**Introduction**

This article shares information about the number of first ascents and new routes that Fred Beckey climbed.

**Forward**

I don’t claim to have known Fred Beckey very well, but I think he would probably bristle at the thought of someone doing a statistical analysis of his climbing career. So, I beg Fred’s indulgence.

First a full disclosure about myself. I was born and have lived my whole life in Washington State. Any bias on my behalf about the state of Washington in any of the articles on this website is intentional.

The information in this article will certainly surprise some people, disappoint others and probably upset numerous Beckeyphiles.

Even before Fred Beckey passed away in late October 2017, I had read and heard speculation about the number of first ascents Fred had made during his long climbing career. But just that – speculation.

In the book *Challenge of the North Cascades* by Fred Beckey, it includes an Appendix in which he chronicles his climbs between 1936 and 1968. But this is just a starting point. Fred was an active climber for the remainder of the 20th century and into the 21st century.

Some people have proclaimed he had climbed thousands of first ascents and that there was no place on the North American continent where he had not climbed. Totaling up the climbs listed in the appendix between 1936 and 1968, the claims of thousands of first ascents seemed like an exaggeration to me. Those years covered his teenage years to age 45. It didn’t seem possible to me, for him to keep up that pace as he got older. See Chapter 12 for an article on this subject.

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There were eleven contemporary, primary sources I relied upon for my research.

The first major source was the American Alpine Club’s annual journal of trip reports, which is available on-line. The second valuable source was The Mountaineers annual journals which are available on-line too. And in late February 2018, I discovered that the Canadian Alpine Club had decided in mid-December 2017 to make their annual journal of trip reports available on-line for free. The fourth primary source was the Mountaineers Summit Registers, housed at the University of Washington Special Collections Library. Also, the Grand Teton Range summit register website is a limited but never the less valuable primary source. The University of California, Bancroft Library Collection, of Sierra Club Mountain Registers and Records provide a few records on Beckey’s climbs in the California. The Whyte Museum collection of summit register entries for the Canadian Rockies provided 17 entries. The North Vancouver Museum and Archives collection of summit registers included a half dozen entries. Dan Davis’s climbing journal is a valuable and accurate resource, which is also stored at the University of Washington Special Collections Library. Ed Cooper’s climbing diary proved invaluable too. And finally, the eleventh valuable source was the spreadsheet of Fred’s climbs, based his diary.

I also took advantage of the American Alpine Climb’s book lending program, by having numerous guidebooks shipped to my house for me to review.

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**Key Definitions**

Now before I share the information about which people are eager to know, I need to provide a much-needed clarification on a couple of definitions. This is bound to cause controversy amongst the climbing community.

**First ascent**: The first successful ascent to the summit of a peak.

**New route**: The first successful completion of a route on a peak or rock climbing feature, but not the first climbers to reach the summit.

You only have one chance to make a first impression.

You can only lose your virginity once.

You can only be the first person or people to get to the summit of a peak, once.

Here is an example, to make sure everyone is on the same page.

Forbidden Peak

On June 1, 1940: Lloyd Anderson, Helmy Beckey, Jim Crooks, Dave Lind and Fred Beckey climbed the West Ridge of Forbidden Peak. They were the first human beings to reach the summit.

On June 8, 1952: Jack Schwabland, Don Wilde and Fred Beckey ascended the North Ridge of Forbidden Peak. These climbers were not the first people to reach the summit of Forbidden Peak. But they established a new route to the summit.

On May 25, 1958, Ed Cooper, Don Gordon, Joe Hieb and Fred Beckey climbed the East Ridge-Direct, of Forbidden Peak. They were not the first homo sapiens to reach the top. However, they established a new route to the summit.

Finally, on July 15, 1959: Ed Cooper and Fred Beckey scaled the NW Face of Forbidden Peak to reach the summit. Guess what? They weren’t the first people to reach the summit. But they pioneered a new route to the top.

Climbers and authors of guidebooks tend to conflate a new route with a first ascent. There is a difference!

Also, when putting together the list of Beckey’s climbs I did not apply a prominence value to alpine climbs nor a minimum number of pitches or elevation for rock climbs, for the climb to qualify to be included on Beckey’s list of climbs. This list is an effort to put together a historical record of all his successful and unsuccessful climbs.

**Fred Beckey’s career totals**

Drum roll, here are Fred Beckey’s current career totals.

* First ascents: 260
* New routes: 383
* First Winter Ascents: 11
* Successful climbs: 1237
* Unique or different alpine mountains or peaks climbed: 639

Of all the successful climbs that Fred Beckey made, 53% of them were a first ascent, new route or first winter ascent. That is impressive!

Am I going to proclaim that these numbers represent a complete, accurate total of all his climbs?

No!

**What is not included in the above totals**

In the Appendix of *Challenge of the North Cascades*, it states “First ascents of peaks, faces, buttresses, ridges, or new routes are in italics.”

A first free ascent is a repeat of the first ascent without aid, so are not included in the first ascent totals. There are 16 circumstances in which a first free ascent is claimed to be a first ascent.

I found two circumstances in which a claim of a first ascent was made, but evidence was found that another climbing party ascended the peak first. In another situation a first ascent was claimed but another climbing party reached the summit first, however a new route was established instead.

