

“My best days have been climbing!”

During the Great Recession several years back, Wilderness Watch’s experience was very similar to nonprofits throughout the country. Foundation grants and donations significantly declined. In what would have been our darkest hour, a unique member gave WW an extraordinarily generous gift that instantly righted the ship. It was one of a half-dozen gifts from supporters that both pulled us out of the whirlpool and helped secure our future.

Frances Chamberlin Carter has a deep and abiding love of wild places. She has spent her life hiking and climbing the earth’s most inaccessible places. In 1980, in fact, she became the first woman and the eighth person to climb the highest peak in all 50 U.S. states.

Mrs. Carter, now 91, modestly told an audience several years ago, “Climbing various sorts of mountains and various parts of wilderness has always been a very important part of my life [because of the] beautiful scenery, strong friendships, lives often dependent on one another, and the thrill of reaching a goal make it quite exhilarating.”

Mountain climbing runs in her family. She was only a youngster when she began ascending mountains with her father, a geology professor at the University of Chicago, first in the White Mountains in New Hampshire and then in the Tetons in Wyoming. Mount Chamberlin in Alaska is named after her grandfather, who was also a famous geologist. Later, she climbed with her husband Dave and her good friend, Gertrude Smith with the Alpine Club of Canada.

In addition to her climbs in the U.S., she’s ascended peaks in Canada, New Zealand, Switzerland, Austria, Nepal, Antarctica, Mexico, and South America. Her photographs have an incongruity about them, showing her straddling breathtaking cornices at the top of the world in what ap-

pear to be simple clothes, the kind you’d expect to wear for a hike out the back door: duck canvas pants, a flannel shirt, sunglasses, and a bush hat with a fabric flower.

In her talk several years ago, she showed slides and matter-of-factly narrated her climbing of overhangs and cornices, remembered companions who broke legs, others that suddenly disappeared into crevasses, avalanches that took out the town of Yungay below Peru’s highest peak, Mount Huascaran, which she summited in 1963, and friends who ran out of daylight and camped in snowstorms on hazardous ledges. She herself once ran out of daylight and spent a hair-raising night on a narrow ledge, the weather turning bad. She says simply, “It was hard getting down.”



Frances Carter and her husband Dave on Montana’s highest mountain—Granite Peak.

She also downplays the heroic nature of her accomplishments. “We tied a rope around our waists, carried an ice ax and a pack with spare clothes, and set out,” she said. “Now a days, you’d have a hard hat, slide into a harness, carry metal gadgets, click into a fixed rope, get in trouble, take out a cell phone, and call for a helicopter rescue. We had none of that. We were on our own.”

She climbed Alaska’s 20,000-foot Denali in 1962, the third woman to do so and the first via the West Buttress route. She was the only woman in the seven-person team. Their base camp was at 13,000 feet. It took them 17 days up, five days down. They had to leave flags in the snow to find their way back. She felt like quitting because of the cold but didn’t.

She would probably deny it, but she is a hero to many who have come after her. She is a hero to Wilderness Watch, too. We will work hard to honor her belief in us. ❧

-Jeff Smith