



Schoolteacher Fay Fuller was the first woman known to stand on Rainier's summit. Fay Peak, found northwest of Mount Rainier near Mowich Lake, is named in her honor. Photo: Washington State Historical Society.

What draws women into the wilderness, high onto mountain peaks? Are the impulses the same for men and women? Historically, women have sought out wilderness adventures for the same reasons men have—recreation, companionship and the physical reward of putting one foot in front of the other to ascend a mountain slope. In the Northwest, many women have expressed an interest in seeing and experiencing the unknown by exploring wilderness areas, both close to home and more far-flung. The earliest female explorers had so much more to prove—their fitness to vote, their physical and mental toughness and their willingness to be bold.

Our historical look at women in the Washington wilderness begins with Fay Fuller, who climbed Mount Rainier in 1890, and we'll come back to her one hundred years later.

Fay Fuller was a 22-year-old schoolteacher in Yelm when mountaineer Philemon Van Trump talked to her class about climbing Mount Rainier. The idea enthralled her. She started her ascent with four men and another woman, Edith Corbett, but had to continue without her when Corbett became ill. Above Camp Muir, the team climbed for twelve hours. Fuller refused assistance and worried that if she failed to make the summit, one of the men would have to take her back down. At 4:30 p.m. on August 10, 1890, they reached the top of Mount Rainier.

"It was a heavenly moment. Words cannot describe the scenery and beauty; how could they speak for the soul?" she said. They spent the night in the crater before returning, and Fuller predicted that "a good many women" would follow her example.

Dr. Cora Eaton Smith took up the banner of women adventurers. In 1907, she became the first secretary of The Mountaineers. Smith combined mountain climbing with the cause of women's suffrage. If women were strong enough to climb mountains, they were certainly strong

The First Ladies

A look back at a century of women in the mountains, the ways mountains have inspired women and the women who have shaped our wilderness

By Judy Bentley, Joan Burton, Lace Thornberg and Carla Firey

enough to vote. During the Alaska Yukon Pacific Exposition in 1909 a large number of women joined The Mountaineers on a summit attempt. Sixty-two climbed Mount Rainier from the northeastern side and flew a flag on top bearing the words, "Votes for Women."

Dr. Eaton Smith was the first woman to reach the East Peak of Mount Olympus in 1907 and went on to successfully climb all six major peaks in Washington. In the register on top of Glacier Peak, she wrote "Votes for Women" after her name.

Washington granted women the right to vote in 1910.

Years later, Fay Fuller, who had continued climbing all of her life, said she recommended the climb for those who “want to begin life anew ... The beauty and grandeur and inspiration you will find there will add new life.”

In 1918, Mount Rainier National Park Superintendent Dewitt L. Reaburn made a shocking announcement: **Alma Wagen** would be the first woman to join Mount Rainier's guide staff. Wagen got her start in Minnesota, climbing the tallest “peaks” she could find, which happened to be windmills on the plains. In search of real mountains, she moved to Washington. Teaching high school as a career left her with summers free and she made the most of those long stretches. One summer, she explored the Olympic range, summiting various unnamed peaks as she travelled from Hurricane Ridge to the coast. She spent another summer in the Alaskan backcountry, and after a summer in Glacier National Park, she realized her calling to be a mountain guide for the national parks. As she told *American Magazine*, “There were places to climb and I wanted to teach other women the joy of climbing.”

In the history of Pacific Northwest climbing, the early 1900s are marked by the advent of climbing clubs—The Mountaineers, the Mazamas, the Washington Alpine Club and more—and women played key roles in the development of each of these organizations. Over half of the founding members of The Mountaineers were women.

Anna Louise Strong is better known as a journalist who reported on and supported communist movements in the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, but she made her mark on the climbing scene in Washington in spite of only living here between 1914 and 1921.

Strong came to Seattle a well-educated woman; she had attended Bryn Mawr, earned her B.A. at Oberlin and a Ph.D. magna cum laude from University of Chicago. She had written a novel, a play and a book of poetry. When she was recruited to serve on the School Board, she was the only woman amidst its ranks.

While en route to Seattle, Strong had taken part in San Francisco municipal camp held in California's High Sierra. Looking to start a similar program in Washington, she sought support from the Seattle City Council, Labor Council, YMCA, YWCA, Boy Scouts, Campfire Girls, University of Washington, and the school board—anyone who might be able to back the venture. Finally, the Seattle Park Board loaned a well-known mountaineer, Major E. S. Ingraham, to serve as the leader while Strong coordinated all the logistics.