Three times a new route was claimed, but another climbing party had pioneered the route first. Seven times a new route was claimed, but it was a route variation instead.

Regarding claims to first winter ascents, twice the ascent date occurred after the beginning of spring time. One time the date of the ascent was prior to the official beginning of winter. In another circumstance, on the first winter ascent of Mt Robson two sets of climbers acted independently. Leif-Norman Patterson and Alex Bertulis climbed the Berg Glacier route and reached the summit two hours before Fred Beckey and Tom Stewart reached the summit via the Robson Glacier route. In fact, Patterson and Bertulis passed Beckey and Stewart within shouting distance, as they descended.

**Beckey Deliberating Deciding Not to Complete a Route to the Summit**

During my research I came across evidence, where Beckey would claim that everyone in the climbing party reached the summit, when if fact that was not the case. In all these circumstances, it was recorded as a successful ascent, most as first ascents.

The first instance was a climb of The Hook, via the West Face (Washington State), on August 29, 1948 with Herb Staley and Pete Schoening. Here is an excerpt from The Mountaineers 1948, page 27.

*After lunch at a welcome creek, we clambered 1500 feet in the hot sun to the lowest of the Rat Creek peaks, namely, The Hook. The big monolith gave us no end of trouble for the last 30 feet had nary a piton crack. After numerous tries, Pete*(Schoening)*planted a cod line across the pointed summit and pulled up a spare rope which I secured with two pitons and an expansion bolt. As Pete almost reached the vertical tip on prussik slings, the rope showed signs of slipping so he hastily retreated. As far as we were concerned, however, that was close enough to call it another first ascent.*

The next circumstance I came across was documented in the book: *Desert Towers: Fat Cat Summits & Kitty Litter Rock* authored by Steve “Crusher” Bartlett. The book includes an article written by Eric Bjornstad of the climb of the East Face of Middle Sister on April 20, 1967, located in Arizona. The climbers were Eric, Pat Callis, Harvey Carter and Fred Beckey.

*An hour later I (Eric Bjornstad) reached the summit of the Middle Sister just as the sun completed its arc to the horizon. I anchored an 11mm rope to the highest of the three bolts I placed and abseiled to the belay shelf, cleaning the pitch as I descended. Somber faces greeted my return. Fred pointed across the valley to a pickup truck with a red light atop and a Navajo policeman patiently waiting beside it. We had broken the 11th commandment-we had been found out. Fred commented as he often did, “It’s been climbed now, no reason for me to go up.”*

The third documented incidence I came across was from the book*Postcards from the Trailer Park*written by Cameron Burns, which contains an article he wrote in 2004 titled*The Unbearable Greatness of Fred (2004).*The article contains the following passage.

*“If it has been done, Fred will just turn around and go home.” Said Doug Leen, remembering a jaunt in the early 70s. “We ended up going off for about a week in the desert, climbing all these pinnacles. We climbed Dark Angel*(Located in Arches National Park in Utah),*and I got up to within twenty feet of the top and I said, ‘Fred, there’s a sling up here.’ Fred would literally pull me down the pinnacle. He’d say, ‘Let’s just get out of here, we’re wasting our time.’ And he’d just tie me off and I couldn’t finish the climb. It had been climbed before and he wanted a first ascent.*

*On some climbs, if the first man in a two-man team has made it up, that’s enough for Beckey.*

*“For instance,” recalled Eric Bjornstad, “I made the first ascent of Zeus*(Located in Utah, via the NE Face on September 26, 1970) *and Fred said: ‘Oh well, you’ve reached the summit; why should I come up?’ It would still be written up as Fred and Eric’s first ascent of Zeus, even though Fred didn’t lead any of it. He just belayed me the whole distance. He would do that a lot, not go to the top. He’d just say, ‘It’s a waste of time. The climb been done.’ It would be written up, and a lot of the times it would become known as ‘Beckey’s route’ when he didn’t even touch the rock. He didn’t reach the summit of Sewing Machine Needle*(Located in Utah, via The Treadle Route with Reid Cunduff, Lou Dawson and Fred Beckey in May 1975.) *either.”*

On the climbing lists, under the attempt or “AT” column, I designate these climbs as “DS”. Beckey deliberately decided not to complete the route to the summit.

**Request for input from Climbing Community**

The list of Beckey’s successful climbs and unsuccessful climbs can be found on this website.

The list also includes other activities, where he did not make a summit attempt.

Beside sharing these numbers to satisfy people’s curiosity, I also want people to review the list of Beckey’s climbs and provide missing information about a climb that they did with Beckey, along with feedback on any climbs not accounted for on the list. As you’ll see, there are a lot of blank boxes, incomplete information or missing information for Beckey’s climbs, especially early in his climbing career. If there is any hope of compiling a complete and accurate list of Beckey’s climbs and the information about that climb, his climbing partners or their surviving family members need to share information with me.

I welcome the climbing community’s input on Beckey’s list of climbs and will gladly update the information. However, evidence will need to be provided to me. This can be in the form of a climbing journal or dairy. Also, a trip report, photographs, video, summit register entry, are acceptable.

The key information that is lacking for some of Beckey’s climbs are:

* Specific date
* Climbing route
* Other people in the climbing party

Contact information will be provided on this website.

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