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In Memory: Barry Chapman Bishop, 1932-1994: And Away We Go

Bernard Nietschmann

University of California, Berkeley

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In Memory: Barry Chapman Bishop, 1932-1994 And Away We Go

Barry C. Bishop was one of world leaders in scientific and exploratory geography. He was an accomplished scholar, climber, field researcher, photographer, lecturer, and promoter of the geographic sciences. He was a pro. Barry was always excited about science, especially about field research and the adventure of discovering new knowledge. He had many other talents: he was an excellent carpenter (the bunkbeds, deck, and orchid tables at the Bethesda house), a manufacturer of quality tents (Bishop Tents), a shameless punster ("geographers are spatial people"), and an erstwhile organizer (he underlined the book *File Don't Pile*, but left the wrapper on the audio cassette "End Procrastination").

Barry bubbled over with energy, exuberance, enthusiasm, mirth and the sheer delight of enjoying his family, life, friends and colleagues. His mop of salt and pepper hair, waxed mini-handlebar mustache, twinkling eyes, upraised eyebrows and feigned look of surprise, and delightful ho-ho-ho laugh were Bishop trademarks. He loved his work, friends and colleagues, and it showed in everything he did. And we loved him. One of his Committee for Research and Exploration staff at National Geographic said, "With Dr. Bishop, I never laughed so hard in my life, and this was at *work*" !

A telephone call or meeting with Barry invariably ended with another Bishop trademark, "And away we go, " he'd say, which for Barry meant let's get on with overcoming the difficult, the impossible, the bureaucracy, the dunderheads; let's do it right and let's have some fun in doing it. To be on *any* mission with Barry, from doing field research, to going to National Geographic, to going to the hardware store was always so much fun and always so interesting -- so *Barry*.

The Bishops' house in Bethesda was a suburban base camp of activity, logistics preparations, deliveries. "Oh, Barry!" his wife, Lila, would say -- part in mock exasperation and part in delight -- when UPS would deliver another mail order gadget or a new exercise machine that would get him in shape for the next field project, or when Barry would be looking from room to room for his day pack, or when he'd cover the basement floor with field equipment.

On May 22, 1963 Barry was one of the American team that reached the summit of Mount Everest. His scientific and climbing abilities put him on many expeditions. He worked on research projects on the 1956-57 Argentine Expedition, the Greenland Ice Cap, and the High Mountain Research Program in Alaska and Yukon Territory, Canada, to name but a few.

He is best known for the expeditions and research in the Himalaya. He was climatologist and glaciologist on Sir Edmund Hillary's 1960-61 expedition to Himalaya. After the 1963 Everest ascent, Barry returned to Nepal many times, often accompanied by Lila. For his dissertation field research in Geography at the University of Chicago, Barry and Lila with their children Brent and Tara drove 10,000 miles to Katmandu to spend 1968-1970 studying the culture-economics and environments of the different peoples of the Karnali region, Western Nepal. Subsequent work in Nepal included serving as chief of field operations for the 1983-84 Boston Museum-National Geographic Society Sagarmatha Khumbu (Everest) photomapping project. Lila began to lead her own treks to Nepal, and their son, Brent, became an accomplished climber in his own right, and following his father's footsteps reached the summit of Everest in May, 1994. Barry and Brent are the only American father and son to have scaled Everest. Besides exploration, the Bishop family fostered achievement in academics: their daughter, Tara, is completing her Ph.D. in Psychology.

Born in Cincinnati, Barry studied geology at the University of Cincinnati, where he met Lila. After graduating in 1954, Barry served in the Antarctic Projects office of the U.S. Airforce, and from 1955-1958, worked as scientific advisor to Rear Admiral Richard E. Byrd. During this period he also earned a masters degree in geography in 1957 from Northwestern University.

In 1959 he joined the staff of the National Geographic Society as a picture editor. During the next 35 years at the NGS, he held positions in the *National Geographic* magazine's editorial and

photographic divisions, recommended and researched environmental and geographical articles, and wrote or photographed 10 articles himself, including October 1963 classic, "How We Climbed Everest."

Barry was as equally determined to pursue academics at the highest level as he was climbing or National Geographic assignments. The University of Chicago was widely acknowledged as having one of the top graduate departments in Geography. Barry took a leave of absence from National Geographic to complete the required course work, and in 1968-70 the Bishop family lived in western Nepal with Barry while he did his dissertation field research.

