



mountaineering club of alaska
box 2037 anchorage alaska 99501

scree, volume 12, no. 5, may, 1969

V I N H O E M A N

"Vin Hoeman died on Dhaulagiri," the telephone said. For some people, the response would be, "That's too bad, but who's Vin Hoeman and what's Dhaulagiri?" They don't know. Too bad they don't know, because Vin was worth knowing. A fine person, even if, as some of us non-climbers privately thought, somewhat crazy about climbing, crazy to the point of being almost a fanatic. "'Almost'--baloney! He was fanatic!" some climbers even would say. Mountains, always mountains. Even in the Army as an enlisted man, he wangled a deal to instruct in mountaineering. When he worked for the Smithsonian as an ornithologist, he managed to find birds that lived somehow in or around mountains. He climbed mountains in all fifty states, the highest in each, and at one time it seemed as if that would be enough to do and write about it, but when that was accomplished, there were other mountains, other unexampled feats. He climbed McKinley in an unequalled traverse. And another year, when people died up there, he went back to look and to help. Now he's gone up a mountain to stay.

Vin loved to keep track of mountain events, evidence, statistics--who climbed what, when, how, and with whom. He had an impossibly orderly card file of all kinds of mountains, in and out of Alaska, complete with dates, heights, weather, and cryptic little marks in that curious hieroglyphic he thought was handwriting. We who had to read anything he didn't type knew differently, though. Mostly he typed on a little portable typewriter and made lines that went all the way across the page, longer than anyone else's so that you had to figure his articles would take up more space than

anyone else's...if you were taking articles for SCREE. Vin wrote for SCREE often and lengthily, and eventually he accepted the job as editor of it, though he really didn't want to be an editor of things so much as he wanted to be the writer of things. Things about mountains, that is.

Vin made mountains his business. He was a mountain climber. You couldn't really call him anything else. For him, there was something, unexplainable to the rest of us, that was important about being first to the top of the fifty state high points, the grand points of South America, Mexico, Canada, North America, the World. He was a forester by training, but a mountain climber by inclination, perhaps even from necessity, some kind of necessity that the rest of us label with terms like craziness, fever, or mystique. Who knows why he had such a drive to climb mountains? Perhaps it had something to do with his past, his height, his lack of humor, or some kind of peculiar time-transcending awareness of his fate on Dhaulagiri.

Maybe Grace knows why he had such a mountain drive. She went climbing with him. She was married to him and must have shared some of the feeling he had about doing this first or that feat first. He did all kinds of firsts, here in Alaska especially, and many of us could appreciate these efforts intellectually, but few really know what his efforts mean in the long haul. Maybe Dave Johnston knows, who climbed with him on McKinley and on a bunch of other peaks, and who lived with Vin in that unbelievable apartment on A Street back in the days when both of them were single and didn't want to spend money on rent when they could spend it on equipment and transportation and climbing trips. It was called the "A Street Hole" ...and it was. Maybe Cliff Ells would know. Cliff climbed McKinley with Vin, too, in that long traverse from one side to the other, on foot. Maybe Bill Babcock knows, who climbed with Vin this and other winters, and who's seen the death McKinley can deal out. Maybe Scott Hamilton, who's known another big Asian peak as well as the death of a climbing partner and who lived in the A Street Hole, would have an idea of Vin's accomplishments, a real appreciation. Maybe Nick Parker or Dave Meyers, who learned a lot from Vin, or the Bludworths or Bob Spurr or Ray Genet or John Samuelson or Rod Wilson or Paul Crews or Helga Byhre or John Bousman--who may have thrown up their hands in horror that Vin was trying some mad trip up an unclimbed killer face of Dhaulagiri in the Himalaya--but who would have appreciated what the effort meant in the world of real climbing...maybe they'd know, as would those who belong to the American Alpine Club with good reason and those who've climbed Chimborazo or Aconcaqua or Yerupaja or McKinley or St Elias or some other mad peak...or Everest or K-2 or Dhaulagiri or anything at all that demanded endurance and experience and expertise in the world of mountains...above what we who dodge the extreme demand would know...or want to know. Vin wanted to know.

Vin came from Utah...most recently, that is. At least that's where his parents' address was when that was his "home" address. Before that were other places...and Kentucky, where he was born, according to an off-hand comment that came over dinner on his 30th birthday Labor Day two years ago. But really he wanted to say that he came from Alaska, and he put that on all the forms: "Home Town: Anchorage, Alaska." which it became in spirit, as it does for a lot of us who've lived here only six or eight or ten or twelve years.

Vin was worth knowing because something was important to him and he pursued it with all he had. It killed him, but is it bad to die doing something that is of supreme significance in the life that is being ended? Vin wanted to go to the Himalaya to do something that someone else had not done before. He died in that effort, something that mattered greatly

to him. Is there a better way to stop living than to stop living in the best way one has lived?

