Guide to the Stanford Alpine Club Oral History Interviews SC1018

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January 2011
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The Stanford Alpine Club was one of America's prominent college climbing clubs. Its identity was forged in the crucible of Yosemite Valley's smooth, steep granite. Members made important contributions to the development of modern Yosemite rock climbing technique and helped carry the lessons learned to the world's great ranges. Coeducational membership was another factor distinguishing the SAC from the longer-established and better-known eastern clubs, and a tradition of "manless climbing" dated from the club's 1946 inaugural year.

Through the summer of 1946, Larry Taylor worked on plans to form a climbing club at Stanford when he returned for graduate work in civil engineering. Then in August he chanced upon Al Baxter buying hobnails in the campus shoe shop, giving himself away as a mountain climber. "Though he had never done any roped climbing," wrote Taylor, "Al was at once enthusiastic about my plan; indeed it was his enthusiasm which had a great deal to do with the actual carrying out of the idea." The third founding member, Fritz Lippmann, the only experienced climber of the group, Taylor had met during Sierra Club Rock Climbing Section outings.

The personal connections and corporate traditions that bound one class to another became the SAC's strength. One such connection was between founder Fritz Lippmann and Dave Harrah, and then between Harrah and members who would become club leaders into the 1950s, including Jon Lindbergh and Nick Clinch.

Guide to the Stanford Alpine Club
Oral History Interviews SC1018
Lehman, and Rowland Tabor were examples of the club’s ability to attract, train, and retain a nucleus of leaders that would guide it through the fifties in the form established by the founders, strengthened by Harrah, and carried on by a cadre of new club presidents with a shared vision and commitment to the club.

Women climbers had distinguished themselves beginning in the club’s first year when Mary Sherrill and Freddy Hubbard became the third and fourth women to climb to the top of Higher Cathedral Spire in Yosemite Valley. Later Hubbard made the first ascent by a woman of the Washington Column Direct Route. The club’s tradition of "manless" climbing dated from 1947. In 1952 Jane Noble, Mary Kay Pottinger, Gail Fleming, and Bea Vogel made ascents of Mt. Moran, the North Ridge of Middle Teton, and the Southwest Ridge of Symmetry Spire. In 1965 Irene Beardsley and Sue Swedlund made the first all-woman climb of the awesome North Face of the Grand Teton, the most famous north face in the United States. Climbing historian Chris Jones called that adventure "probably the most arduous all-woman ascent then made in North America," and Beardsley "one of America's best women climbers."

Freddy Hubbard and her Roble Hall companions were not merely beneficiaries of the new club's coed-friendly attitude. Experienced mountaineers all, they were important contributors to the SAC's success.

Throughout the 1957/58 school year Mike Roberts, Lennie Lamb, Henry Kendall, Dave Sowles, and Gil Roberts were working on their contributions to a new edition of the Stanford Alpine Club Journal. Gil Roberts, back from his summer first ascent of Mt. Logan's East Ridge, was also planning to join Nick Clinch's 1958 American Karakoram Expedition to Gasherbrum I. In addition to the challenge of the great Himalayan peaks, a second test of American mountaineering beckoned. The most severe routes of the Alps, including the Walker Spur of the Grandes Jorasses and the Eigerwand, awaited American ascents, as did major lines and faces yet unclimbed. Club members were learning skills and forging relationships that would help them accomplish these mountaineering goals. John Harlin and Gary Hemming would lead the way in a breakthrough for Americans climbing in the European Alps. Kendall joined Hemming on the Walker Spur of the Grandes Jorasses, the first American ascent of that classic climb, "a route to dream of, perhaps the finest in existence." Frost joined them on some of their greatest first ascents: the South Face of the Fou and the Hidden Pillar of Fréney. These adventures on great mountains had their beginnings in small places, on Sunday outings to Miraloma Rock and Hunter's Hill, with the Stanford Alpine Club.

The SAC continued throughout the sixties in a form that would have been recognizable and familiar to all earlier members, albeit the overall membership was smaller than in many earlier periods, no more than 15-20 members. The change in Yosemite sign-out rules in the mid-sixties, along with the growing number of climbers, development of commercial climbing schools, production of guidebooks, and availability and relative affordability of climbing equipment contributed to a situation where many Stanford climbers were pursuing their goals independently.

