

REMEMBERING A MOUNTAINEERING LEGEND

LOU WHITTAKER 1929-2024

BY ANNIKA S. HIPPLE | SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

As At 6 feet, 5 inches, Lou Whittaker was a towering presence in any circumstances, but he loomed especially large as a mountaineer, right up until his death on March 24, 2024, at the age of 95. Born in Seattle on February 10, 1929, Lou was a veteran of several high-profile Himalayan expeditions but found his true calling closer to home on Washington's highest peak, 14,411-foot Mount Rainier, which he summited 250 times while guiding thousands of clients to the top.

Lou first climbed Rainier when he was 16, together with his twin brother, Jim, who later went on to become the first American to summit Mount Everest. A few years after their first Rainier ascent, the twins began guiding climbers and participating in mountain rescues. In 1969, Lou founded Rainier Mountaineering, Inc., which was the only authorized guiding operation in Mount Rainier National Park for more than 30 years. Now run by Lou's eldest son, Peter, under the name RMI Expeditions, it remains the largest of the three guide services currently operating on the mountain, with more than 2,200 clients per year. Lou's younger son, Win, also guides for RMI. In addition to carrying on their father's legacy on Rainier, both sons have also summited many other major peaks around the world.

In 2016, on assignment for BBC Travel, I had the opportunity to sit down with Lou, Peter and Win in Ashford, a former logging town that serves as the western gateway to Mount Rainier National Park. We met at Whittaker's Bunkhouse, built in 1912 as housing for loggers and mill workers and renovated by Lou and his wife, Ingrid, in 1990 to accommodate climbers and others visiting Mount Rainier. My conversation with the three Whittaker men was full of climbing wisdom and anecdotes from decades spent in the mountains.

What makes Rainier such a special mountain?

Lou: It's a place that can be used as training grounds for any mountain in the world, and a perfect place to learn snow, rock, ice — the whole complexity of mountaineering.

Rainier can make its own storms. So you can sit up there, and the rest of the country or Washington is in good weather, and you can be in a cloud cap up there, and high wind and a storm. You can get above it as well, so you try every time, even if it's crummy to start with.

Peter: It's the most glaciated peak in the lower 48, so that makes it unique with the snow and ice and big mountain features. When you're on top of Mount Rainier or up high and you're cold, and you watch it get light, and then when the sun cracks the horizon in the east, the first rays hit the very top of the mountain and then slowly come down to 13,000 feet where you're at. You're being hit first, and the rest of the state is in the shade, so your day is actually longer and sweeter. It's an amazing thing that happens.



ABOVE: Peter, Lou and Win Whittaker at their base camp in Ashford, Washington, just outside Mount Rainier National Park. Photo by Annika S. Hipple

Lou: That's how the sun moves, and the stars at night are never clearer than up there, when you're above smoke or haze. There's a different feeling up there. It's a unique peak. It rises so high above its base that it's like a moth to a candle. We're attracted to that, to the uniqueness of it.

Win: We do it so much, I think we a lot of times forget how cool it is, and we can be reminded by what comes from a client, such as going up the Cathedral Cap and hitting the top and there's the northern lights and then a shooting star, and the client behind me going, "Wow! Whoa!" And I'm just going, "Yeah, this is pretty damn cool."

Do you have a favorite time of year in the park?

Peter: Rainier is like a moody girlfriend. There are four seasons, and they're completely different, and each one has its unique appeal. Fall, where the bugs are gone, and so are the people, and everything is orange, and the colors are just amazing. Then winter, to be up there on a day when it's brutally cold and a northwest storm is coming in and you're above tree line — you could be in the Himalaya or Antarctica or anywhere. And then the spring — the earth is waking up, and everything's new and fresh and lush, and the colors. Then summer, too. It's a continually changing landscape.

Lou: It's hard to have a best time, because they're all good. The whole season of the whole year up there has its special time.

Win: I like winter in July. Thirteen thousand feet, and it's snowing so hard, and the wind —

Peter: Two feet of new snow. On July 4, it always snows up on Rainier.

Lou: I've never seen it rain on top. It's always snow.

Win: And then to come off the mountain, and it's 85 degrees down here.

What are some changes you've seen over time?

Lou: In the old days, we could fish in Reflection Lake, and the trout were a great size, and you could swim in the lakes. Hidden lakes that nobody goes to, great little lakes. The horse guides and the ski lifts are not there, and they've reduced the campgrounds, so there's not that much camping anymore. So the national park changes, but the mountain itself — I always smile, because it's there, and it's not going to change.

Win: It might erupt.

Peter: It may change, but on its own terms.

Lou: Yeah, St. Helens erupted all of a sudden. We say we outlived a mountain. This one, there's always that potential. The steam vents still have that sulfur

smell. One of the unique places is in the steam vents on top, in the lake in the crater. I led about a dozen guided trips through the steam caves, down a fumarole, and then at the bottom, up the other side. And then a lake at the bottom. We said, "Maybe there's some blind mermaids down there. Let's go down and look." There weren't.

How has climbing changed?

Lou: Equipment's a little better, a little lighter, a little more specialized. But it still takes that person to have the desire, and some that are not in quite good shape need more desire. And some of them fight it, and we'll tell them, "You know, you'll feel better if you come back." "Nah, I gotta get the summit, I'm gonna get the summit." So they'll suffer and summit and maybe come back the next year, do it easier and with the

knowledge of how to do it. It's a lot of mental determination.

Win: Twenty or 25 years ago, there really weren't too many other people up on the mountain, but it's getting super popular. More independent climbers, people that are learning on their own.