In 1971-1972 Barry took another leave from the National Geographic Society to come to the University of Michigan as a Visiting Lecturer in the Department of Geography. At Michigan, and later as Visiting Adjunct Professor of Geography at Arizona State University in 1979, Barry further developed his ideas on cultural ecology, mountain people and habitats, and geographic patterns that shaped his University of Chicago Ph.D. dissertation. Barry earned the coveted Ph.D. in 1980. Many people worldwide felt they had a stake in that fabled dissertation.

Barry worked off and on for the next 10 years perfecting his dissertation for publication. To this he brought his many skills honed at the National Geographic Society as photographer, editor, layout designer, and professional geographer. Published in 1990 by the University of Chicago Press, Barry's *Karnali Under Stress* became an instant classic, recognized as the best of the cultural ecology approach and one of the standard-setting studies of mountain peoples and environments.

Barry knew people from everywhere and from all walks of life. At Ann Arbor, Barry was being introduced to Supreme Court Justice William Douglas who had come to give a lecture, but Douglas cut in, "Hi, Barry," he greeted. "Hi, Bill," Barry replied. In 1992 after the Association of American Geographers Annual Meeting in San Diego, Barry was enroute to San Francisco with the Geography Research Rally Tour, along Highway 1, when at a lookout over kelp and sea otters near Monterey, a battered VW van pulled alongside and a mid-30s man in faded Levis and flannel shirt got out with telescope in hand, "Hi, Barry," he said.

Barry told Lila that of all his accomplishments he was proudest of three: being part of the National Geographic Society's Committee for Research and Exploration, earning his doctorate at Chicago, and climbing Mount Everest.

His devotion to and passion for research, science and scientific exploration guided all Barry's positions and assignments at National Geographic. As Chief of the Geographic Liaison office, 1980-1989, he was the Society's main bridge to the academic and scientific communities. To increase reciprocal exchanges between universities and the National Geographic Society, he developed and directed the Intern Program that each year brings some 20 young college students to work in the many divisions of the Society. Highly successful, this program now has over 200 alumni, many of whom became professionals in the geographic sciences or at National Geographic.

Work with the Committee for Research and Exploration gave Barry the most satisfaction at the Society. In 1984 Barry was made Vice-Chairman of the Committee for Research and Exploration, and in 1989-1994 he served as the CRE's Chairman. Each year the Committee distributes some \$4 million dollars to about 250 scientists for field research around the world in the geographic sciences. As Chairman of the CRE, Barry worked enthusiastically and tirelessly to foster broad, field-based geographic research. He helped many young scientists get their start doing field research.

During the CRE meetings at the National Geographic building in Washington, when getting through the large pile of proposals seemed daunting, Barry would call a break, and there in the richly appointed meeting room, with its 30-foot-long mahogany table, the chandeliered ceiling, the oil painting-laden walls, Barry would lead the 18 distinguished scientists in calisthenics.

Barry's approach to overcoming the Three R's of Bureaucracy (roadblocks, rules and restrictions) was to make a frontal assault. Barry's battles with the bureaucracy at National Geographic were legend.

National Geographic Society President Gil Grosvenor said of Barry, "he wasn't cut out for bureaucracy," which everyone took as a compliment to Barry.

For his many achievements Barry received many awards. National Geographic presented him with the Franklin L. Burr prize in 1961 and the Hubbard Medal in 1963. The University of Cincinnati gave him the William Howard Taft Medal in 1963, a Distinguished Alumni award in 1990, and an honorary doctorate in 1994. He received an award for his photography of the American Mount Everest Expedition from the National Press Photographers Association in 1963. The Association of American Geographers recognized his contributions to geography with an Honors Award presented at the annual meetings in Atlanta, 1993. The National Geographic Society posthumously honored Barry with the Distinguished Geography Educator award at the annual meeting of the National Council for Geographic Education in November, 1994. Barry's passion for geography, education and scientific exploration was manifest in the work he contributed as a member of the board of directors of the Woodlands Mountain Institute, Yosemite National Institutes, Population Reference Bureau, and Explorers Club.

