” approach. Feminist Psychologist Carol Gilligan, in her widely accepted book *In a Different Voice*, explains some differences in the way in which men and women relate within their own gender groups. She suggests that women tend to be more “relational” while men

¹²⁴ Blum, 240.

¹²⁵ Blum, 206.

tend toward “individuation.”¹²⁶ I am not suggesting that female psychology or feminist ideology actually *causes* women to climb differently from men—after all, steep terrain and the techniques needed to negotiate it are the same regardless of gender—but there is more to climbing mountains than rock and ice. On a three-month expedition some of the greatest challenges are personal, involving questions of motivation, psychological endurance, and interpersonal tests of a group’s ability to work together. Maurice Herzog, leader of the first Annapurna ascent in 1950, told Arlene Blum that had his teammates not reached the summit when they did, “the accumulated psychological strain would have forced them to abandon the attempt.”¹²⁷ Thus, finessing the innards of group dynamics becomes a kind of expedition “technique.”

Arlene Blum suggests that as a group of women climbers, their ability to relate to one another and make collective decisions was fundamental to their success and different from the way in which men may relate to one another on expeditions. The possibility that the style in which women work together on a high mountain climb could be an asset rather than a liability was a new concept.¹²⁸ Blum writes, “The questions of who will lead and who will make up the summit team...invariably cause problems on large expeditions.” But when Blum had to make this decision on the Annapurna climb, she did not do it alone as the expedition leader in a hierarchical manner, which was the common practice in Himalayan climbing. Instead, she held a group meeting to determine who would do the lead climbing and who would climb in the less prestigious support roles. The women were implementing a more collective, “female” model to achieve the same end. According to Carol Gilligan, based on her research with children during developmental stages regarding conflict resolution, boys often set up a “hierarchical ordering to resolve conflict between desire and duty,” whereas girls “describe a network of relationships.” Thus, both male and female climbing teams may equally emphasize reaching the summit, but

¹²⁶ Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982) 8.

¹²⁷ Blum, 117.

¹²⁸ “Blum was well aware that one of the reoccurring doubts about women’s expeditions had been whether women could work together as well as men.” *From Mazel*, 19.

their methods to that goal can vary greatly. In Blum's opinion the summit teams were strengthened by the fact that the climbers voiced their opinions and "had not simply buried their hurt feelings and gone marching stoically up the mountain."¹²⁹

Despite Annapurna's example, not all women climbed within the same collective, team-oriented framework. Regardless of their gender, many female climbers would not succeed in the more communicative, group oriented, "female" method of expeditioning that Arlene Blum suggests, and of course, not all men resign to the presumed hierarchical "male" model. But Annapurna opened a door to the possibility that women could climb on their own and that they could climb without conforming to a traditional paradigm. Thus, women who were hesitant to be the only female on an expedition now had an alternative to continue climbing at the highest margin possible. As a result, the number of climbing's female elite has exploded since the 1980s. Annapurna meant that women's individual climbing needs and feminist ideals could converge without being lost in David Mazel's so-called "feminist utopia."

Finally, it is important to recognize that Annapurna's success did not eradicate the tension that can arise when trying to simultaneously maintain excellence in women's climbing and adopt a feminist vision. (This is a tension that can either be perceived by the climber or by the climbing community depending on the context). For instance, the goals to increase the numbers of women who climb or to use climbing as a tool for women's development are both essential to the future of women in mountaineering. But if those efforts are not conceived of thoughtfully, they can greatly influence the experience of committed female climbers. Arlene Blum writes, "To include unqualified women as climbing members of an expedition does a disservice to both the individual climber and to the cause of women's climbing." The problem is

¹²⁹ Blum, 116. Another testimony to the differences in this expedition is Arlene Blum's book itself. The book has a more open, inclusive feel than its typical male counterpart which often tell gallant stories of near death experiences up high on the mountain. Missing from her text are traditional photos of the leader going heroically upward, and in their place we find group photos of team members working, talking, and climbing together. Blum also includes photographs, stories, and names of Sherpas, whose photographs are reproduced in the same size and displayed just as prominently as those of the western members of the expedition—an indication of the truly egalitarian elements of the climb

that instead of judging that particular individual as an unqualified mountaineer, assumptions can be made about female mountaineers in general.

This tension between climbing “to climb” and climbing for an alternative, feminist goal is evident in more recent years as well, and in some ways, is a byproduct of the 1970s feminist movement. Arlene Blum would strongly emphasize that while Annapurna was indeed a feminist climb, it was more intently about a group of experienced climbers who wanted to climb the mountain. This assertion is in contrast to the highly publicized, feminist “Climb for the Cure” on Denali in 1997. This event included ten breast cancer survivors who tried to climb the mountain to raise money for research. The fund-raiser was a success and resulted in life changing experiences for those women. But the only skilled female mountaineer on the climb was a single female guide; the rest of the guides were men. Thus, while “Climb for the Cure” was a remarkable event, as a high-profile, feminist endeavor it represented a perception of women’s climbing that often exists—that women must climb for an alternative agenda other than climbing itself. That was not the goal of the Annapurna expedition. Despite the fact that elite climbers may support the feminist premise of an expedition such as the Denali breast cancer climb, unskilled women outfitted in expensive technical gear and guided by men does a lot for breast cancer, not for the image of world class mountaineers. As a result, what can emerge is an inclination among some of climbing’s best women to disassociate from anything feminist.