Lou: The park has reduced the numbers on the mountain. Some of my climbs were unlimited. Seattle Mountaineers, we took 80 up, my twin and I. That was a mistake. But we didn't kill anybody! Jim was rearguard, and he didn't get down 'til dark. Now it's limited numbers, a safer number.

Peter: The three guide services that are up here — together, we probably turn away 1,500 people that want to climb each summer. The demand exceeds capacities. It's good to have capacities to protect the mountain and balance the resources and everything else.

What's your best advice for less-experienced climbers?

Lou: Conditioning. You want to train cardiovascular, heart and lungs. Swimming, biking, running, climbing, hiking with a pack on. Dr. Kenneth Cooper, who wrote the book "Aerobics," after he climbed with me, said that the best training is to go up and down stadium steps every day, with a pack on. He was devastated by the up and down. His group was all in good shape, but they hadn't gone up and down, and this is up and down.

Peter: I describe high-altitude mountaineering as long-term low-level suffering. It's not always like that, but a lot of times it's not that much fun. It's great being on top, but be prepared to earn your way to the top through some discomfort.

Lou: What throws people off is the change in elevation. Most are born or live around sea level, in the major cities, and to go 14,000 feet in a couple days is a huge effort. And they don't get the full oxygen intake at 14,000 feet. That's why it's difficult. Some people don't acclimate as fast as others. I have a saying that you can love the mountain, but remember the mountain doesn't love you. So you want to be on your toes and aware that there are some inherent risks on any mountain.



Mount Rainier and Edith Creek seen from the Paradise area of the park.
Photo by Annika S. Hipple

What's the most important thing you hope your clients will take away from their Rainier experience?

Peter: We're really the keepers of safety. That's what we're hired for — to manage the risk, make good decisions and hopefully allow people a good shot at the summit. But they have to walk it on their own. A good guide is there, but the relationship should be between the person and the mountain. I think most people, whether they're successful or not, they learn more about themselves. Maybe their tolerance for discomfort, and how they were not being in control. Most people I watch gain some sort of perspective or contrast to the life that they live below.

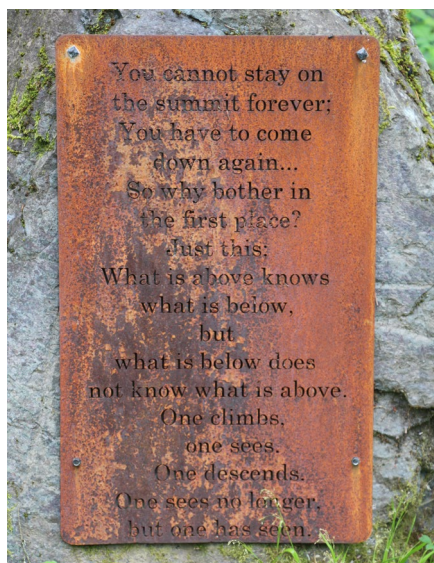
Lou: There's a saying: "Have we vanquished an enemy? None but ourselves." They learn an awful lot about themselves up there, and some are really disappointed to not summit. Some come back, and some realize that it's the journey, not the destination. Just to do it and get your own summit — get to Camp Muir, that's great, that's now 10,000 feet. And then if they can go to the top of the Cleaver — 12,006. And then if they summit, fine, but if they just made Muir, they've done more than most people in the U.S. can do.

Peter: Many people come and climb it their first time and train, condition, this and that, but then there's that person that on their fourth or fifth attempt, they finally make it. They're really diligent and committed and have worked harder than most to finally get there. I enjoy seeing that aspect of human nature.

Lou: Yeah, we see tears on top a lot.

Win: As Dad was saying, to not summit can be disappointing, but it shouldn't be devastating. You can be disappointed, but just being out there is a success to begin with. One of the things I want my clients to take away and pass on to future generations is how awesome it is to get outside and be in the mountains.

Peter: It's hard, though, because when they go home, the first thing people ask is, "Did you make it?" How we gauge success is if you made the summit or not. It's kind of the way we're wired. People hire us to make life-and-death decisions for them, and most often they agree with us, but sometimes they have a summit-at-all-costs attitude. That means you're willing to risk everything, and in the mountains, that can lead to death. That's



ABOVE: Rene Daumal poem. Photo by Annika S. Hipple

when we have to step in and help protect them from themselves and other people. You have to have that ability to not be so focused on the summit, to make the right decisions.

Lou: Sometimes we'll turn just 300 feet from the summit, just so close. But when those storms are that bad, it isn't safe. Some of them still want to go on. Most of them by then realize that we're correct in spinning them, but there'll be people that say, "God, I was so close." Yeah, but you're close to death, too, if you don't turn.

Any final thoughts?

Peter: The thing about Rainier and any mountain once you get above tree line — we talk about all of the baggage that we have, the human race, and the mountain doesn't really care about any of that, so everybody that goes up there gets treated the same. Ethnicity and economic background and gender, all that stuff doesn't really matter. I learned that from my father, that it's that equal, level playing field that leaves all these other things we tend to build up around ourselves that divide us, and it's like there's one race, up high — it's the human race. We're able to do this really close to Seattle, but you get above tree line and it's like any big mountain anywhere in the world. It's refreshing, and I think a great place for people to grow and learn about themselves.

Note: This interview has been edited for length and clarity. Some comments originally appeared in my 2016 BBC Travel article, "The First Family of U.S. Mountaineering."

— Annika Hipple is an award-winning Seattle-based freelance writer and photographer specializing in travel, conservation, sustainability and profiles. Her work has appeared in *Lonely Planet*, *Smithsonian*, *Atlas Obscura*, *Sierra Magazine*, *Bats Magazine* and many other publications.



Lou Whittaker at the guide memorial. Photo by Annika S. Hipple