Leigh Ortenburger's connection with the Stanford Alpine Club extended over some thirty years. Bob Brooke described him as the holder of a long-time record for non-dues-paying participation in Stanford activities. He had not been a Stanford undergraduate, nor had he learned to climb in the club. He was already a Teton guide when he first climbed with Clinch, John Mowat, and Dick Irvin in the Tetons in 1951. Ortenburger's SAC connection developed when he came out to Berkeley for graduate school in the fall of that year, climbing with the same trio in Yosemite Valley. He shared apartments with Al Baxter and later Dick Irvin, attending practice climbs, parties, and dating Stanford coed climbers. He married Irene Beardsley in 1956. Gil Roberts told of his influence in the early fifties:

He was a couple of years older and he was very experienced. He'd been to Peru and he'd done new routes in the Tetons. So he certainly was one of the guys that was setting the pace on club trips. . . . Leigh was an excellent climber and everybody respected him.

In the sixties Ortenburger earned a master's degree from Stanford and did course work for a Ph.D. Throughout the sixties and seventies he sometimes attended club meetings and climbed with Stanford climbers. Probably no other person had such a long-term connection with the club. Leigh Ortenburger Photographer.

In the summer of 1952, while still in high school, Irene Beardsley traveled with her parents by car west to Stanford from her Washington, D.C. home. Viewing the eastern escarpment of Wyoming's Teton mountains, jutting six thousand feet above Jackson Hole, she knew that people climbed those imposing rock and snow summits. She was intrigued. She was also occupied just then by other dreams. She wanted to study physics:

My mother wanted me to go to Mills, but I wanted to go to Stanford. It was just something I decided to do because of their reputation in physics. And I got interested in the SAC because when I was in my freshman year I looked around for various social activities and didn't find any that fit. I remember an embarrassing interview when I tried out for some kind of political sort of thing; I wasn't the right type, and they told me so. I next saw an advertisement in the Daily for the Alpine Club, and I went to a practice climb at Miraloma Park in San Francisco. I wasn't very good.

While becoming the fourth woman to earn a Ph.D. in physics from Stanford in 1965, she made hundreds of ascents beginning in the 1950s, including notable firsts as the 1965 first all-woman climb of the North Face of the Grand Teton, the
most famous north face in the United States, and the 1978 first American ascent of Annapurna (26,545 ft).
The SAC continued throughout the sixties in a form that would have been recognizable and familiar to all earlier members, albeit the overall membership was smaller than in many earlier periods, no more than 15-20 members. The change in Yosemite sign-out rules in the mid-sixties, along with the growing number of climbers, development of commercial climbing schools, production of guidebooks, and availability and relative affordability of climbing equipment contributed to a situation where many Stanford climbers were pursuing their goals independently.

Sixties outings sounded pretty much like old times: Belay practice was held in the San Francisquito creek bed near the shopping center and Children's Hospital—as it had been since 1950—at the beginning of fall quarter and sometimes spring quarter as well. It was still required of members who aspired to climb in Yosemite. The raising through a pulley and dropping of a hundred-pound block of concrete, testing the technique of well-anchored and padded belayers, presented an entertaining spectacle. "Belay practice was always a jolly event which attracted a fairly large crowd of both participants and spectators," Russ Van Dyke, president in 1969/70 and 1970/71, recalled. The principal social events were beach trips and club parties, still called Bergsteiger balls through the mid-sixties. Folk dancing and sing-alongs were regular activities at the latter. One-third of the active members were women. Meetings, held several times a quarter, sometimes included slide shows by members or guests and were the forum at which club outings were planned, including Yosemite trips, which were made at least four times during the fall and spring quarters.

In 1969 Chuck Kroger, SAC president 1968/69, became the first person to climb four routes on El Capitan in a single season, including the third ascent of the menacing North America Wall, widely considered the most difficult rock climb in the world. Scott Davis, '70, joined Kroger on three of those climbs: the NA, West Buttress, and Dihedral Wall. Kroger and Davis, two of the finest big-wall climbers in the country, capped their El Cap tour de force with the first ascent of the Heart Route in April 1970.

