

# The Sierra Register Committee

## *A quest to preserve historic mountaineering registers*

### ***Preface - September 2007***

It's now been more than twenty years since I first entered the movement to preserve historic mountaineering registers in the Sierra. The summer of 1987 began what I thought would be life long endeavor, but ended much more quickly. On August 11, 1988, my best friend and co-founder of the Sierra Register Committee died suddenly in a rock slide on Devil's Crag #8. In his absence I continued the quest to bring about public awareness about the importance of historic mountaineering registers and advocating their preservation under stringent guidelines. Nevertheless, few people wanted to listen to my concerted efforts through both written correspondence and published articles. In total, the mountaineering publications truly had little interest. I continued climbing for six more years, albeit on a much more constricted basis. In 1994 I abandoned mountaineering and began photographing the wilderness with a large format view camera.

Fast forward ten years. In the summer of 2004 Tom Knudson, writer for the Sacramento Bee, contacted me about current register thefts and my past involvement with register preservation. On October 24, 2004, the Sac Bee published his research in an article titled "Into Thin Air" *Climber's notes left on Sierra summits are vanishing - and no one knows why.*

Internet article address. <http://dwb.sacbee.com/content/news/story/11201045p-12116915c.html>

A few months later, National Geographic Adventure Magazine contacted me with the same questions. Internet address [http://www.nationalgeographic.com/adventure/0502/q\\_n\\_a.html](http://www.nationalgeographic.com/adventure/0502/q_n_a.html) Bottom line, both writers asked, "who is stealing registers"? Although a legitimate question and concern, had I known whom was stealing registers, that person(s) would have long ago found themselves with three free meals and a cot in a small room at tax payer's expense.

While I maintain an interest in mountaineering history, my interest in register activities died long ago. Nevertheless, I continue to field questions about the evolving problem with people removing registers.

### ***Introduction:***

The morning of July 29, 1987 began with great excitement. The prospect of seeing the Midway Mountain summit register placed by Sierra pioneers Farquhar, Colby, and Price in 1912 that was disclosed in Steve Roper's "A Climbers Guide to the Sierra Nevada" was to be the highlight of our trip. Early that morning, Mark Hoffman, Mark Tuttle and I filled our day packs with rope and snacks for the day as we headed off toward Midway's unclimbed South face. Three pitches of 5.7+ lead to easy scrambling and the top.

It was nearly a race to see who could hold the register first. At the 13,600' summit Hoffman dug through the rocks to unearth the container, then slid off the lid. The old register was gone. Over the next ten minutes we carefully read each entry in the 1969 register until finding the evidence we'd been dreading. A 1979 entry by a group calling themselves "The Purple Mountain Gang" wrote, "*Note the turkey's with the mountain numbers in the original register, which Sierra Clubbers must think is missing, but which we stole.*" They signed, Mark Farkel and Otis Jasper Russell.

Having a high regard for the mountains and God Who created them, we made it a point to control our tongues in the mountains, but Mark and I both cussed the thieves and threw rocks in anger! This wasn't the first time Hoffman had seen the PMG's less than noble activity. Four years earlier he'd climbed Mt. Dade and found the PMG had taken the Dade register and replaced it with a register from a Colorado summit. Although I wasn't there, I can recall Mark vividly telling the story about the Purple Mountain Gang's boast over the "Register Exchange Program" in which they'd take registers from other summits and switch them onto another peak.

Angered over the Midway theft, Mark Hoffman set out on a quest to recover the register and bring these guys to justice. For weeks we made call after call to the Sierra Club since this was a Sierra Club placed register. Finally we were able to reach executive committee member, Michael McClosky, who was sympathetic to the theft, but stated that overseeing such activities were beyond the Sierra Club's current scope. The Sierra Club's help was a dead end. We then contacted the Chief Backcountry Ranger of Sequoia Kings Canyon National Parks, Paul Fodor. Unfortunately, Mr. Fodor echoed the same sentiment. The NPS is not well enough staffed to pursue mountaineering artifact based thefts. Sorry.

We knew something had to be done, but what?

### ***Formation of The Sierra Register Committee***

In early February Mark called David Brower at his Berkeley home and discussed the current problem. Being sympathetic and helpful, Brower invited Mark and I to meet with him on February 15. The privilege to meet one of the Sierra Nevada's last generations to explore and climb the last unclimbed places was overwhelming. Despite our awe for the man, we found that Dave, as we came to call him, was just like talking to our grandfather.

