



The Secret Climb of Bob Jones

RECENTLY, AN UNKNOWN ALPINIST CLAIMED HE'D MADE THE FIRST ASCENT OF DENALI'S MOST POPULAR ROUTE THREE YEARS BEFORE THE LEGENDARY BRAD WASHBURN DID IT IN 1951. WAS HE REALLY FIRST—OR IS HE YET ANOTHER ADVENTURE FRAUD?

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BY JONATHAN WATERMAN

In the summer of 2015, I learned about a mysterious mountaineer and World War II infantry hero who was publicly disclosing that back in 1948 he had secretly parachuted into the southeast fork of the Kahiltna Glacier and climbed the lynchpin West Buttress route up Denali—the baddest mountain in North America. For climbing historians like me, this was astonishing news, because the renowned Dr. Bradford Washburn had claimed that first ascent in 1951.

The man was named Bob Jones. He lived in Seattle, he was 95, and he was dying of cancer.

Unknown in the climbing world, Jones seemed to embody the inverse of Washburn, the celebrated Renaissance man of American mountains, who paved the way for thousands of Alaska climbers by generously sharing hundreds of his own breathtaking aerial photographs, a laser-precise map of Denali, and specific route information on what has become the most popular path to the top. Although Denali still offers up a gauntlet of lethal storms and high-altitude challenges, Washburn's pioneering work on the ground and above it has given ordinary mortals a relatively quick, yellow-brick road of fixed ropes and broken trail up the buttress. Until Washburn masterfully opened up this key route in 1951—ushering in the use of ski planes for glacier landings—the mountain had seen only a half dozen successful expeditions, and those had all toiled up the more logistically challenging and remote Muldrow Glacier route, which had been discovered by Alaskan miners in 1910 and was first climbed in 1913.

Skeptical that Washburn, whom I'd interviewed many times before his death in 2007, would have knowingly ignored such an important predecessor in the mountain's history, I telephoned Jones, convinced that his story was just another con amid several fraudulent Denali claims. But after three conversations with him, I grew excited by the lucidity of his memory and the exactness of his details, including his description of a broomstick-size flagpole that had been planted on the summit by a Muldrow Glacier climber in 1947. I was further swayed by Jones's brutal experiences in winter warfare, which had built his tolerance for suffering, a crucial trait for enduring the cold and misery inherent to Denali outings.

I felt I had no choice but to fly to Seattle, look him in the face, and hear his story firsthand. I arrived to find a faded green ranch house in a quiet suburb, surrounded by a browned

lawn and a graying fence. It seemed diminished beneath a towering hawthorn tree and a scrum of unruly rhododendron. Jones met me at the front door, braced by a cane and clad in an unbuttoned cowboy shirt over a Seahawks T-shirt. He led me to a kitchen table piled with rubber-banded correspondence, cans of pens and pencils, and stacks of reading material.

As the talk flowed, he reminded me of Washburn. Both men were teetotalers uninterested in the simple "how do you do" civilities, both had been devotedly married for a half-century (Jones's wife Helen had died 23 years earlier), and both were blessed with a crisp memory for long-ago details that would have been lost to average men.

As our first day wore on, Jones seemed both maverick and charmer, nonplussed by how his heretofore-unknown climb would rewrite the history of North American mountaineering. How could it be, I wondered, that a working-class man—unaware of the evolution of alpinism—beat one of mountaineering's greats to the punch, and no one knew about it?

I spent four days with him. This is his story.

Because Jones and his two climbing partners—a Native American named Tommy Vint and a Michigander named Chuck Ward (both newly enlisted in the Air Force)—lacked Washburn's scientific credentials, they were denied a National Park Service permit to climb the mountain. So they concocted a covert parachute approach. In May 1948, the three men jumped out of a military plane above Denali's Kahiltna Glacier. Jones had recently retired from the Army and was close friends with an influential general. As decorated veterans and airmen, the three men signed a waiver with the commanding officer at Anchorage's Elmendorf Air Force Base affirming that they were on their own and promising that they would keep their climb a secret.

"We hit the glacier at 7,000 feet, rolled over our 50-pound packs, then hid our chutes under the snow," Jones said. "Just like working behind Nazi lines."