Davis was a foreshadowing of the club's future. "I sort of thought I was a member," he concluded some thirty years later, though on another occasion he conceded that he may not have been an official member. "The 1960s were pretty informal," he added. Davis participated in club activities and regularly climbed with club members, especially with Kroger, who counted Davis among the SAC ranks. Another example of the amorphousness of the situation in the late sixties and the seventies was Walt Vennum, a geology graduate student from 1966 to 1971. During his Stanford years he made first ascents in Alaska and the Sierra Nevada, and listed himself in published climbing notes as "unaffiliated." "I don't think I was officially a member of the SAC," Vennum said. "I climbed with a lot of people who were in the club. It was a pretty fluid situation."

Jim Collins, sporting his distinctive leather cap, shorts, tube socks, and EB rock shoes, was a familiar campus sight in the late 1970s, cruising the back wall of Building 260 or the Art Gallery. Collins, an applied math major, never had so much to do that he wouldn't take time out of his regimen to encourage and advise another wall climber. "The University is the ideal place for practicing rockclimbing by way of building, the art of climbing walls," Collins told a Stanford Daily interviewer in 1979. "The sandstone blocks are ideal for climbing, though extremely difficult. In fact, the most difficult rock-climbing challenge in the world is in the Quad."

Buildering flourished on campus from the club's beginning in 1946: roofs were scaled and rappelled from, walls were traversed, and Freddy Hubbard rappelled out of her Roble Hall second-floor dorm window in order to make a pre-morning-curfew start for the crags. What distinguished the Stanford's post-War building history from earlier times was the application of climbing technique and technical rope work to the local problems. All the causes and effects of forces shaping club history and society at large in the sixties intensified in the seventies. Roger Gocking, Darien Hopkins, Jim Collins, Rob Bracken, Greg Larson and other club officers each attempted to make the club relevant, and different solutions were tried. Despite their efforts club activities lapsed during 1975/76 and a few years later in 1980/81. Resurrected once again, it disappeared after the 1982/83 school year. Gocking described the Stanford climbing scene in the early seventies:

The club had played several roles. One was it provided a basic introduction to rockclimbing, and it helped to provide the logistics for climbing. People would pool their cars, equipment, and all those sorts of things. And then too, it was something of a social club. People met one another. I remember talking to Leigh Ortenburger about this, and his observation was that a lot of people got married as a result. When I was president that role was beginning to change. The better climbers didn't feel the need to belong. They were off doing their own things. Climbing levels continued to rise. There was a big gap between club-type activities and what many people were themselves climbing. I think that people who were serious didn't want to be involved in something like a climbing club, which didn't really cater to what they were doing.

The End: Greg Larson, Tresidder Union recreation manager, championed student voluntary outdoor groups in general and the SAC in particular, which he and Steve D’Hondt reestablished in 1981. Having been inspired to try out rockclimbing by a Jim Collins presentation, and having learned to climb with the SAC, Larson fondly remembered the trip-taking and
Larson and D'Hondt rejuvenated the SAC to fill the need for rockclimbing instruction. Larson took the title of coordinator. They organized ten instructional climbs at local outcrops that year, along with the showing of climbing films and a presentation by Jim Collins. After Larson's departure, D'Hondt took over as club coordinator for 1982/83, repeating the previous year's pattern of activities. The club, however, disappeared during the next school year.

Source: John Rawlings, "No Guts, No Glory: A History of the Stanford Alpine Club"

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  Physical Description: 3 audiocassette(s)

box 2  
Roberts, Mike 1997 Jan, Feb  10  11
  Physical Description: 2 audiocassette(s)

box 2  
Tabor, R. W. (Rowland W.) 1997 Jan 23, Feb 5  12  13  14  15  16  17
  Physical Description: 3 audiocassette(s)

box 2  
Van Dyke, Russell, MD. 1997 Feb 17  18
  Physical Description: 1 audiocassette(s)