Strong and Ingraham hosted five camps during the summer of 1916, each with 40 to 50 participants. That fall, delegates from each camp met with Strong and Ingraham to schedule winter training walks and make plans for future camps. Strong had founded the Co-Operative Campers—now known as the Washington Alpine Club.

Another way women ventured into the wilderness was as fire lookouts on mountaintops during World War II. Two whose stories stand out are Martha Hardy and Pamela Bobroff.



To become a mountain guide, Alma pushed herself to the limits of her skills and abilities, such as one 240-mile Mountaineers outing. After summiting Mount St. Helens, the group walked to Mount Adams and then to Mount Hood, summiting both of these peaks as well. Photo: University of Washington Special Collections.



Convinced that summits should be attainable financially as well as physically, Anna Louise Strong organized the Washington Alpine Club. Strong also led the first winter climb of Mount Hood. Photo: University of Washington Special Collections.

Martha Hardy wrote about her summer of 1943 on a 6,000-foot peak called Tatoosh in a book by that name. She was candid about her fears, her mistakes and the fire that threatened her own cabin 3,000 feet below in Packwood. Her descriptions of her friendship with a pet ground squirrel and the beauty of Mount Rainier at sunrise, sunset and by starlight are lyrical.

Pamela Bobroff was the youngest part of a three-generation team who served as fire lookouts and plane spotters in the summers of 1943, 1944 and 1945. She was only 13 the first summer and remembers that Grandma was the cook and woodchopper, Mom did the plane spotting and fire finding, and that she carried the water and raised the flag. They served on Suntop, Miner's Ridge and American Ridge. The U.S. Forest Service got a bargain with that family, the only three-generation team in Washington and Oregon.

An avid hiker long before hiking was popular, Louise Marshall laid the foundation for Washington Trails Association in 1966. She was also the first female board member of REI and a cofounder of the American Hiking Society.



By late 1945 they waited eagerly for news of the war, hoping it was over. To the east in Hanford, secret activities were going on that would end it, but they had no way of knowing that. As World War II drew to a close, lookouts were no longer needed and the Bobroff team returned home, remembering their high elevation summers of service to their country. Today Bobroff says it was the "best time of my life."

Louise Marshall contributed to the Northwest hiking community in several significant ways. Born in 1915, she grew up in New York City and had traveled in

Europe as a girl, so when she married and moved to Seattle, she remembered the guidebooks and outdoor clubs she had known. She joined The Mountaineers and, after serving as a hiking trip leader for a number of years, decided to write a trail guide for trails near Seattle. The club agreed to publish it. The first *100 Hikes* book was hugely successful, but the following books were written by Harvey Manning and Ira Spring, not by Marshall.

She went on to found the Washington Trails Association, to write a hiking guide to the Pacific Crest Trail titled *High Trails*, and to publish a monthly newsletter with trail updates, called *The Signpost*. This publication became a support network for trails, which encouraged readers to contact land managers about trail changes. She organized trail work parties and encouraged hikers to volunteer their time to preserve trails for everyone. She flew to Washington, D.C., to advocate with the National Park Service and the U.S. Forest Service, and was a cofounder of the American Hiking Society.

While climbing activity had increased greatly after World War II, it was still a sport practiced by only a small group, including a growing number of women. **Joan Firey** was one such woman, who, with her husband, Joe Firey, was most interested in "exploratory mountaineering," visiting remote ranges to do routes and summits that had not yet been climbed. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Joan and Joe climbed in the summer and went ski mountaineering in the winter, leaving their three children with babysitters for weeks at a time. Irene and John Muelemanns accompanied them on many trips in the 1950s to the North Cascades and Canadian Rockies.

During the 1960s and early 1970s, Joan and Joe logged many first ascents and new routes in Washington's Northern and Southern Pickets, the Monarch Ice Cap area of British Columbia's Coast Range, the Waddington/Combatant Range, and the Arjuna Group (also in the B.C. Coast Range) and connected new alpine traverse routes in the North Cascades. Women who joined the Fireys on some of the notable climbs included Frances Whitmore, Joan and Joe's daughter, Carla Firey, and Piro Kramar. (You can read a personal account from Piro on page 27.)

WOMEN IN WASHINGTON'S WILDERNESS 1890–1990

1890 — Fay Fuller summits Mount Rainier on August 10, 1890. She is the first woman known to reach the summit.