BEYOND ANNAPURNA

So what gives Lynn Hill her world class reputation? To begin with, she is unequivocally the best woman climber in the United States—or according to Alan Watts, “maybe the best climber period.”

--John Steiger, Climbing Magazine, 1987¹³⁰

Annapurna paved the way to modern women’s climbing, and what followed was an astonishing increase in the number of women who climbed and in the number of women climbers who were at the cutting edge of the sport. In 1982, there was an all women’s expedition to K2 and in 1989 an American women’s climb of Pumori in the Himalaya (*see plate 1*). Stacy Alison became the first American woman to climb Mt. Everest in 1989, and the list goes on. Climbing exploded into a new era where women were no longer on the margins. The birth of “sport climbing”—short, anaerobic, strength intensive climbs—made climbing more accessible and was ideal for women’s small frames but high strength to weight ratio. Unlike in mountain climbing, women could rely on their physique rather than stamina, finesse rather than brute force, and would not have to carry immense loads for days at a time. Climbing became a “sport” in all senses of the word—it was no longer determined only by the epic mountain experience. But the advent of “sport climbing” did not preclude significant developments in women’s mountain climbing. On the contrary, women pushed boundaries in the mountains beyond imagination alongside their male companions. In this history I have depicted ten American women who were at the top level of mountaineering from 1890 to 1980. Yet, in order to do any justice to climbers

in the past two decades, I would have to describe ten more women for the eighties alone and countless more for the nineties.

In many ways, the pioneers highlighted in this thesis persisted long enough that by the 1980s women had achieved enough recognition in climbing that a woman, Lynn Hill, could be seen as the “best climber period.” This is not to say that women have overtaken the climbing world. As Lynn Hill noted in an article for *Climbing*, “There is still a lot less importance and prestige placed on women in climbing, no matter what your ability is.”¹³¹ Only thirty percent of the community is women and only about ten percent of the top athletes in climbing are female. But comparatively speaking this is a marked improvement. John Steiger, author and editor of the women’s issue of *Climbing* magazine felt that the increase in numbers of female climbers was due, in part, to “the exposure of women who could serve as role models.”¹³² Certainly Annapurna served part of that function. Today women are climbing simply outrageous mountains of rock, ice, or both and continue to redefine limits in the sport. [Plate 19]

While Annapurna set a precedent for all-female climbing experiences that would increase opportunities for role-modeling, a certain pressure has emerged. Liz Klobusicky, a member of the Annapurna expedition in 1986, climbed the south face of the Fou with a male friend who happened to be a mountain guide. She chose not to write an article about her climb because she was concerned it would be viewed as “illegitimate” despite the fact that she and her partner led alternate pitches of equally difficult ratings without exception.¹³³ Thus, an ironic twist has risen out of the all-female climbing experience which suggests that the only way women climbers can “prove their abilities” is by climbing with other women so that they do not risk being seen as

¹³⁰ John Steiger, “Lynn Hill” *Climbing* August 1987: 49.

¹³¹ Steiger, “Lynn Hill,” 51.

¹³² John Steiger, “Profiles,” *Climbing* August 1987: 83.

¹³³ A “pitch” is approximately a full rope length, (165 feet). A mountain climb can be several (30+) pitches. It is common practice for two “leaders” of equivalent ability to switch off leading a route every other pitch. For further clarification on leading, refer to footnote 80.

“passengers who are taken up routes by their boyfriends.”¹³⁴ Unfortunately this fuels a common trend for women to excessively compete with or compare themselves to one another. Yet, it would be easy to lament about all of the challenges women face in climbing because the reality is that women have swallowed some form of adversity since Julia Archibald Holmes climbed Pikes Peak in 1858. But women keep climbing, they keep achieving remarkable accomplishments, and a large portion of the climbing community regards women’s efforts in climbing as a fundamental component of modern mountaineering. Thus, despite pressures, the post-Annapurna era of women’s climbing has propelled itself into a new, progressive phase—one that will require a history of its own.

¹³⁴ Bonny Mason, “Ideas” *Climbing* August 1987: 44; Another common theme in the post-1970s feminist era was for radical feminist climbers to criticize women who climbed with men for not being independent, feminist “hard women”. A more recent example in the January 1999 issue of *Climbing* printed an article about Bobbi Bensman’s “boob job”. She is one of the top female sport climbers in the world and was criticized by more “liberated” climbers for buying into male expectations of the “sexy” female sport climber (see plate 14). Bensman’s response was essentially for the women to stop worrying about her and start climbing.