Brower spent several hours discussing his climbing days with Norman Clyde, Hervey Voge (author of the first two guide books), Ansel Adams and what it was like on the Sierra Club High Trips. In fact, Brower and Voge had much the same interest in old registers that we had. In 1934, Brower and Voge traversed the length of the High Sierra from the Kearsarge Pass area to Yosemite. During their "knapsack survey of routes and records" they climbed 59 peaks in 69 days - a feat still not repeated today.

Brower's advice is what truly formed the Sierra Register Committee. As an advisor, he recommended a seven part program focusing on education and preservation of existing historic registers. His urging was underpinned with the statement, "*If you guys are truly upset about this, you'll do something about it instead of making a bunch of noise. The world is full of noise makers, but short on activists.*" During the following months we met other Sierra pioneers, Jules Eichorn, Hervey Voge, Dick Leonard, and Marge Farquhar. Each one echoed Brower's sentiment that something needed to be done and each pioneer reinforced and endorsed our project.

### ***A Six Part Program***

Under the advice of Brower, Eichorn, Leonard, Voge and Farquhar, we developed our Six part program which was drafted as follows:

- 1. Register removal criteria, written by David Brower. Remove historic registers which are either full or in peril of loss caused by the weather and elements. In peril of loss is generally a condition of badly damaged, but can pertain to a published location of a significantly old register. Registers removed for*

*preservation are to be placed in the Sierra Club Archives since this was the Club's long standing tradition stemming from the turn of the twentieth century under John Muir and his fellow explorers. The current location for the archives is UC Berkeley's Bancroft Library.*

- 2. Anchor all register boxes to the summits to prevent their theft. (Register boxes were being stolen as well.)*
- 3. Manufacture new aluminum register boxes to place on summits.*
- 4. Upgrade all deteriorating register containers to increase longevity. PVC was commonly used, but boxes whenever placed when possible. (It was later discovered, however, that some containers became wet inside, and others did not. Uncertain as to why. The PVC containers were abandoned after two years.)*
- 5. Place instructional cards in all historic registers to increase awareness about the Sierra Club Archives. These cards increase the odds for proper preservation registers removed by other concerned climbers. The idea here was that many climbers removing registers were well intentioned, but couldn't find out where to send registers for preservation.*
- 6. Place photocopies of historic registers on the summits from which they came.*

Mark and I undertook this project without any outside financing. In the first year our expenses exceeded \$200. Much of our expense was photocopies of registers removed over 30-50 years earlier.

The drafted plan of the activities under the Sierra Register Committee was endorsed additionally by the National Park Service and included a written and signed Memorandum of Understanding between Robin Ingraham, Jr. and Superintendent of Sequoia/Kings Canyon NP. Verbal endorsements were provided by Ron Mackie, Yosemite Chief Backcountry Ranger. The Forest Service didn't see the need for an MOU.

### ***Death on a Mountain***

During the first summer of activities Mark Hoffman and I spent numerous weeks climbing throughout the Sierra in search of historic registers, not much different than Voge and Brower 54 years earlier. Tragically, on August 11, 1988, a rock slide swept Hoffman down a steep chute on Devil's Crag #8, then over a 50' cliff to his death. The story is well chronicled in Eric Blehm's 2007 book, "The Last Season".

In the winter of 1988-89, Mark Marden, one of SIERRA magazine's editors, penned an article for the Jan/Feb 1989 publication outlining Mark's untimely death and goals of the SRC. Unfortunately, Marden's article did more harm than good as he omitted the fact that the SRC was created only after careful consideration and consultation with noted Sierra pioneers. Furthermore, Marden did not delineate the fact that we had stringent removal criteria, full or in peril of loss, but rather wrote that whenever finding an old register we removed it for preservation in the Sierra Club Archives. The omission and misleading information generated a very uncomfortable dispute with a Southern California group of climbers, the Sierra Peaks Section.

### ***The arising of a Dispute***

In the spring of 1989, I received a call from Bill Oliver of the Sierra Peak's Section. While Mr. Oliver

was sympathetic to our cause, he informed me that many members of the SPS were not happy with my activities to remove registers. The SPS, whom is the largest group of Sierra climbers, has a list of 318 peaks that their members seek to climb. Furthermore, the SPS had been placing registers on these summits and advocated a position of leave registers on summits forever, no matter of the outcome even if it is lost to decay.