In an astonishing five days after their jump, he and his battle-hardened companions tagged the summit. Shortly after they started their descent, Ward collapsed with altitude illness, apparently suffering from their speedy, unacclimated climb. Jones and Vint dragged him down the mountain on a sled made from snowshoes, but a day after he collapsed, Ward stopped breathing. Jones and Vint lowered the corpse

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BOB JONES AT HOME. JONATHAN WATERMAN | PREVIOUS: WEST BUTTRESS. DENALI. JONATHAN WATERMAN



IN 1910, JUST FOUR YEARS AFTER FREDERICK COOK CLAIMED SUCCESS ON DENALI AND RELEASED A CROPPED VERSION OF THE PHOTO ABOVE, INVESTIGATORS FOUND "FAKE PEAK" ALMOST 20 MILES AWAY AND 15,000 FEET LOWER. IN 1998, A RESEARCHER DISCOVERED THE ORIGINAL, UNCROPPED IMAGE, SHOWING THE RIDGELINE THAT PROVED THIS WAS NOT NORTH AMERICA'S HIGHEST SUMMIT.

FREDERICK COOK/OSU ARCHIVES

by rope into a deep crevasse at 10,000 feet. Then, incredibly, they plodded out more than 80 miles to the ocean, navigating across the rivers by tying their packs to logs and wading. When they got to Cook Inlet, they flagged down a passing steamer.

Over the week that I spent interviewing him in person and on the phone, Jones grew increasingly annoyed by my repetitive questions, as if he thought I was treating him like he had dementia or didn't believe his answers. It felt like playing chess, trying to stay one step ahead and firing out more questions, but his story remained rock-solidly consistent.

His need for privacy and disdain of the climbing community at large seemed refreshingly eccentric. He appeared as that rare bird disinterested in his own reputation and had only deigned to let me interview him because his sons convinced him, for their sake, to share his remarkable accomplishment with a Denali expert. "My dad is infamous," his son, Steve, said, "for not signing summit registers atop his many peak climbs."

Jones periodically flourished a gallon jug of what appeared to be orange juice, hurriedly sending me away from the kitchen table. As I waited in his book-cluttered living room, he would urinate into the container. "Bladder cancer," he mumbled, as if it were yet another shrapnel wound from various European campaigns. "My plumbing's shot. But I told 'em no to any more of that goddamned chemo."

Slowly, begrudgingly, I came to believe this unpretentious war veteran. His many war stories and a claim to climbing Denali had already appeared online and in local newspapers. There were still some niggling holes in his tale, but it seemed ungracious to doubt him.

As a historian and author of three books about Denali, I was fired up about his accomplishment for another reason as well: Almost all of the early (and well-documented) ascents of Denali's South Peak belonged to privileged aristocrats like Washburn. The mountain had been climbed by scientists, Ivy Leaguers, artists, photographers, even a British priest. Jones stood in stark contrast. He was a blue-collar enlisted man who didn't want to be burdened with a camera because of the weight and the fear that showing off photographs would have incurred the wrath of the Park Service and the general who'd allowed the team's off-the-books parachute jump.

I did have one burning question: "Why have you kept this all secret for so long?"

"We just wanted to climb the mountain for ourselves," Jones said.

At one point, Jones extracted from a dresser drawer a

few war medals, which he said were only a small portion of the total he'd earned for various wounds and clandestine bravery on volunteer missions. "They gave 'em out like popcorn," he declaimed. Most of his medals had been lost by his mother, he said.

Jones didn't like to talk about his war record, but according to his son, Steve, he'd been trained by British commandos in the early part of the war, after enlisting in 1939 to cut Nazi throats behind enemy lines, then traveled in desperate cold, on meager rations, often cut off from support.

In a separate meeting, I expressed to Steve my doubts about his father climbing Denali without sleeping pads or ropes or crampons and fording the mountain's glacial torrents without swimming. "C'mon," he said, "my dad's a 95-year-old war hero, and he's sharp, but he's still digging up memories from 67 years ago."

Until then, I'd seen the "West Butt" as a deserved achievement of Washburn, who had paved the way for so many climbers. I couldn't imagine why Washburn would cover up an earlier ascent of his route, especially after Jones said he had written and gotten advice from Washburn, who later congratulated him for this 1948 climb. As I caught a plane home, I realized I needed to dig deeper into the mountain's climbing history...and into adventure hoaxes in general.