CONCLUSION

*You never conquer a mountain.
You stand on the summit for a few moments.
Then the wind blows your footprints away.*

--Anonymous¹³⁵

How do I feel? Partly an incredible sense of relief because I don't have to walk uphill anymore. And a sense of accomplishment for myself and the whole team. We've done what we set out to do—there's no point higher. But mostly, I know that it's 3:30pm and we have to make tracks to get down before dark.

--Irene Miller, Annapurna, 1978¹³⁶

The summit of a mountain, the pinnacle of a climber's ambition, the moment that any mountaineer dreams of with an almost crazed amount of anticipation, is simply a *moment*, a single moment that the alpine winds blow away when a climber descends. The mountain-top is not an "end" in itself. It is the act of climbing, the memory of the experience, the wild beauty, and the personal fulfillment that inspires women to continue to "walk uphill." As the epigraph notes, when Irene Miller reached Annapurna's summit she declared, "We've done what we set out to do." But Miller's moment of vertical satisfaction ended as she recognized that her mountain climb was not yet over. Miller still had more to accomplish by returning safely from her ascent; and she still had other mountains to climb. Her summit, her goal, and what she thought was her "end," became overshadowed by the magnitude of other possibilities.

I, too, have accomplished what I initially set out to do. By highlighting some of mountaineering's greatest women, by establishing the varied nature of a women's climbing

¹³⁵ Blum, 211.

¹³⁶ Blum, 214.

history, by exploring why these women climbed, and by exposing some of the challenges they faced in the sport, I have re-introduced—at least some women—into mountaineering history, and in the process perhaps redefined it. But the end of my thesis does not mean that this mountain has been conquered either. There are still many unknown women in climbing's history and the depth of their experiences undiscovered. And certainly, there are still more questions that need to be asked about the formidable nature of being female in a male reality. As quoted in the introduction to this thesis, Susan Rogers maintained: "that the history of women climber's is silent...is no surprise...as with all women's studies, women have to be sought after, rediscovered." Thus, though more research is still needed in the world of women's climbing, perhaps their history is not as silent as it was before this work.

According to Susan Rogers, most modern female climbers bemoan the relative lack of women in climbing. She wrote that in order "to increase female participation...we need a clearer history of women who could serve as role models."¹³⁷ On some level, that was my motivation in writing a history of American female mountaineers. But beyond my own personal investment, why write a history of women climbers? Because their story is representative of something larger in both women's history and climbing history. Women's active presence in the sport has both revealed and questioned the way in which women have adjusted to the traditionally male world of mountaineering and how, in turn, mountaineering has reacted to women. It is this relationship that has created such a diverse—and at times inconsistent—history among women mountaineers because not all women climb for the same reasons nor do all women perceive their position as women climbers in the same way. Feminism in particular is an uncertain part of climbing history because the larger mountaineering community historically has not had the ability to conceive that women climb to climb, either as feminists or not. Women do not need a singular "ism" to entice them to seek mountains and to take the same risks that men do in their quest for the principles that have characterized the myth of the American male. Thus, while someone like Alma Wagen

confronted her gender as irrelevant to her climbing, Molly Higgins perceived it as essential and used her climbing as a metaphor for feminist goals.

Upon completing this thesis I assert four thematic conclusions that address the significance of this work and of women's climbing history. The first conclusion I have already alluded to which acknowledges the necessity to uncover the stories of climbing's heroines in order to establish a viable foundation and a group of role models for modern climbers. Beyond the fact that these women's achievements are extraordinary, by understanding the lenses through which they climbed, we can begin to see patterns in the types of issues that women have faced in the sport. In other words it is important to realize that for over a century elite women climbers have described their mountaineering with the same passion and seriousness of intent that they do today, and that the desire for high places is not a new inclination among women. It is equally important to recognize that the same uneasiness with "feminist" associations that affects some women climbers in the 1990s made Grace Hoeman squirm thirty years earlier. Thus, there is a relevant history to the questions and/or challenges women climbers experience. In other words, to recognize that some women did not view their mountaineering as a feminist act, is just as valid for the modern climber as to understand that some women did; then it is left to the climber to ask the question "why?".

The second conclusion I came to is that women are an integral part of mountaineering history. In other words, their story is not separate from, but a part of the broader context of climbing history. The fact that Miriam Underhill began climbing *en cordee feminine* greatly influenced the numbers of women who climbed, the degree of difficulty at which women could climb, and the way in which women were perceived within the sport. The notion that women could actually *lead* climbs was an unimaginable concept just a few years before Miriam Underhill began leading. As a result women began making first ascents—not just "female" first ascents—and in turn pushed the envelope of mountaineering for the entire community. Annapurna is

¹³⁷ Steiger, "Profiles," 83.

another example of the way in which women have impacted the sport. Arlene Blum recognized the more collective, interactive, and communicative qualities of the all women's ascent of the mountain as distinct from the characteristics of all male expeditions and as essential to the success of their climb. The effects of this are evident in modern day mountaineering. For instance, the National Outdoor Leadership School—the organization I instruct for—is historically viewed as a skill-based organization. In other words we emphasize “hard skills” such as rock climbing systems, skiing technique, mountaineering, paddling skills, etc. In more recent years the concept of “soft skills” has emerged. Soft skills include communication, leadership, group dynamics, teaching ability, and expedition behavior. Until the late 1980s, the term “soft skills” was not even a part of mountaineering language, but modern guides—male or female—are expected to excel at both hard and soft skills and to teach both categories to their students. There is no doubt that a connection exists between the increase of female mountaineers in the 1980s and the growing emphasis on soft skills.