During the fall of 1989 I attended a Sierra Club Mountaineering Committee meeting and got into a heated debate with several SPS members over register removal. To the credit of the SRC, however, we had the backing of the NPS and the Sierra pioneers. Nevertheless, the friction proved too much. My best friend had died and I was trying to organize the group of climbers alone. I abandoned climbing in 1994 and without my leadership the SRC disbanded.

### ***Three Divergent views on Registers***

There are three divergent views of what should be done with registers:

1. *Registers should be removed for preservation.*

This is the view of the Sierra Register Committee and myself. The argument of preservation is as follows: Registers are not a natural occurring part of the landscape. They are historic artifacts since they document human activity. Since they were placed by man, it is man's responsibility to preserve these documents for future generations, and proper preservation cannot occur atop a 12,000' peak given the harsh environmental conditions. The idea that they should remain on a peak forever is a utopian view that is not practical. The registers do not belong to a mountain since a mountain is an inanimate object. It does not have rights. It cannot possess anything. Furthermore, to leave a register there forever would be akin to extending this argument to other artifacts like the Dead Sea Scrolls. Furthermore, since registers are placed to document climbing activity, once they are full they have fulfilled their originally intended purpose. Granted, there is much more of a thrill in seeing an old register on a summit than seeing it in a library, but the leaving of a historic man made artifact on a mountain is not a realistic plan.

2. *Registers should be left on summits forever.* The arguments in favor of leaving them on the summits is so that people climbing peaks can see who was there before. Many hold the belief that the register belongs to the mountain. It doesn't mean something in a dusty old library. All we can do is hope that it is not destroyed by the weather or stolen.

3. *Registers are trash and should be removed from the wilderness as trash.* This is the radically environmentalist view. Some people believe that registers have no place and should be discarded. This flies in the face of the historical relevance of the document and holds an elitist view of purity. Hogwash! The wilderness is not found solely at the top of a peak. These are the same types of people that pry USGS markers from summits. It is one thing; theft and vandalism.

### ***The importance of Registers***

Mountaineering summit registers truly serve three purposes beyond human interest.

1. Registers provide a written documentation of climbing activity. In itself, it is interesting to see how climbing activity has increased over the decades. While most peaks showed only one or two ascents a year in the 1940s, activity moved exponentially higher, up to 5-10 per year, or even 50 per year depending on the peak. Peaks with the highest activity, like those surrounding Tuolumne Meadows, and the 14,000 summits have registers that will fill every summer with ascent activity, or perhaps every 2-3 years. On

the other hand, there remains a small and dwindling number of peaks in the Sierra Nevada that are climbed a few times a year, or a few times a decade, and have registers dating back over 50 years or more. These are the registers that are in increasing danger of being stolen by current vandals. The question remains the same as it did 20 years ago while I was actively involved, “What can be done”?

2. Registers can be used to record new route information and first ascents of peaks. Albeit, all the peaks in the Sierra Nevada have now been climbed, there was once a day when a register showed someone had been there before. Often times this was done by leaving a small note in a tobacco can or similar container. Today climbers often record their information in the summit register, and perusing the register can often validate or discredit the fact when a route was first done. The examination of climbing activity and route information is what drove David Brower and Hervey Voge to make their 1934 “*Knapsack Survey of Routes and Records*”. In fact, without the existence of registers and examining their contents compiling the first climber’s guides would have been next to impossible.

3. Registers can be used in search and rescues. If a climber goes missing, the first thing that SAR will normally do is find the base camp, then try to ascertain where the person went from there. If the explorer left a written agenda with a family member, which should always be done, the SAR personnel can climb the peaks to find where the last ascent was made by the missing climber and look from there. The search for Walter Starr, Jr. in the Minarets during the summer of 1933 is the classic example of how registers played an important role in finding his remains. After several days of climbing and searching the Minaret’s summits, routes and registers for the missing Starr, Clyde found the climber’s body below the summit of Michael Minaret. Clyde’s search for Starr is a classic amongst Sierra Nevada literature and is easily found on the Internet and other publications.