"You would know the secret of death.

But how shall you find it unless you seek it in the heart of life?...

For life and death are one, even as the river and the sea are one...

For what is it to die but to stand naked in the wind and to melt into the sun?...

And when you have reached the mountain top, then you shall begin to climb.

And when the earth shall claim your limbs, then shall you truly dance." (Gibran)

Not every mountain top is at the highest point on the mountain.

--Marie Lundstrom

* * * * *

Vin's first meeting with MCA-ers happened, very fittingly, at the "rocks" about ten years ago. Eric Barnes knew him superficially from Colorado and introduced him. Vin wore Army boots--but impressed us with his tremendous agility and surefootedness. The Army had brought him to Alaska and he certainly belonged here.

Only one person in thousands can separate himself from the "eight-to-five" routine into which Society presses most all of us. But Vin was one of those who succeeded in doing strictly what he wanted--it wasn't always easy. Only because of his exactness and strict self-discipline was he able to do many of the things he had set forth as goals. Many MCA-ers will recall the "shack" on A Street and its Spartan inhabitants as well as the predicament that Vin found himself in when he broke both elbows. It speaks for his popularity that many MCA-ers offered help which he cheerfully refused. Vin was tough--and tough on himself.

Those who have been on mountain trips with Vin will recall foremost the tremendous speed he could break into (he claimed he learned that while carrying machine guns over Alaskan mountain passes) and his true love of nature, as he could recognize every plant, animal, or bird as a friend. He was an interesting companion, never dull.

Similarly, he made a "friend" of every Alaskan mountain. Certainly he will be remembered because of the tremendous effort he put into research on Alaskan climbing and exploration, much of which has already been disseminated throughout the climbing world outside Alaska.

* * * * *

A VACUUM IN ALASKAN MOUNTAINEERING

Although I was not the first to make this statement, I feel it is the only way my feelings can be expressed clearly. After my first couple of climbs with Vin, I was convinced that he was the most competent climber from which to learn and I sought to climb with him often. Gradually I became fairly well acquainted with him, and on the Yale Glacier, Dub and I had a week alone with him, which has been the most memorable experience of my life. The reason for this was not merely our accomplishments but, to a much greater degree, it was the company I enjoyed. During the Yale Glacier Expedition I became aware that Vin did not approve of human names being substituted for those which were more appropriate for our natural features. I agreed with him on this and was pleased to read Grace's acknowledgment of it. In the two short years I knew Vin I enjoyed climbing with him more than anyone else, next to Dub. When he led a climb he kept

an eye on all his members, and on one trip I especially remember his going back several miles to check on the progress of two lagging members.

Although I knew Vin for a shorter time and probably to a much less degree than most of my readers, all that I associate with my memories of his company is good. He accomplished more than any other climber in Alaska and indeed worked at it constantly. However, he was never selfish in regard to mountains and encouraged other climbers, of whom I am one. Information on a climbed or unclimbed peak could be obtained from him even if the mountain was of special interest to him. Sportsmanship was also an outstanding quality. One caught in the act of mountain thievery was never begrudged by him.

I would also like to add to this list of memories the memories of his death. At first I felt it was a true tragedy that would be most difficult to bear, but after close examination of my experiences I can see that it was much less a tragedy than I had first thought. He was a good person in all respects and had accomplished more in his years than I would probably have accomplished in twice as many. He died doing what he did and liked to do best, and he was left to rest on the sixth highest mountain in the world.

Although his death is a tragedy to us and leaves an unfilled spot in our hearts, I earnestly feel that he has gained, through death, more Life.
-- Harry Bludworth

* * * * *

Memories of Vin...A ride to Fort Richardson after an MCA Board meeting --he was a soldier in the Army, assigned to the mountain troops, an appropriate place.

His climbing reputation spread through the club--a reputation for speed --O'Malley Peak in 2 hours; Matanuska Peak in 4 hours, others hardly making it in 12 hours. Hardy MCA-ers were barely able to keep up.

A lecture to the Ornithological Society with two broken elbows--he had pitched over the bicycle handlebars on the way to the meeting.

A namer of mountains and peaks, after events of Alaskan history, birds, shapes, but never people.

An apartment on A Street...A-Street-hole-in-the-wall it was called. A climber's haven, two rooms filled with maps, climbing gear and other paraphernalia.

A Grand Traverse of Mount McKinley on an austere budget--sleeping on the top in order to be on the summit for a total eclipse of the sun.

Adventures outside Alaska, all faithfully reported in SCREE.

A regular contributor to SCREE.

A wedding on a cold December day.

A wife who accompanied him on his climbing adventure--sharing the thrill of the outdoors together.