As the prince of Denali rogues, Dr. Frederick Cook spuriously claimed the mountain's first ascent in 1906, along with attaining the North Pole in 1908. A half-century later, it fell to Washburn to quell the so-called "Cook Society," founded by Cook's daughter Helen and dedicated to confirming their long-dead champion's claims. Washburn referred to this group of climbing dilettantes as "the Cookies."

In most climbers' minds, Cook couldn't possibly have climbed Denali. To this day his route has not been repeated. There's also his mistake of presenting a photograph from a peak 19 miles away and 15,000 feet below the mountain as the summit. Washburn was one of several climbers who re-photographed the easily attained "Fake Peak" and matched it to Cook's photo.

Cook wasn't the first scientist-explorer to commit such acts under the "publish or perish" syndrome. The list of adventure fakes and their "accomplishments" includes Sebastian Cabot sailing to Hudson Bay in 1508; Thomas Dryer climbing Oregon's Mt. Hood in 1854; Samuel Adams boating the Colorado River in 1869; Admiral Byrd flying over the North Pole in 1926; and Eric Ryback walking all of the Pacific Crest

Trail in 1970. These men—seeking profit for their firsts and cheekily publicizing their aggrandized adventures in print—were all proved to be frauds.

In his book *Great Exploration Hoaxes*, David Roberts surmises that the fraudulent adventurer is motivated by paranoia and megalomania. A surprising number of hoaxers lost a parent at an early age and appeared to be making up for their early loss. They can also be charismatic charmers, habitual (but not pathological) liars, emotionally distant, smooth storytellers. The vast majority conveniently lack reliable eyewitnesses because they traveled alone, or because their companions died en route. Cook added a variation on the theme, keeping his Denali and North Pole yarns tightly under wrap by choosing an illiterate horse packer or Inuit as non-English speaking companions.

I turned back to the mountain's history, consulting, among several sources, *High Alaska* (the historical guidebook I'd written after three years working on Denali as a Park Service mountaineering ranger). I already believed that an Italian climber had falsely reported her first female solo of the West Buttress in 1984. Also, in 1972 a Swiss skier's first descent of Denali's Messner Couloir had been tainted by his false claim to have skied from the summit, 700 feet higher than where he actually started laying down tracks.

Back home, beyond the reach of Jones's subtle charms, I began to see similarities between his stories and those of other frauds. To honor Brad Washburn's legacy, and to correctly revise *High Alaska*, I dug to unravel the mystery.

Unlike other more infamous hoaxers, if Jones was telling a lie about Denali, his motivations didn't appear to include advancing his career or financial profit. Oddly, he had waited until he retired (and until after his wife died) before revealing his extraordinary climb to his children, friends, and reporters. So I looked into the public record. Neither online military files nor Anchorage's Elmendorf Air Force Base historian could pull up any names remotely similar to Jones's climbing partners. It was as if Tommy Vint and Chuck Ward never existed (Jones said Vint died when his plane crashed during the Korean War and that neither had any surviving family). Nor did it help Jones's case—fitting the classic, loss-of-a-parent profile of more famous exploration frauds—that his father had raised him after the alcoholic mother, Wilhelmina, left the family.

Everywhere I searched, there was no Robert Frederick Jones born in 1920 in Ashford, Washington, to his uniquely named mother and father Robert—despite Jones's and his son's insistence on this birthdate and place.

After more than a week of combing federal censuses,

marriage records, and Army enlistment records, I hit pay dirt. Documents showed that Jones had been born in Hamtramck, Michigan, in 1925—five years later than his friends and surviving family believed. He'd enlisted in Fort Lewis, Washington, near the end of World War II, on April 18, 1944, making it highly unlikely that British commandos had trained him. The awful battles that he supposedly fought had taken place while he attended public high school in Highland Park, Michigan.