1907 — Dr. Cora Eaton Smith climbs Mount Rainier and Mount Olympus.

1916 — Anna Louise Strong organizes the Co-operative Campers.

1918 — Alma Wagen joins Mount Rainier National Park as a guide. She leads the John D. Rockefeller Jr. party in 1920.



As she pioneered climbing routes in the North Cascades, Joan Firey studied the landscapes and later crafted mountain portraits, such as this serigraph, *Moonrise-Southern Picketts*, done in 1975.

Accomplished mountaineer Kathy Phibbs considering logistics at Mount Rainier. Photo by Rachel da Silva.

Joan was a member of the all-women team to climb Annapurna in the Himalayas. The team raised money for the expedition by selling T-shirts that said, "A Woman's Place is on Top!"

Joan died in 1980 after a bone marrow malignancy. Her witness remains with us in her many mountain portrait paintings, showing the joy of exploring these beautiful landscapes.

In the 1980s, **Kathy Phibbs** made her mark as a premier mountaineer both in Washington and around the globe. After leading several first female ascents in Peru and Bolivia, Kathy organized the first meeting of Women Climbers Northwest (WCN) in 1983 and, two years later, opened the Northwest office of Woods-women and served as its director. In addition to a demanding climbing schedule, Phibbs also found time to write and developed a character named "Miss Dish" as an alter ego. Miss Dish was portrayed as a separate character who accompanied "that Kathy girl" on climbs or who spoke to others, such as at WCN meetings. As Carla Firey explains, "I think Kathy meant for Miss Dish to appear rational, logical, sensible, and with impeccable manners as a foil to hu-

man folly as embodied by climbers and their behaviors."

One hundred years after Fay Fuller became the first woman known to stand atop Rainier, Phibbs dressed in the spirit of Fuller, in a long skirt and a flat-brimmed hat, and made a centennial climb of the mountain accompanied by 33 women. Phibbs died one year later, in 1991, when she fell while ice climbing in the Cascades. Kathy Phibbs's legacy endures as the WCN remains active today.

From Fuller to Phibbs, all of these women—and many more whom we were unable to include here—shared the traits of enthusiasm, joy, perseverance, competence, integrity and passion. Did these qualities lead them into Washington's mountains, or did the mountains demand these traits from them? We suspect the truth to be a bit of both. ♦



1943 — Martha Hardy and Pamela Bobroff serve as fire lookouts.

1958 — Ladies' Cascade Expedition climbs Eldorado.

1966 — Louise Marshall writes *"100 Hikes in Western Washington,"* and publishes the first issue of *"The Signpost."*

1974 — Joan Firey climbs Mount Terror.

1990 — Kathy Phibbs dresses in the spirit of Fay Fuller and completes a centennial climb of Rainier accompanied by 33 women.

To complete our piece on ambitious female climbers, we asked Joan Burton and Piro Kramar, both avid climbers and WTA members, to share a highlight from their many exploits in the mountains.

Back row, left to right: Una Chalupny, Joan Burton, Betty Manning, Stella Degenhardt. Front row: Ann Curtis, Ginny Mohling and Pat Spring. Photo by Ira Spring.



A Ladies' Cascade Expedition, June 1958

Reflection by Joan Burton

What was it like to be a woman climber in the 1950s? To start with, the gear was not designed for women, but was usually Army surplus clothing and equipment we had to modify to fit ourselves. Women did not usually climb together in groups. One exception was the Ladies' Cascade Expedition, thought up by photographer Ira Spring as a picture story for the *Seattle Times*.

Betty Manning and I were members in June 1958 of the weeklong Ladies' Cascade Expedition to traverse Cascade Pass and Boston Basin and attempt the 8,800-foot-summit of Eldorado. Seven women, including Ira's wife, Pat, backpacked up ridges and meadows to reach Inspiration Glacier before our final assault on the peak. There we camped and looked out over the heart of the North Cascades. The weather was clear and sunny until the last day, in time for the long descent.

I remember sleeping on a thin plastic air mattress in a tent laid directly on glacier ice and shivering all night long. Betty remembers that her mattress was a coiled-up climbing rope. I had never hiked with an exclusively female group before, so I thought the conversations were delightful. Betty brought along her recorder and played for us. We lingered over our meals and savored our coffee. I remember that we represented a range of ages and all got along well, no matter the adversity, such as blisters or the aches and pains of carrying heavy packs.