Barry retired from the National Geographic Society in July 1994. He was to continue to be a member of the Society's Research Committee. Barry's dream was to live in a place that had some of everything he loved most: academics, mountains, nature, new challenges, and access to a good airport so he could attend the eight per year CRE meetings in Washington, D.C. Barry and Lila selected Bozeman, Montana. They sold their Bethesda house and bought a piece of land that had no roads between it and Yellowstone, and they bought an historic house in Bozeman where they would live while Barry oversaw and helped build their mountain retreat home. Barry joined Montana State University as an adjunct professor in Earth Sciences. The university was a ten-minute walk from the house. Barry set up an office at home and one at Montana State. He was preparing to write a book on field research, not how to do it, but why it is done; a book by a master field researcher to excite the next generation, to tell the stories of why we go *to be in* the places, *to be with* the people, *to be within* the environments. Lila had successfully moved her orchids from Bethesda and was turning her attention to get her second career going -- after teaching for 16 years at Sidwell Friends School, she retired to study landscape gardening in which she'd received a degree in 1993.

On Saturday, September 24 Barry and Lila were driving from Bozeman to San Francisco. Their son Brent was to receive an award for his May, 1994 Everest climb (where his team removed some 2000 pounds of climbing equipment trash). Barry was to introduce him. Tara would come from nearby Oakland and meet them. It would be a family get-together. Barry was so proud of Brent. The feeling was mutual, Brent later said, "On Everest I learned to appreciate my Father more. I walked in his footsteps, I felt what he'd gone through. Every agonizing step, I felt it. It deepened my respect for him, for what he'd done."

Barry was driving and Lila was napping in the front passenger seat. Barry somehow lost control of the car and it went off the road, and rolled three times, 11:30 AM, on Highway 15, near Pocatello, Idaho, five hours into the drive. Barry was killed instantly. Lila suffered two broken ribs. Tara and Brent flew to Pocatello. When their mother was released from the hospital they took her to the scene of the accident in a taxi cab. The taxi driver gave them flowers. Brent and Tara put prayer flags at the accident site. They did a ceremony for their father, one they'd learned in Nepal. They poured some Bombay Blue Sapphire gin on the ground, the drink their father favored when he'd return home from National Geographic after an especially fine day promoting solid geographic field research or doing battle with the bureaucracy dragons, or, even better, both.

Brent Bishop selected this poem for his father's memorial. He said it was his father's favorite.

You cannot stay on the summit forever, You have to come down again... So why bother in the first place? Just this: what is above knows what is below, but what is below does not know what is above.

One climbs, one sees. One descends, one sees no longer but one has seen.

There is an art of conducting oneself in the lower regions by the memory of what one saw higher up

When one can no longer see, one can at least still know.

-- Rene Daumal, *Mount Analogue*

To honor Barry's contributions and life, and his commitment and devotion to research, the environment and education, Lila has specified three appropriate funds:

Committee for Research and Exploration. A permanently endowed fund in Barry's name has been established to support scientific research and exploration.

Sagarmatha Environmental Expedition. To support continued removal of trash from Mount Everest under the supervision of Brent Bishop.

Yosemite National Institute. In support of ongoing environmental education and scientific programs.

Contributions may be sent to the following address, and will be forwarded to the appropriate cause:

National Geographic Society
Barry C. Bishop Memorials
Post Office Box 37285
Washington, D.C. 20013-7285
USA

This remembrance of Barry is only a snapshot of the tremendous person he was, and his many accomplishments. He was so personable, so giving of himself, that we each knew him in different ways. Barbara Moffet at National Geographic wrote up a summary of Barry's accomplishments which was helpful in writing this remembrance from San Jose, Costa Rica, as was a wee sip of Blue Sapphire to recall those times -- those, good, good times.

Here's to you, Barry, whatever summit you are on. And here's to you too, Lila, Brent and Tara, that was one heck of a wonderful man and he had a wonderful family. You touched us all.

And away we go.

Bernard Nietschmann is Professor, Department of Geography, University of California, Berkeley, and a Member of the Committee for Research and Exploration, National Geographic Society. He first met Barry at the University of Michigan in 1971. Himalayan Research Bulletin appreciates Barney Nietschmann's willingness to prepare this loving tribute at short notice and great distance.