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Nepal's Most Important Non-Climber

Elizabeth Hawley's unique journalistic pilgrimage

Billi Bierling



WHEN I ARRIVED AT TRIBHUVAN INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT IN Kathmandu on March 26, 2018, something felt different. Something was missing. After fidgeting around in my rucksack to find my phone, it suddenly became clear to me what it was. It was my usual telephone call to Elizabeth Hawley informing her that I had arrived in Kathmandu. For the past fourteen years, this had been the first thing I did straight after the plane touched down in the Nepalese capital, and for the past fourteen years, Miss Hawley (as everyone called her) would tell me to make my way to her house immediately or (if I had arrived late) first thing in the morning. “The expeditions are already flocking in, so you’d better get started,” she would often reprimand me.

Suddenly, there was a void. These phone calls had become a thing of the past. Miss Hawley had died exactly two months earlier, on January 26, 2018, at the proud age of 94.

BORN ON NOVEMBER 9, 1923, IN CHICAGO, ILLINOIS, ELIZABETH ANN Hawley became famous in the mountaineering world as “the keeper of the mountains,” which is also the title of Allison Otto’s documentary film as well as of the later edition of Bernadette McDonald’s biography of the American journalist who came to Nepal in 1960 and never left.*

“I guess inertia has kept me here,” was her rhetorical response to those who asked why she never went back to the United States. *Inertia* is certainly not a term I would have associated with Miss Hawley, as she was world famous for hunting down mountaineers all over Kathmandu in her 1964 baby-blue Volkswagen Beetle. She rang them in their hotels as soon as they had put down their bags, summoning them for a pre-expedition interview. She seemed tireless in her quest to find every single mountaineer intending to climb an expedition peak in Nepal and to grill them about their climbs. Even though Miss Hawley described herself as a “city woman” and had no

* McDonald’s biography was first published as *I’ll Call You in Kathmandu: The Elizabeth Hawley Story* by The Mountaineers Books in 2005. In 2012, Rocky Mountain Books published it as *Keeper of the Mountains*.

Elizabeth Hawley drove her Volkswagen Beetle around Kathmandu interviewing climbers for the Himalayan Database she established. She stands outside a hotel with Alexander Abramov, left, and Noel Hanna before their team left for Base Camp on the north side of Mount Everest in 2011. 7 SUMMITS CLUB

interest in exploring the hills or doing any mountaineering herself, she gained remarkable respect in the Himalayan climbing circles.

Many outsiders wondered how someone who had never trekked to Mount Everest Base Camp, never worn a pair of crampons, and had only ever read in books about the fine art of using an ice ax or finding a route up a mountain managed to become so highly acclaimed in the mountaineering community. I guess it was her brilliant mind, her ability to envisage routes, and her endless curiosity about the climbers and their climbs that allowed her to gather an extensive knowledge and feeling about the mountains. Her work is so far unmatched. She was one of a kind and a very special person, especially during her days of gathering the data.

These days, however, ended in spring 2016 when she suddenly decided to give up her career as an archivist. It happened after she had interviewed a North American team that was attempting an unclimbed peak in the Everest region. “When in the middle of the interview, my mind went blank, I knew it was time to stop.” And so she did, and never looked back. No hard feelings, no regrets, no jealousy, completely pragmatic—simply Miss Hawley style. “Why would I be upset about it. I started it, I finished it, and now it’s your job to continue,” she said when I asked her whether it was hard for her to cease doing something she was so passionate about. The question about passion actually came as a surprise to her. “Passionate about my archives?” she responded. “How can you possibly be passionate about a database? I have never been passionate about anything,” was her retort.

This statement was in complete contradiction to the impression I got of her when I first met her in autumn 2001. Back then I had traveled to Kathmandu to attempt Baruntse, a 7,152-meter peak in Nepal, together with my former partner Mike Grocott. She had hunted us down in our budget hotel, which boggled Mike’s mind as he had never expected Miss Elizabeth Hawley to bother with such an insignificant and small expedition as ours. But we were attempting an expedition peak, and no matter how tiny or unimportant a mountain may have seemed to the outside world, Miss Hawley treated them all the same. She wanted her archives to be complete. Mike could not believe his eyes when Miss Hawley finally rocked up in her Beetle at the Hama Hotel in Thamel. I, on the contrary, had no idea who she was but when we sat down for the pre-expedition interview—or shall I call it interrogation—I was fascinated by this woman who wanted to know every single detail about us and our plans on the mountain. When I decided to move to Nepal three years later, this remarkable woman popped back into my mind,

and so I reached out to her offering my help with the data collection. She gladly accepted. This was the beginning of a long partnership, which initially had its trials and tribulations. I had to get used to Miss Hawley's meticulousness, which I found so fascinating during our encounter in October 2001. When I interviewed my first expedition teams and asked them to fill in Miss Hawley's infamous biography forms, which asked for personal details such as addresses, dates of births, marital status, and professions, I would happily accept "teacher" as profession. However, when I handed my handwritten forms to Miss Hawley, she would throw them back at me demanding me to find out what subject they taught because simply "teacher" was not good enough. This is how I learned to be more precise, which has certainly helped me a lot later in life.