The third conclusion I determined was that the history of women's mountaineering is important for women's history in general. First there is the apparent connection between the course of women's mountaineering and the patterns of the feminist movement and feminist ideals in the United States. That Fanny Bullock Workman climbed in a post-Victorian age is not necessarily a coincidence or that Elizabeth Cowles Partridge enjoyed the domain of femininity—and lacked an apparent feminist identity—correlates with the trends of the period in which she climbed, the 1940s and 1950s. This does not mean that either of these women did not make individual choices about their mountaineering, nor does it indicate that their climbing was *determined* by their environments. What it does suggest is the obvious: women were *influenced* by their environments. Certainly women in other male spheres asked similar questions and confronted similar issues that female mountaineers encountered. Despite the fact that many mountaineers lacked a conscious intention to represent something grander in the name of

women's pursuits, there is no doubt that their choice and ability to excel in climbing symbolized that women could enter and succeed in a male domain.

My final conclusion is the thread of this entire thesis: women mountaineers climb because they love to climb mountains. Regardless of feminist inclinations, regardless of their perception of their experience as women, they are climbers and they are sometimes drawn to the mountains for the same reasons that men are. As obvious as this statement may seem, historically it has been a difficult concept for climbers and non-climbers to conceptualize. Often, one can not understand why women would be compelled at all to risk their lives up high—men, yes, but women? Inconceivable. Therefore, while I have lined the history of these climbers with the complexities of their experiences as women, at the core of all their stories are the voices of passionate mountaineers, such as Eleanor Davis who slept in the rain in order to make one more sacred ascent. As Maurice Herzog declared at the end of his book *Annapurna*, “There are other mountains in the lives of men.” And in the lives of women too.