I also consulted the famed 1963 Everest summiteer Tom Hornbein, because Jones had said they'd once been partners; Jones claimed he'd been invited to join Hornbein's Everest expedition but had decided not to participate. Hornbein remembered Jones but said his inexperience was obvious while seconding on a tight rope during a 1956 climb they did together of Washington's Mt. Adams, and that day's outing had been exponentially easier than the difficulties Jones would have encountered on Denali's West Buttress eight years earlier. After talking to four surviving Everest climbers, I learned that Bob Jones had not been invited to join the 1963 team, despite his claims. In fact, no one remembered his name (including Hornbein, who only remembered their climb together). There were no letters from Jones or his partners in Washburn's two carefully kept archives. Nor could I find any evidence that he'd won war medals, and there was nothing in any Park Service files from his team requesting permission to climb Denali.

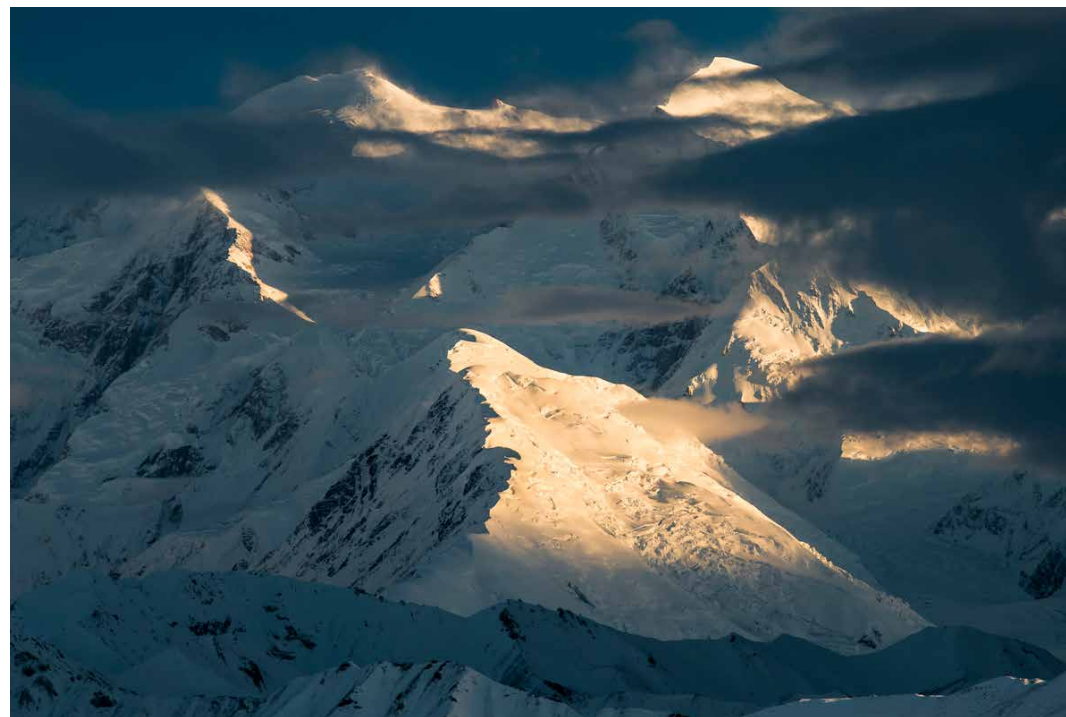
Characteristic of this stripe of adventurer, he had continued to stand by his story, even when confronted with its discrepancies. "If you don't believe me," he said, "you don't believe me." He refused to retract any details.

After all my research, it was clear there was no evidence that Jones made the first ascent of the West Buttress and a lot of signs saying he didn't. I shared my findings with his son and told him that I felt exploited and used. "If you think it's bad for you," he said, "I've heard his stories all my life. You can walk away from this, but I have to live with it." Then he abruptly ended the phone call.

As for what motivated Jones to make his claims, who knows. Perhaps his tales served as a lifeline that prevented him from falling into a void that hadn't matched his own expectations of himself. After all, his life presented little out of the ordinary. Alpine frauds rarely admit their lies, even in the face of overwhelming evidence. Maybe coming to believe them is easier and safer than the alternative.

After my August 2015 visit, Jones continued to refuse treatment for his bladder cancer. In January, his "plumbing" now totally gone, he followed the crevassed Chuck Ward and his best friend "the Indian" Tommy Vint to their graves. **A**

A RARELY SEEN VIEW OVER THE MULDROW GLACIER, WITH DENALI'S SOUTH PEAK ON THE LEFT, NORTH PEAK ON THE RIGHT.



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CARL BATTREAL