Now the final climb on Mount Dhaulagiri.
-- Marge Maagoe

* * * * *

When I was younger, and a fledgling climber, I was once passed on the trail, often beaten to a first ascent, and otherwise made to feel humble by a stocky little guy called Vin. As time and my climbing experience progressed, I was never quite able to overcome my initial impression that Vin was unstoppable, unapproachable, and generally a superior climber. I suppose that I was not only impressed with his never-ending list of climbs, but with the order in which he was able to preserve every detail of the ascent, ferret out long-forgotten data about the people who may have climbed before, and then stow away the report in a maddeningly orderly file cabinet. I don't suppose there is another file cabinet in the whole of the

mountain world quite like Vin's. With his attack on every facet of climbing, I've often thought that Vin was somehow trying to impose his character on the mountains to which he time and again returned. He climbed with a practical determination that made him able to overcome problems and move on in double-quick time. Always there was this idea of speed in the accomplishment. In his writing he probably best expressed his philosophy on climbing; he seldom seemed to want to stop and pick berries or dwell on an untrodden trail. Rather, he was always for going on up as quickly as possible, as if something might win him over to a moment of solitary peace by the wayside.

Vin didn't write much about the joy he derived from climbing, nor of the sublime beauty of the mountain world. He put down his practical experience, almost as if he were a scientist recording the details of some lengthy experiment. He was an unfailing recorder of mountain history, but mostly he was a climber. The mountains were his life, his avocation, and ultimately, his death. The momentum of Vin's mountaineering is now stopped. Only in memory is his marching footfall heard, going deeper into the realm of Night.

-- Nick Parker

* * * * *

I first met Vin the 27th of August in 1966. We were at the Eklutna cabin for a weekend MCA glacier school. He and Bill Hauser had just made first ascents of the Mitre and Ovis, and Bill introduced me to him. He cut quite a figure in his tattered, partly patched climbing garb, padding about the cabin and glacier in well-worn overboots. Hauser was in one of his exuberant moods, and I cornered him for a first-hand account:

"Why, that guy's a professional. He's a lot better climber than I am. I had to run to keep up with him."

"Did you have to rope up?"

"Nope. He climbs so fast you don't have time to worry about the exposure."

Coming from Bill, all this made quite an impression. There were about 16 of us at Pichler's Perch that night. Amidst the chatter Vin sat quietly egregious, making notes in a little book. Next morning in the rain some of us retreated down glacier. Vin and Grace, still virtually strangers, decided this was premature and turned around. It was on this day and occasion they raced each other across Eklutna Glacier, as witnesses will recall.

Vin provoked in many of us the spirit of competition, at least whatever competition we could offer at stealing a first from him now and then. As some of us quickly grew to realize after some discouraging setbacks, this was not easy. Vin had a finely-honed intuition for picking the right peak in the right place at the right time. He was ready to go at the hint of good weather, so it was not unusual to find ourselves climbing behind him. While he fed on firsts, any peak he had not yet climbed could become his objective. Nothing was too small, too wooded, or too insignificant if he had not climbed it. I don't think Dub Bludworth will ever forget accompanying Vin and Grace on their climb of Black Mountain across Kenai Lake and searching for the highest tree.

Yet even Vin's enthusiasm could be humorously fallible in concert with our own. One of his weekend objectives this winter had been Bard Peak, the post-card cleaver between Shakespeare and Portage Glaciers. He thought he could get it in one day with an early start, even in January. Nonsense, I commented. Not even you, I thought, could pull it off in one day now. I explained how Hauser and I had believed a one-day ascent possible in April --only to be foiled when the ice went out--but certainly it wouldn't go one-day in January. The spark was ignited, however, and I figured I'd

better get down there quick. Careful map-reading seemed to indicate one-day possibilities if there were no time-consuming hangups, so early on a Sunday morning in January three mice stole across Portage Lake to attempt to steal the cheese. No such luck! An open moat between lake ice and snout confronted us, and we lost too much time diddling around with attempts to cross. In 25 below weather no one was anxious to get his feet wet. So we turned around and walked back across the ice. Drawing near the parking lot we spotted two figures, one of them in a blue parka. Sure enough, Vin and Grace, out for a day's snowshoe hare hunting in Bear Valley, had caught us in the act. There were a lot of embarrassed laughs, and Vin laughed loudest. This tale would end here if Vin had not returned a week later for his own one-day attempt, which, though it progressed farther, likewise ran out of time.

Vin served the climbing community in countless ways, not the least of which were his duties with ARG. We enjoyed calling him in Anchorage from The Mountain. His deep voice boomed in at 17,200 ft with words inspiring confidence tempered by caution.

"How does it look from there?" we would ask. And he'd give us the latest ESSA forecast.

"We've got clouds on the summit here."

And he would answer, "Well, don't go up there until it looks good."

And we didn't.

-- Bob Spurr

* * * * *