Transcripts

box 1, folder 1  
Baxter, Alfred W. 1997 Feb
  Physical Description: Transcript: 42 leaves.
  Physical Description: Photographs: 7 photoprints.
  Biographical/Historical note
  Alfred W. Baxter earned his A.B. in philosophy at Stanford University in 1947; he was one
  of the founding members of the Stanford Alpine Club.
  Scope and Contents note
  Subjects include the Stanford Alpine Club; fellow climbers Larry Taylor, Ulf Ramm-Ericson,
  and Fritz Lippmann; climbers from UC Berkeley; and climbs with the Sierra Club Rock
  Climbing Section.
  Subjects and Indexing Terms
  Mountaineering
  Taylor, Lawrence D.
  Sierra Club. Rock Climbing Section.
  Lippmann, Fritz.
  Stanford Alpine Club
  Ramm-Ericson, Ulf.

box 1, folder 2  
Baxter, Mary Sherrill. 1997 Feb
  Physical Description: Transcript: 19 leaves.
  Physical Description: Photographs: 5 photoprints.
  Biographical/Historical note
  Mary Sherrill Baxter earned her A.B. in classics at Stanford in 1950; she was an early
  member of the Stanford Alpine Club.
  Scope and Contents note
  Subjects include the Stanford Alpine Club; fellow members Alfred Baxter, Ulf
  Ramm-Ericson, Winifred (Freddy) Hubbard Brown; Stanford professors Margery Bailey and
  Hazel Hansen; and other climbing experiences.
  Subjects and Indexing Terms
  Mountaineering
  Brown, Winifred Hubbard.
  Bailey, Margery
  Hansen, Hazel Dorothy.
  Baxter, Alfred W.
  Ramm-Ericson, Ulf.
**Boore, David M. and Boore, Judith Lovelace 1997 Jul**

Physical Description: Transcript: 33 leaves.
Physical Description: Photograph: 1 photoprint.

Biographical/Historical note
David M. Boore (BS 1964 and MS 1965 in geophysics) and Judith Lovelace Boore (AB 1965 in psychology) were both active in the Stanford Alpine Club during their student years at Stanford.

Scope and Contents note
Subjects include Stanford Alpine Club climbs in Yosemite and elsewhere, training and technique, the practice of climbing on campus buildings, and the social aspects of the club. Other people mentioned include Steven A. Jervis, Fred Wesley Smith, and Richard N. Baldinger.

Subjects and Indexing Terms
Mountaineering
Baldinger, Richard N.
Smith, Fred Wesley.
Jervis, Steven Alexander.
Boore, Judith Lovelace.
Boore, David M.

**Clinch, Nicholas, 1930- 1997 Jul**

Physical Description: Transcript 34 leaves.
Physical Description: Photographs 2 photoprints.

Biographical/Historical note
Lawyer and conservationist, Nick Clinch earned his AB at Stanford University in 1952 and his LlB in 1955. While at Stanford, he was active in the Stanford Alpine Club.

Scope and Contents note
This interview was conducted in July 1997. Subjects include Stanford Alpine Club climbs in Yosemite, climbing equipment and technique, the social aspect of membership, leadership in the club, role of women, and the Sierra Club Rock Climbing Section. People mentioned include Dave Harrah, Bea Vogel, John Salathe, and Leigh Ortenburger.

Subjects and Indexing Terms
Mountaineering
Vogel, Bea.
Salathe, John.
Harrah, Dave
Clinch, Nicholas
Ortenburger, Leigh N.
Stanford Alpine Club
Crowder, Betsy, 1926-1996 Dec-1997 Jan

Physical Description: Transcript: 51 leaves.
Physical Description: Photographs: 6 photoprints.

Biographical/Historical note
Betsy Swann Crowder earned her A.B. at Radcliffe College in 1947 before moving to California in 1948. She did graduate work in anthropology at Stanford prior to her marriage in 1950 to Dwight Crowder. As a student she was active in the Stanford Alpine Club. After Dwight's death in 1970, she earned her MS in engineering in 1972 and pursued a career in urban planning.

Scope and Contents note
Subjects include the Stanford Alpine Club; fellow climber and husband Dwight Crowder; and the Stanford anthropology department and Prof. Bert Gerow. Also included are Crowder's "Stanford Alpine Club Remembrances," Rowland Tabor's "The Recounting of Our Night of Terror on Lower Brother," typescript of remarks from the memorial service for Dwight Crowder, 1970, and Constance Pratt's "Betsy Swann Crowder: A Vignette."