Plate 1: American Women's Pumori Expedition 1989



Plate 2: Patagonia, Argentina

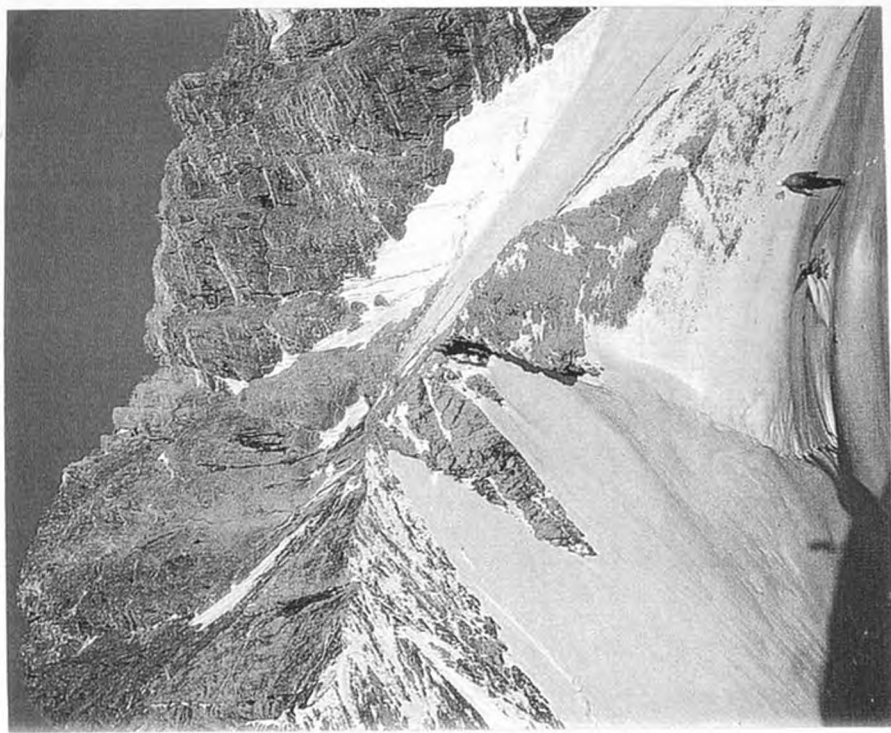




Plate 3: Mlle. Margeurite d'Angeville. Mt. Blanc 1838



Plate 4: Annie Peck, circa 1910



Plate 5: Fanny Bullock Workman in the Himalaya 1898



Plate 6: Fanny Bullock Workman in a crevasse



