

Pass It On®...

Climb the Tallest Mountain You Can Find!

The life of mountaineer Jim Whittaker, first American to summit Mt. Everest and first full-time employee of REI.

In the 1930s and '40s, life in West Seattle was paradise for young boys who loved the wilderness. Puget Sound lay out before them. The Olympic Mountains stood monolithic, beckoning youngsters to venture into their crags and find narrow footholds that would lead them to the top. There were beaches perfect for camping, and the Cascades when they tired of the Olympic range.

Jim Whittaker and his twin brother, Louie, threw themselves into the ruggedness with a zeal that had been swallowed up by civilization a century earlier. Alongside their eldest brother, Barney, they joined the Boy Scouts, got lost for a day with their troop in the woods and, when they aged out of those adventures, joined the Mountaineers club.

After a harrowing climb that required them to cross a crag barely wide enough for their toes, on a cliff so steep the sight of the bottom was lost to their view, Whittaker wrote in his memoir: "That day, only moments apart, we each crossed a gap within ourselves and, in the process, had been exposed not just to danger but to our destinies."

Whittaker went on to work as a climbing guide on Mount Rainier, a mountain considered more difficult to climb than Everest. He joined the Army and became an instructor at the Cold Weather Training Command at Camp Hale, Colorado, the original home of the 10th Mountain Division. It was a time to learn not only how to better navigate an expedition, but also how to navigate the big egos of military leaders. Whittaker later said that training helped him spar with the international and corporate world he would later be enmeshed with.

When Whittaker returned from his Army service, he was approached by a friend to come help him run a garage business that supplied climbing gear to mountaineering enthusiasts. Whittaker became the first full-time employee of REI. He got to work immediately, organizing the stock, the Rolodex of customers and the order system that imported products from Europe. And he kept climbing.

By the 1960s, no American climber had made it to the top of Everest. A Swiss filmmaker contacted Whittaker because of his reputation as a climber and gearhead – the kind of person who knows everything about what you'll need for an expedition, how to pack it and, especially, how to use it properly. The expedition would take a total of four months and feature tons of equipment. It all had to be organized, shipped and reorganized for each climber. Whittaker was the most qualified American, and many say the expedition was a success because of him.

On May 1, 1963, the team summited Everest. Whittaker brought home a small, heart-shaped black stone from the peak, which he had mounted in a gold ring he would wear the rest of his life.

"There was a huge parade through the streets of Seattle," Whittaker writes. "I was given the keys to the city. I kept thinking, 'Look, all we did was climb a mountain.' (But) it began to dawn on me that my life had changed forever."

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