Subjects and Indexing Terms
Mountaineering
Tabor, R. W. (Rowland W.)
Crowder, D.F. (Dwight Farnsworth)
Pratt, Constance.
Stanford Alpine Club
Stanford University. Department of Anthropology
Gerow, Bert A.

DeStaebler, Herbert C. 1997 Mar

Physical Description: Transcript: 20 leaves.
Physical Description: Photographs: 2 photoprints.

Scope and Contents note
Subjects include the activities of the Stanford Alpine Club, including a climb of the Battle Range, and fellow climbers Henry Kendall, John Harlin, Thomas M. Frost, and Gary Hemming.

Biographical/Historical note
DeStaebler, professor emeritus of physics at Stanford University, earned his Ph.D. at MIT in 1954. He came to Stanford in 1957 as a research associate in the Department of Physics and joined the permanent staff at SLAC in 1961. During his early years at Stanford, he was active in the Stanford Alpine Club.

Subjects and Indexing Terms
Mountaineering
Frost, Thomas M.
Harlin, John
Hemming, Gary.
Kendall, Henry Way

Physical Description: Transcript: 28 leaves.
Physical Description: Photographs: 1 photoprint.

Biographical/Historical note
Henry W. Kendall, professor of physics at MIT and recipient of a Nobel Prize in 1990, taught physics at Stanford from 1956 to 1961. While at Stanford, he was active in the Stanford Alpine Club.

Scope and Contents note
Interviews were conducted in March 1997 and February 1998. Subjects include activities of the Stanford Alpine Club and fellow members John Harlin, Leigh Ortenburger, and Thomas M. Frost; his other climbing experiences, including the Battle Range; climbers Gary Hemming and Hoby De Staebler; climbing equipment; photography; the Union of Concerned Scientists; and his physics career. Also included is a photocopy of the catalog from an exhibit of his art and expeditionary photographs held at MIT.

Subjects and Indexing Terms
Physics -- Study and teaching.
Photography.
Mountaineering
Union of Concerned Scientists.
DeStaebler, Herbert C.
Frost, Thomas M.
Harlin, John
Stanford Alpine Club
Hemming, Gary.
Ortenburger, Leigh N.

Ortenburger, Irene Adelaide Beardsley. 1997

Physical Description: Transcript: 24 leaves.
Physical Description: Photographs: 1 photoprint.

Biographical Sketch
Irene Beardsley earned three degrees in physics at Stanford: BS in 1957, MS in 1958, and PhD in 1965; she was active in the Stanford Alpine Club.

Description of the Collection
Interview was conducted in February 1997. Subjects include the Stanford Alpine Club, its women members, club climbs in Yosemite and elsewhere, fellow club member (and her husband) Leigh Ortenburger, climbing accidents, the physics department at Stanford, and her post-Stanford climbing career, including climbs in Peru and Europe. Also included is her climbing record from 1953 to 1996.

Subjects and Indexing Terms
Mountaineering
Women college students -- California -- Stanford.
Women mountaineers.
Mountaineering -- Peru.
Stanford Alpine Club
Stanford University. Department of Physics
Ortenburger, Leigh N.
**Ramm-Ericson, Ulf. 1997-1998**

Biographical/Historical note
Ulf Ramm-Ericson earned his B.S., 1948, and his M.S., 1949, in civil engineering at Stanford University. While a student, he was active in the Stanford Alpine Club.

Scope and Contents note
Interview was conducted in October 1997. Subjects include the Stanford Alpine Club; fellow climbers Alfred Baxter, Rupert (Bud) Gates, and Winifred Hubbard Brown; and postwar experiences in Europe. Also included is Ramm-Ericson's account, in letter form dated February 1998, of a number of mountain climbs, including the Matterhorn with Winifred H. Brown in 1949.

Subjects and Indexing Terms
- Matterhorn (Switzerland and Italy).
- Mountaineering
- Brown, Winifred Hubbard.
- Baxter, Alfred W.
- Ramm-Ericson, Ulf.
- Stanford Alpine Club
- Gates, Rupert Louis.