Plate 7: Fanny Bullock Workman in the Karakorum 1907



Plate 8: Fay Fuller, Mt. Rainier 1890



Plate 9: Fay Fuller 1900

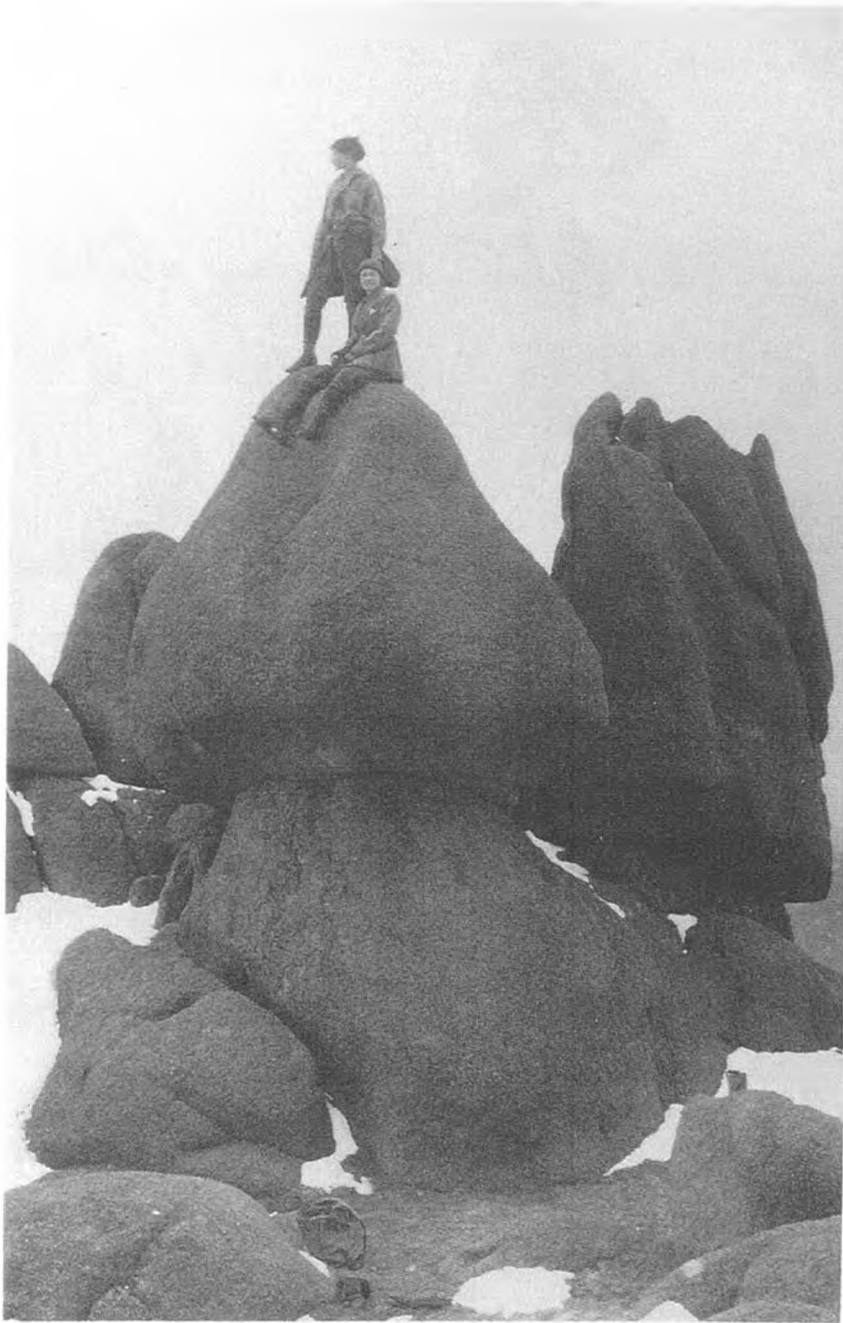


Plate 10: Eleanor Davis in Colorado 1914

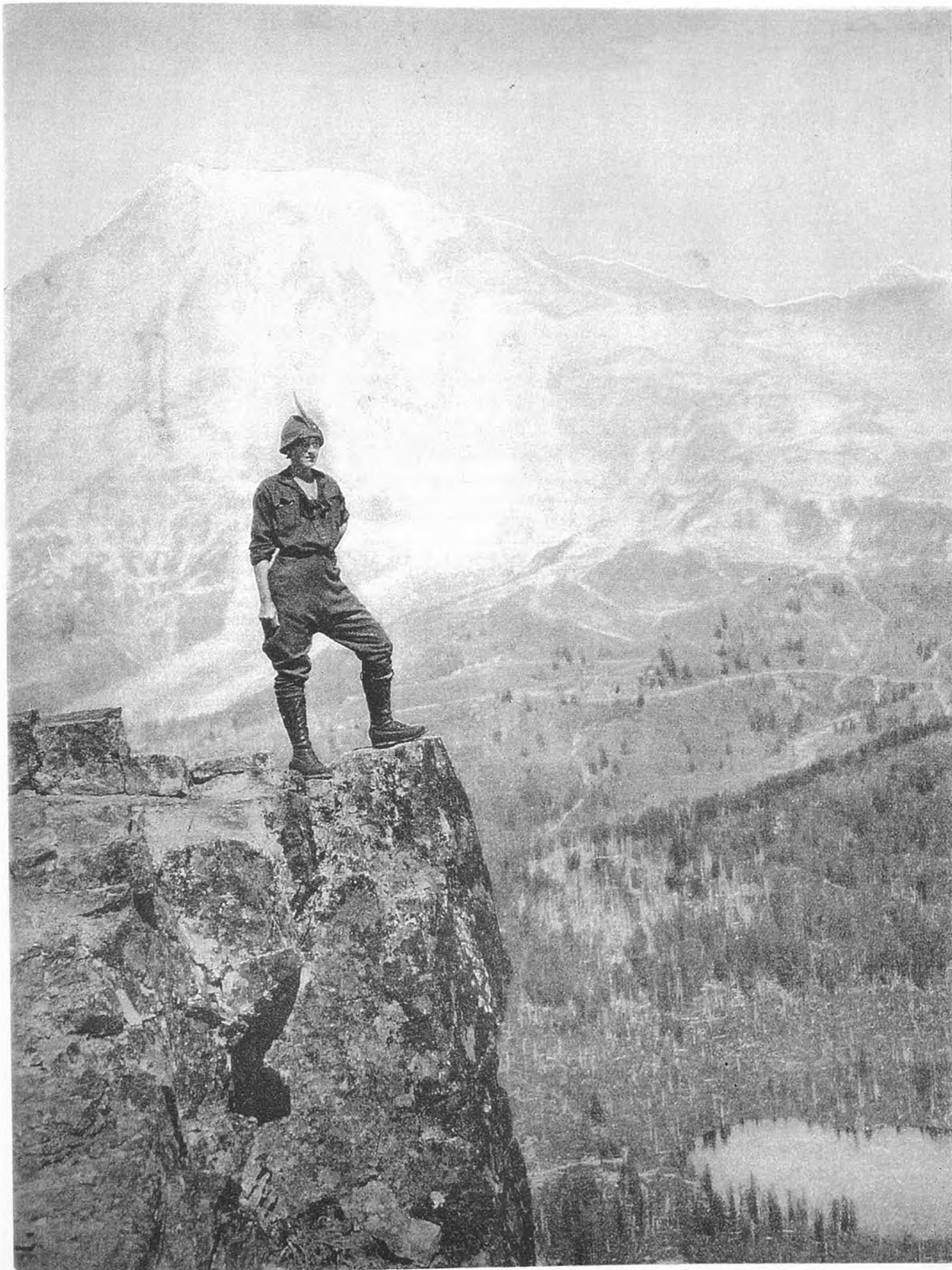


Plate 11: Alma Wagen, Mt. Rainier National Park 1918



