

Being an incomplete and opinionated History of the Harvard Mountaineering Club

Revisions: Lucas Laursen, Winter 2005
Alexander Cole, spring 2006
Lucas Laursen, fall 2006

Henry S. Hall Jr. founded the Harvard Mountaineering Club (HMC) in November 1924. In its earliest days the club was organized around meetings in the home of Mr. Hall, who specialized in the Canadian Rockies and was also an instrumental member of the American Alpine Club. Two or three semi-formal banquets held each year highlighted both invited speakers and club member's slideshows, often in the Lowell House Junior Common Room. During the year, members trained for summer climbing camps by rock climbing at the Quincy Quarries and skiing and mountaineering in New Hampshire, particularly on Mt. Washington. Summer climbing camps were held in the Canadian Rockies, where qualifying members could earn Active Membership by climbing three glacier-hung peaks. In just a few years, the HMC was publishing a biannual journal, *Harvard Mountaineering*, which reported on its member's activities and ascents.

Around the same time, an unusual Groton graduate enrolled in the College and joined the Club: Henry Bradford Washburn had already succeeded in numerous high-level climbs with his brother in the Alps and published in an adventure series written "by boys for boys." The royalties from his books were quickly invested in a Ford Model A, which turned out to be an asset to the Club. Washburn managed to convince a skeptical group of administrators from the US Forest Service to issue a special permit to the Club to erect a skier's hut on Mt. Washington. Using his Model A and, as he puts it, "plenty of beer," weekend work parties from the Club succeeded in building Spur Cabin at the foot of Boott Spur and Tuckerman Ravine. The cabin was instrumental in winter ski races against the Dartmouth Outing Club and contributed to the HMC's training for larger climbs in Alaska.

Throughout the 1930s and up until the Second World War, HMC expeditions put up first ascents in the Canadian Rockies, the Yukon, and Alaska. Washburn's passion for aerial photography changed the shape of Alaskan mountaineering. He would often perform aerial photographic surveys of a mountain before choosing reasonable routes and convincing the more daring Alaskan pilots to drop him and his supplies on a glacier with other HMCers. The technique gave rise to practically uncontested first ascents on the highest unclimbed mountains in North America, particularly the dramatic ascent and then escape from Mount Lucania in 1937.

During the Second World War, the HMC was temporarily disbanded, but many members continued mountaineering in some capacity in conjunction with the US Army. This ranged from equipment testing to serving in the US Army's 10th Mountain Division, a unit of infantry trained and equipped to operate in mountain environments. Immediately after the war, 10th Mountain Division lieutenant William Lowell ("Bill") Putnam re-formed the HMC by announcing himself President in *The Harvard Crimson*, and executed an expedition that made the second ascent of Mount Saint Elias with fellow HMCers.

The 1950s saw HMC alumni invited on instrumental expeditions to the Himalayas, including Robert H. (“Bob”) Bates and Charlie Houston, M.D., who took part in the 1953 American Expedition to K2, during which Pete Schoening made his legendary boot-axe belay that miraculously stopped six other men from a fall.

Members who joined in the 1960s claim to have been cowed by their predecessors, but their contributions were no less dignified. In one year, 1963, they managed to build a larger replacement cabin at the behest of the US Forest Service, and put up a first ascent on the unclimbed 14,000’ Wickersham Wall on the north face of Mt. McKinley.

The 1970s saw a change in the HMC’s focus from large-scale expeditionary climbing to developing highly technical rock and ice routes throughout New England. Members of the HMC continued putting up new routes and publishing their journal throughout the 1980s, including publishing a guide to ice climbing on Katahdin in the 1984 journal. In 1989, Henry Hall, still a regular figure at the Club’s Thursday night meetings and banquets, passed away.

A successful effort to publish a retrospective seventieth anniversary edition of *Harvard Mountaineering* records contemporary climbs in Alaska, Africa, and Europe, though no exploratory expeditions are reported in the 1990s. The late 1990s are notable for the installation of two bouldering walls in the Club’s Claverly Hall clubroom, and the last known Halloween ascents of Memorial Hall.

In post-millennial years, the club has seen renewed activity on many fronts, including the re-launch of *Harvard Mountaineering*, and renewed undergraduate interest in local climbs and slideshows. Slideshows and dinners have featured alumni like Bradford Washburn and Bob Bates and the Wickersham Wall team, along with contemporary climbers Timmy O’Neill and Alexander Ruchkin, among others. In 2005, members made the first recorded ascents of nine peaks in the Borkoldoy Range in the Tien Shan Mountains of Kyrgyzstan, marking a return to exploratory mountaineering in the Club.

That summer also saw a trip to the climber’s paradise of California for forays on Mount Shasta, the Yosemite Valley, and the Palisades. Wildly popular beginner’s trips kicked off the year’s climbing, which sent members out every weekend to Rumney, Cathedral, the Gunks, ice climbing on Mount Washington, Crawford Notch, Smuggler’s Notch, and more. Intersession saw ten HMCers return to Katahdin, and spring break saw a similar number back in California for climbing in Joshua Tree. Hell, the club even put a new roof on the cabin for good measure. The momentum has not been lost: during summer of 2006, HMC climbs took place on the Mont Blanc Massif, in the Ampezzo Dolomites, and other members had adventures everywhere from the Scottish Highlands to the Spanish Pyrenees, and of course, on New England’s Yankee rock.

The upcoming year has amazing potential: an upstart crew of bouldering fans has converted a squash court in Lowell House into the largest, most modern bouldering facility in Boston. Mountaineering and climbing of every kind can now take place under the aegis of the Club.

And they’ll probably even have a little fun.