**Roberts, Gilbert J. 1997**

Physical Description: Transcript: 38 leaves.
Physical Description: Photographs: 1 photoprint.
Biographical/Historical note
Gilbert J. Roberts earned his A.B. in psychology at Stanford University in 1955 and his MD in 1959. He was a member of the first American team to reach the summit of Mt. Everest in 1963.

Scope and Contents note
Interviews were conducted in April and August 1997. Subjects include the Stanford Alpine Club and fellow members Dave Sowles, John Harlin, and Leigh Ortenburger; his subsequent climbing career, including the ascent of Mt. Everest in 1963; his work leading treks in Nepal for Mountain Travel (an adventure travel company); his association with Sir Edmund Hillary and the American Himalayan Foundation; the Sherpas in Nepal and the effect of tourism on their lives; and his career in ER medicine.

Subjects and Indexing Terms
- Mountaineering
- Everest, Mount (China and Nepal).
- Sherpa (Nepalese people).
- Hillary, Edmund
- American Himalayan Foundation.
- Harlin, John
- Sowles, Dave.
- Ortenburger, Leigh N.
- Stanford Alpine Club
Tabor, R. W. (Rowland W.) 1997

Physical Description: Transcript: 46 leaves.
Physical Description: Photographs: 4 photoprints.

Biographical/Historical note
Rowland W. Tabor earned his B.S. in geology at Stanford in 1954; as an undergraduate, he was active in the Stanford Alpine Club, holding the office of president in the 1952/53 year. He is the co-author with Dwight Crowder of ROUTES AND ROCKS; HIKER'S GUIDE TO THE NORTH CASCADES FROM GLACIER PEAK TO LAKE CHELAN (1965).

Scope and Contents note
Interviews with Rowland W. Tabor and his wife Kajse Tabor were conducted in January and February, 1997. Subjects include Alpine Club climbs; club members Dwight Crowder, John Harlin, and Dave Sowles; Tabor's work with the U.S.G.S.; his experiences in the Cascade and Olympic mountains; and student antics such as climbing Hoover Tower and exploring the steam tunnels. Also included is Rowland Tabor's essay "The Recounting of Our Night of Terror on Lower Brother," 1996, written for Betsy Crowder's 70th birthday.

Subjects and Indexing Terms
Cascade Range.
Mountaineering
Tabor, Kajse.
Stanford Alpine Club
Sowles, Dave.
Crowder, Betsy
Harlin, John
Crowder, D.F. (Dwight Farnsworth)

Van Dyke, Russell, MD. 1997 Dec

Scope and Contents note
Interview was conducted by phone. Subjects are the members and activities of the Stanford Alpine Club. Also included are two pieces written by Van Dyke: "Memories of the Stanford Alpine Club, 1967-1971," 1998, and "Memories of Camp Unalayee," 1993; Unalayee was a children's camp in northern California run by the Society of Friends.

Biographical/Historical note
Russell Van Dyke, professor at Tulane University Medical School, earned his A.B. in biological sciences at Stanford University in 1971; while an undergraduate, he was president of the Stanford Alpine Club for two years.

Subjects and Indexing Terms
Mountaineering
Stanford Alpine Club
Camp Unalayee.

Vogel, Beatrice R. 1997

Scope and Contents note
Subjects include the Stanford Alpine Club, its women members, climbs in Yosemite, and making her own pitons in the Stanford metal shop.

Biographical/Historical note
Bea Vogel earned her B.S. in mathematics at Stanford in 1952; she was active in the Stanford Alpine Club.

Subjects and Indexing Terms
Women college students -- California -- Stanford.
Mountaineering
Stanford Alpine Club
Biographical/Historical note
Theodore Weicker III earned his B.S. in physics at Stanford in 1953; as an undergraduate, he was active in the Stanford Alpine Club.

Scope and Contents note
Subjects include Alpine Club climbs and fellow members Dave Sowles and Nick Clinch; climbing equipment and training; his post-Stanford climbs; and a brief mention of caving trips with Stanford Grotto, a chapter of the American Speleological Society.

Subjects and Indexing Terms
Mountaineering
Sowles, Dave.
Stanford Alpine Club
Weicker, Theodore, III.
Clinch, Nicholas