Plate 12: Miriam Underhill in the Alps 1928



Plate 13: Elizabeth Cowles Partridge in the Tetons 1941

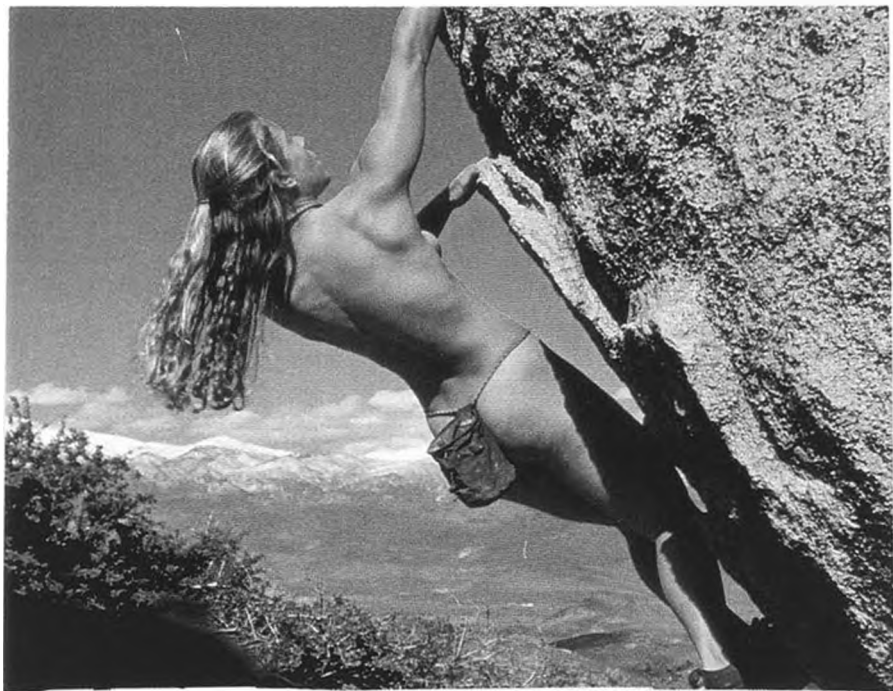


Plate 14: Advertisement from Climbing Magazine 1998

Plate 15: Molly Higgins 1983



Plate 16: Arlene Blum, Annapurna expedition leader 1978