When the time came to attempt the summit of Eldorado, we discovered steep slopes on either side of the knife-edged ridge. For some reason, Ira asked me to lead out across to the summit. I was so thrilled to be on top, I wasn't afraid, and my boots seemed to float. He must have thought I looked too fearless, so he called out to me to bend over and probe with my ice axe to make the picture seem more realistic. I had previously climbed Washington's six major glaciated peaks, and slept on the summit of Mount Rainier, but the technical aspects of this climb were more demanding. We all felt triumphant that we had made the summit.

The weather changed as we turned around to descend after days of sunshine and clear skies. Suddenly it started to rain, and the wind came up. I remember packing up our wet gear and dropping down steeply through meadows filled with wet false hellebores, which soaked our clothes with every step. Because one of our members was exhausted, I carried her pack in addition to my own. I felt cranky and sad that we were going down. The Ladies' Expedition magic had disappeared. ♦



Joan Burton, now a well-known hiking guidebook author, inflating her air mattress

The North Face of Mount Terror with Joan Firey

Reflection by Piro Kramar

By 1974, I had been in Seattle for four years, which was ample time to get hooked up with Joan and Joe Firey and their friends. Being a weekend climber, I grabbed every chance to go out into the hills, and was occasionally lucky enough to join one or both of the Fireys. In the 1970s, Joan had knee surgery, but six weeks afterward she suggested that the two of us try Terror from the north. This seemed eminently reasonable to me, since at that point I believed that Joan could do no wrong.

We camped near the flank of McMillan Spires, traversed to the base of the climb and settled in for a planned bivouac. The weather was pleasant, and early the next day we climbed simultaneously most of the way. The weather, however, turned nasty, with rain, wind and poor visibility. By the time we reached a small ledge about 100 feet from the summit, it started to snow. A second bivy seemed prudent. We hoped that blinding sunshine would greet us in the morning, so we could finish the climb and descend our route to camp.

It was not meant to be. The next day visibility was down to a foot or so. We decided to skip the summit, since we wouldn't know if we had reached it or not. Descending the way we came was out of the question given the thick fog, so Joan thought we could change direction, descend via a long, deep chimney with large chock stones, and double back west toward Degenhardt.

Once down the chimney, we lost all reference points, and Joan remarked, "Well, looks like we're lost." She was limping badly by this time, so we sought shelter under an overhanging boulder. This gave us protection from the continuous downpour, but not from the constant trickles through cracks in the rock. We were wet and cold and tried to start a fire, but all our matches were wet - no zip-locked bags yet.

Joan took apart her head lamp and placed a few matches near the bulb, managing to dry two matches so at least we were each able to smoke a cigarette. Our food was down to a handful of peanuts and a dry smoked sausage. I was a bit anxious about getting into unknown territory and seemed to go in and out of consciousness.

A well-known phenomenon struck me for the first, but not the last, time—I was curled up at the very end of the pseudo cave, feeling warm and comfortable, and had a vivid picture of two other people shivering near the cave's opening—what a great and effective protective mechanism.

We spoke little, and it wasn't until the gray morning that Joan announced that she had figured out exactly where we were—she had managed to glimpse the Chopping Block nearby. Her plan was to "head towards Mount Degenhardt, a *cheval** a mile-long ridge and so go back to camp." I was impressed—it's one thing to make a mistake, or get lost, but it takes a special human to get out of trouble and stay calm.

Our visibility was much improved, although there was still no blazing sunshine. I looked toward our proposed escape and saw nothing but rime-decorated rocks. Given Joan's increasing problems with locomotion, I suggested—rather strongly—that we find another way. I was both pleased and surprised when Joan acquiesced without any long discussion.

We descended via the Barrier, which I believe was easier than the "a *cheval* on a mile-long ridge" on ice. Once on the trail, I started a slow jog to the road, then hitched a ride to our car in Newhalem. When I drove back up to get Joan, she was still a good mile from the road.

The following week, Joan and Dave Knudson went back to retrieve our gear at the first camp. Dave, not one to waste breath on subtleties, declared that opening a tent that had been marinating for a week did not make his list of "Most Pleasant Trips."♦



Piro Kramar (top) and Joan Firey (above) made a number of first ascents in the North Cascades together in the 1970s. A photo of Piro on an early climb appears on page 2.

**To "a cheval" is to sit astride a ridge as on a horse's back and scoot along the ridgeline using your arms to push yourself forward*