

# Ruth Glacier Expedition Funhogs Anonymous

*Text by Dan Koepke; photos by Shred*



*Base camp with Mount Johnson (left), Mount Wake (center), and Mount Bradley (right).*

On June 2, 2013, Sheldon Air Service's David Lee deposited Klara, Shred, and me on the Ruth Glacier due east of Mount Dickey.

We settled in during the first days of whiteout weather before the weather turned severely clear and enjoyed the company of legendary neighbors Alex Honnold, Renan Ozturk, Freddie Wilkinson, Gerhard Fiegl and Alex Blümel. Gerry and Alex Blümel had just put up "Beauty and the Beast" on The Gargoyle [Ed. note: see the March 2014 Scree]. The Great Gorge makes anyone feel small, and we were amateurs among climbing giants. Freddie spoke passionately about Bradford Washburn's connection to The Great Gorge as we chatted about the awesome history echoing around us. In the 1956 *American Alpine Journal*, available in the MCA's Vin Hoeman Library, [Ed. note: Dan Koepke graciously stores many of the periodicals and journals, including the AAJs, of the MCA's Vin Hoeman Library at his home.] Washburn's article about his first ascent of Mount Dickey [Ed. note: see page 47 of the 1956 AAJ], with photos of The Great Gorge, planted the initial idea which grew to our team's expedition.

## **Mount Dickey via 747 Pass and West Face**

We toured from base camp to 747 Pass, enjoying yawny-dawny views. We left our skis just before the West Face's ridge route steepened. Then, at the shoulder, the ascent flattened with shorter steep sections and more exposure. A small cloud obscured the summit's magnificent panorama just enough to remind us that we were on this side of paradise.

We toasted summiting and safely returning to base camp as we saw Freddie, Alex Honnold, and Renan descending below 747 Pass after summiting via the Southeast Face's 1974 Route [Ed. note: see page 17 of the 1975 AAJ]. Summiting Mount Dickey was a proud success for our team, but more than anything it just felt like a humble dream come true.

## **Mount Barrille via the Japanese Couloir**

The air felt too warm when we left base camp. At the base of the runnel, the debris pile's basketball-sized rocks justified our neighbors' "bowling alley" description. Less than halfway up we agreed to stop before committing further: avalanche danger was high, and both self-arrests and protection would be futile in such warm, slushy snow. Hearing a thunderous crack and rumble



*Klara descending the Japanese Couloir's runnel on Mount Barrille.*

directly above us as Klara down-climbed on belay, Shred and I braced for a slide that never came down the runnel. We all felt relieved to hop out of the runnel back on the glacier. The conditions made any attempt at this route excessively risky. We have never second-guessed backing off.

### **The Mooses Tooth's West Summit and touring north through The Gateway**

Treading steps anywhere along the historically-challenging West Ridge route to the West summit would be delightful, but none of it would be easy. We toured from base camp for a better view of the route up the icefall a little farther north of where we initially considered trying to cross the crevasse field. Then, as Klara picked her way around crevasses and over snow bridges in poor light before dawn, I said, "You do not *have* to keep going." Knowing the best strategy for crevasse-rescue was to do everything possible to stay out of crevasses in the first place, we backed off and returned to base camp. We discussed a second attempt, but never came to a consensus for a plan. Too

conservative for the risks presented by that route in those conditions, ultimately we were willing to err on the side of caution in order to live and hog fun another day. We knew Shred's birthday in the Mountain House would be epic as long as we made it there. We packed up base camp to tour north up The Great Gorge, past The Mooses Tooth, and toward Don Sheldon's Mountain House.

We toured over footprints from the Austrians' camp and later to their camp down the Moose's Back. I was surprised to see footprints crossing the crevassed area a little south of where we backed off a few days before. I realized that our view of the route up the icefall days before was both prudent and costly. I often thought about following those footprints up toward The Mooses Tooth as we spent days looking at them at our open bivouac in the Gateway, where alpenglow colored the Don Sheldon Amphitheater – one night like a cherry atop Denali. I fell asleep each night with one eye on Denali, contentedly relishing our mellow adventure and dreaming of future fun.

### **Don Sheldon's Mountain House before returning to Talkeetna**

From Shred's jubilant birthday celebration until the bittersweet end, we felt fun much more than frustration or regret.

We lapped Telemark Hill for hours in our underwear on June 15<sup>th</sup> before David picked us up with two flight-seers incessantly speaking about aliens who live on the dark side of the moon. I felt like I always do after sojourning to the mountains: born to be wild. While checking in with the National Park Service in Talkeetna, a ranger mentioned a successful second ascent of the "Tooth Traverse," which Freddie and Renan first completed in May 2012 [*Ed. note: see page 45 of the 2013 AAJ*]. I smiled because suddenly it all made sense. Summits are always optional and when you return to Talkeetna, celebrating at the Fairview is mandatory. Crossing the Austrians' paths again, we toasted their success just before the band played "Born to be Wild" at the Funhogs' request.



*Dan Koepke (left), Klara, and The Mooses Tooth from the summit of Mount Dickey.*