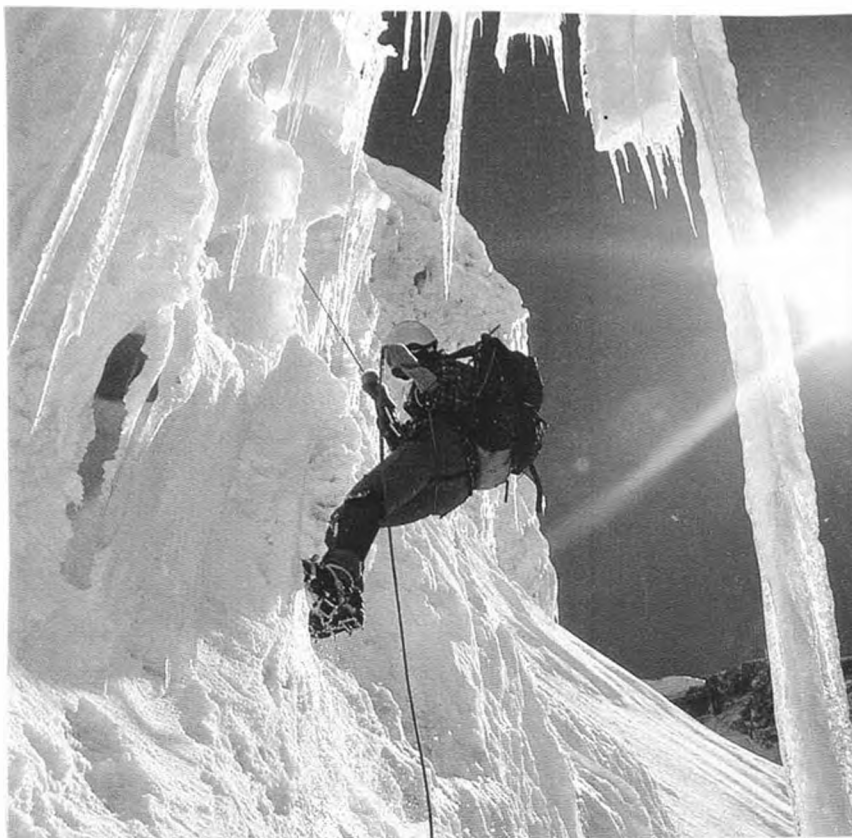


Plate 17: Annapurna expedition member descending an ice face

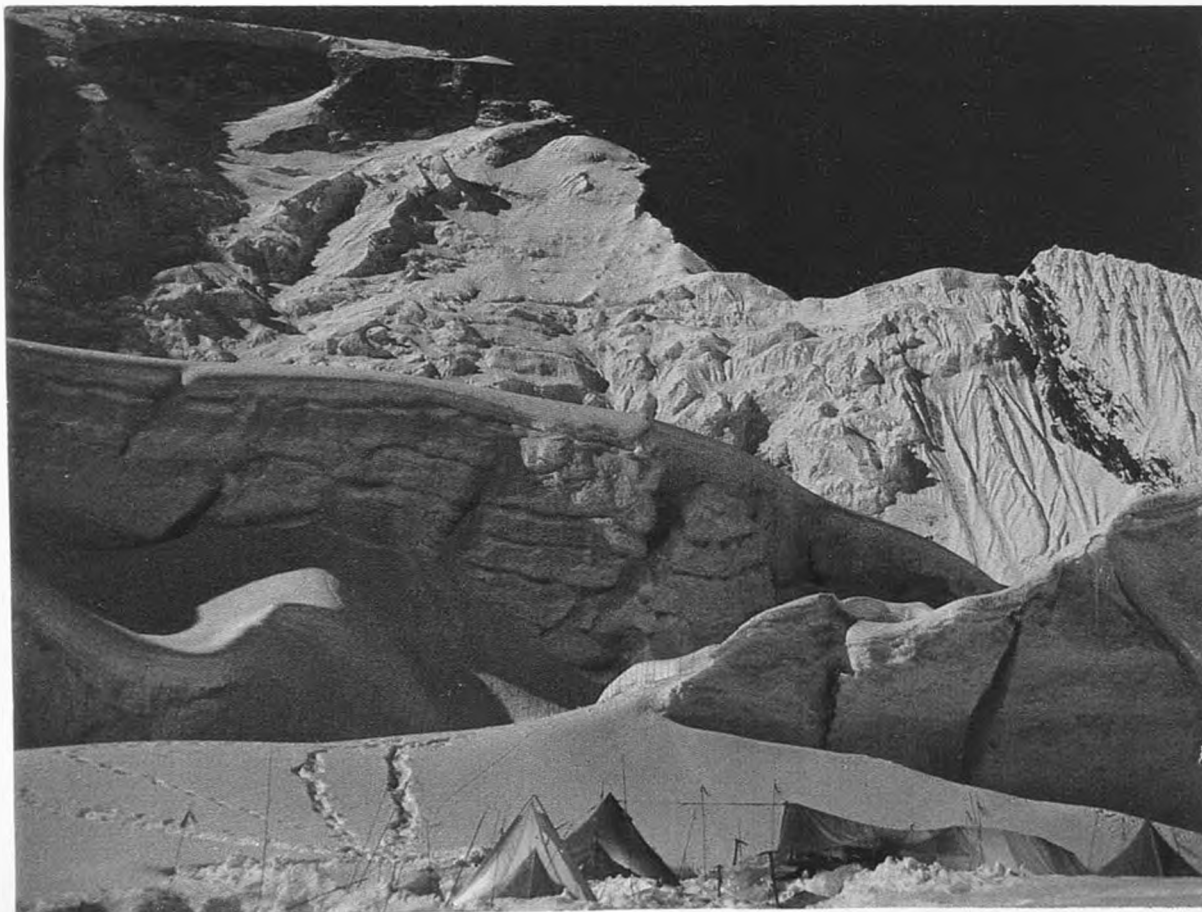


Plate 18: Annapurna, Himalaya

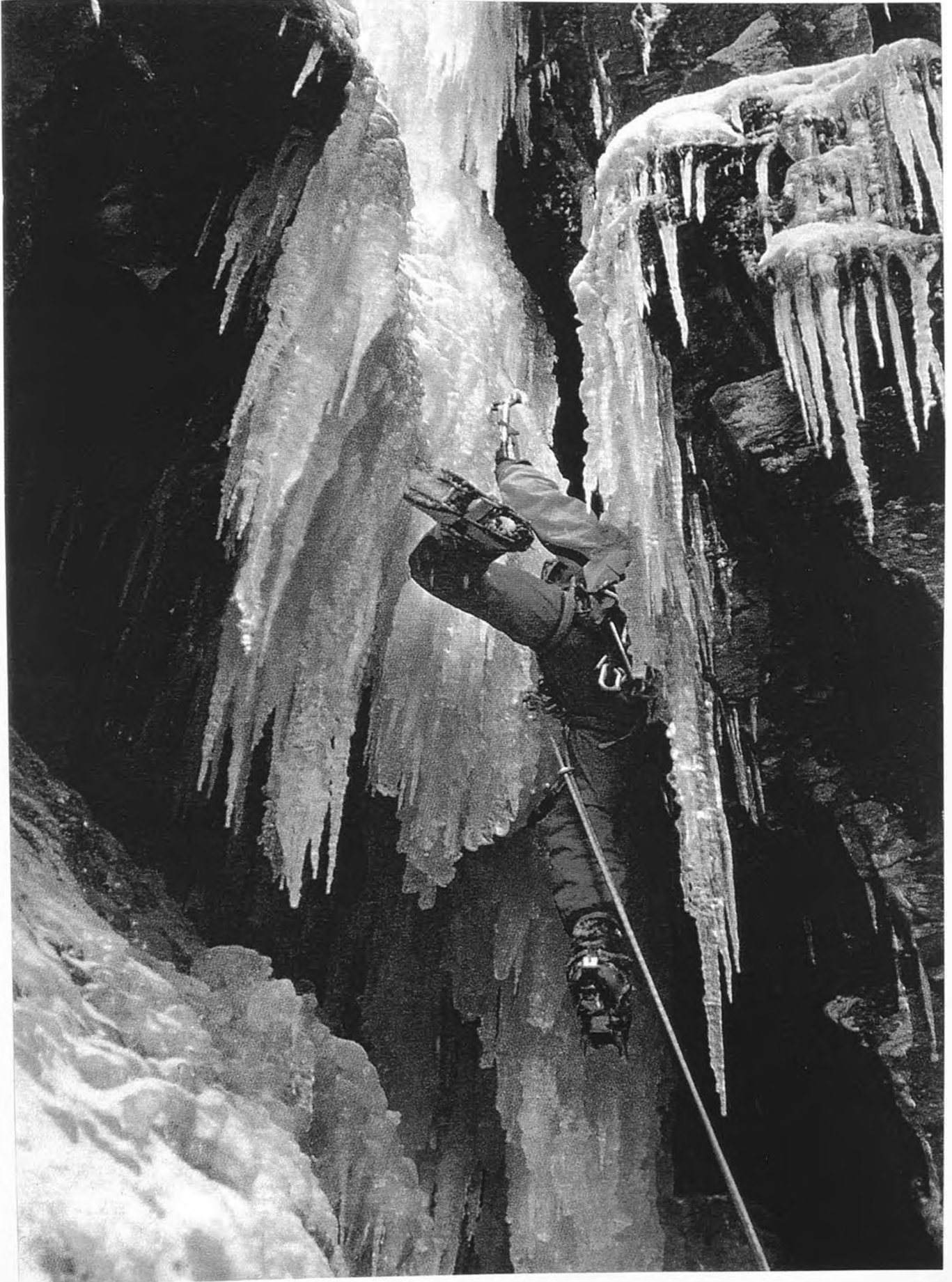


Plate 19: Female ice climber 1998

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