So, maybe passion is not the right word to describe Miss Hawley's devotion and fervency for the things she cared for, such as her favorite writer, the English crime author and poet Dorothy Sayers. Whenever I entered her dimly lit flat in the Kathmandu district of Dilli Bazaar for my visits, which occurred daily during the last two years of her life, Miss Hawley would sit at her sturdy oak table hunched over one of Sayers's books that she had already



Climber Garrett Madison and Elizabeth Hawley in 2012 at the Hotel Yak and Yeti in Kathmandu. Hawley arrived in her famous Volkswagen Beetle. KURT HUNTER/FLICKR

read countless times. “The people in these books are my friends,” she would reply when I asked why she was ignoring all the other books sitting on her table. “Why would I read a book with people I don’t know and I don’t like?” she would ask, often giving me instructions to read just the big pile of paperbacks that were given to her by friends and acquaintances but would never read. Reading had always been high on Miss Hawley’s list of things to do. In previous years, when she was still interviewing expeditions, she would start her day avidly scouring the *New York Times* followed by a Nepali paper, and once a week *Time Magazine*. Having read it daily since she was 12 years old, the *New York Times* was certainly her first choice, and she often talked about the day one of her stories made it to the front page of this renowned daily. On July 21, 1982, Elizabeth Hawley found herself on the same flight from Bangkok to Kathmandu as the ailing then-prime minister of Nepal, Bishweshwar Prasad “B.P.” Koirala, who was returning home after medical treatment in Thailand.

“They had taken out the seats in the front row and laid him down there. It was immediately clear to me that he was being flown home to die,” she remembered this last encounter with the man she had always respected very much. “I spent the entire flight writing the story and kept checking with B.P. to make sure I got all my facts right.” Later that evening, just as she was sending her story to Reuters via telex, she received a phone call informing her that the prime minister had died. “It was a sad moment, as he was one of the few remarkable men we had in Nepal and a political leader who stuck to his beliefs.” However, she did not spend a long time pondering it, quickly changed the ending of the story, and landed a scoop on the front page of the *New York Times*. “I felt very proud.” I think it was actually one of the most rewarding moments of her life.

Mountaineering Archives

However, the iron lady, who never married and was never seen with a partner, did not become famous because of this article. She made a mark with her impressive collection of interviews with mountaineers climbing in the Nepal Himalaya. It later became known as the *Himalayan Database*. Her modest and austere apartment, where she lived from 1963 until her very last days, was lined with bookshelves and filing cabinets containing handwritten accounts of thousands of expeditions. The mothballed papers were all neatly arranged and put together with high-quality paper clips. “I don’t like Nepali paper-clips; they get rusty,” she said when she asked me to bring some from Europe.

“But don’t dare buy the cheap plastic ones either.” Over the years, I must have taken about 1,000 high-quality German paper clips to Kathmandu, and the ones she did not like were usually thrown back into my direction—with great affection, of course.

For more than half a century, Miss Hawley collected forms, notes, newspaper clippings, and scrap papers, many of which were held together by sturdy German paper clips, from her interviews with expedition leaders. She would grill mountaineers about their expedition details, their personal data, and the origins and biographical details of their Sherpas, which were extremely important to her. “Some people don’t even know the names of their Sherpas,” she would angrily comment. “And if they do, they often don’t know how to spell their names properly.” Spelling was something Elizabeth Hawley was incredibly fastidious about. She would immediately spot a spelling mistake while glancing at one of the handwritten forms I would give her. I later found out why. “I see my vowels in different colors and I immediately notice when a particular shade is missing.” She had grapheme-color synesthesia. In this case, she perceived a lack of yellow. I was convinced that I had spelled the name correctly, but, as usual, Miss Hawley got the better of me.

Elizabeth Hawley met many famous mountaineers and became close to some of them, such as Edmund Hillary who, with Tenzing Norgay Sherpa, became the first person to set foot on the top of Mount Everest on May 29, 1953. Until her last days, rumors persisted that she had an affair with Hillary, the former beekeeper from New Zealand. “Ed was one of the finest people I ever met, but I never had an affair with him,” she told me in what I considered complete honesty. “I have actually never had an affair in my life,” she said, looking sheepish. Another mountaineer Elizabeth Hawley thought very highly of is the Italian national Reinhold Messner. She met him in the 1970s when he came to Nepal for the first time. “He was young and inexperienced, and it was interesting to see him develop over the years.” The respect was mutual, and in a recorded voice message for her 90th birthday, Messner said, “I met many climbers over the last 40 years, but nobody is as strong in my memory as you, Liz. You understand the climbers and know how they tackle the big mountains. You are the Himalayan spirit.”

MISS HAWLEY’S SPIRIT WILL CERTAINLY LIVE ON IN NEPAL’S CLIMBING community. She was well respected and even though feared by some, she became a true icon of the Himalayan mountaineering scene known for making some of the big mountaineers look small in the interviews. The last two

years of her life, however, she spent most of her time in her first-floor flat as moving up and down the stairs had simply become too difficult for her. She did not mind. She actually enjoyed finally having the time to sit and read all day long and whenever she was asked out for lunch, she would decline. “I am happy where I am, I don’t want to go out,” she would say. She was hardly ever alone though. Her two nurses Dawa Sherpa and Rista Rai lived with her full time for the last five years of her life, and her longtime cook Man Bahadur served her lunch at 10:30 A.M. and dinner at 4 P.M. She adopted these early eating times when her mother came to live with her in Kathmandu at the age of 88. Miss Hawley also had many visitors who were eager to meet the Grande Dame of the Himalaya and have their photos taken with her. She was always happy to receive strangers in her home and chat with them—sometimes later making a cheeky comment after they had left. “They were on sightseeing tour in Kathmandu, and I think I was one of the sights.”

BILLI BIERLING is a journalist and the longtime assistant and friend of Elizabeth Hawley. She splits her time living between Kathmandu; Bern, Switzerland; and her Bavarian home of Garmisch-Partenkirchen. She also ends up living in other places short-term in her capacity as communications expert for Swiss Humanitarian Aid. Since Elizabeth Hawley’s death, she has worked with a team of six data collectors and Richard Salisbury, who has digitalized Hawley’s notes, keeping the *Himalayan Database* going.