### ***Current thefts***

Modern time. In addition to receiving phone interviews from Knudson of the Sacramento Bee and National Geographic, I most recently received a call in September 2007, by a man allegedly named Andy Becker. (Although I have no reason to believe he is someone other than he claimed, I must use the terminology “allegedly” for legal purposes.) Becker was extremely well researched and claimed more thefts are continuing. Unfortunately, the problem of register theft will never be solved, nor will the argument between preservationists and the leave it there forever camp. Due to increasing instances of missing registers, I’m beginning to wonder if removing old registers for preservation in the Sierra Club Archives may be pertinent under the in peril of loss clause.

After talking to Becker I thought it might be a good idea to use some modern sleuthing tools and began a Google search. I was shocked at the depth of the problem. The first site, “Sierra Peaks Summit Register Needs” <http://www.climber.org/data/SierraPeaks/RegisterNeeds.html> chronicled an inventory of peaks without registers. This list would be insignificant to someone unfamiliar with registers, but for me the list was staggering. Within it I recognized that eight Sierra Club register boxes have been stolen, along with several registers dating back to the 1930s and 1940s. These included, Mt. Barnard, Thunder Mountain, Mt. Stanford (S), University Peak, Mt. Darwin, Mt. Mendel, Mt. Starr King, and Cathedral Peak. Take into account that this is what is REPORTED and the problem begins to show its depth.

My Internet search only got worse from there. I found photographs of register boxes posted on line.

Within minutes I found photographs on the internet of the Mt. Woodworth register that was placed 1899. <http://www.angeles.sierraclub.org/skimt/trips/columbine03/Columbine204.htm> (*Fearing that this register had been placed in peril of loss due to web post, it was removed for preservation in the Sierra Club Archives.*) Another site turned up photographs of a register dating to the 1924 that showed a famous late climber's signature in blood. I'm being ambiguous here on purpose to not disclose the location of those historic documents. However, the case and point is that there are some irresponsible climbers posting information and photographs on line that in turn places these last historic documents in peril of loss. Just a little searching is all it takes. Sickened at the sight of all this, I closed Internet Explorer after three searches.

I recall in the 1989 Sierra Club Mountaineering Committee meeting one climber suggested, "*Maybe we should embed small GPS microchips in the most significant historic registers so if they're stolen, they can be tracked.*" While being a great idea, in 1989 technology terms the idea was ridiculous. Today it is feasible, but yet to be implemented to my knowledge.

### ***The Sierra Club Archives***

Perhaps it is possible that some climbers are continuing to remove registers with the intention of sending them to a preservation site. Removed registers should be sent to:

**[The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley, CA, 94720-6000.](#)**

**[Collection Title: Sierra Club Mountain Registers and Records, 1860-2005.](#)**

**[Collection Number: BANC MSS 71/293c. Telephone number: 510-642-6481](#)**

If someone has removed a register box, please mail it to the Sierra Peaks Section in Los Angeles for return to the summit. The SPS is the largest group of organized climbers in California and should be happy to return the box to the summit. Box returns and registers may be sent in anonymously.

### ***Closing thoughts***

Despite the fact that I gave up climbing many years ago, my ideas of what should be done with historic registers has not changed. We can wish that registers would remain on a summit forever, but merely asking that this happen is just sticking one's head in the sand to the inevitable which is either theft, gone missing, or decay. In either situation, that is just unacceptable in my thinking. The Dead Sea Scrolls is the prime example. Granted they survived in a cave for thousands of years, but were on the brink on loss. While I would argue that a register is not as important as a religious text, that no less diminishes the importance for human involvement in the proper preservation of summit registers. To be entirely clear, preservation should occur in a publicly accessible location, not a private collection in someone's house.

The Sierra Register Committee did not invent the idea of register preservation. This was a practice undertaken by Sierra Mountaineers before the turn of the century. Case and point, the record of the first ascent of what is now known as Mt. Brewer and numerous other registers were removed for preservation by climbers long before my grandparents were born. Looking to tradition, past policies, and seeking advice from the Sierra's last living pioneers is what determined my involvement and in turn the creation of the Sierra Register Committee.

This manuscript should serve to clearly answer all questions on my involvement in registers and how the Sierra Register Committee came into existence. It is up to this current and future generation of climbers as to how they should address register preservation. Throughout life we all have plans and intentions of how our trail into old age will turn out. I could never have dreamed back in 1988 when climbing dominated

my life and thoughts that so much would change. I believed that I'd remain involved in register preservation and climbing into old age, but everything changed on the cool August afternoon in Devil's Crags when Mark Hoffman died. A part of myself died that day as well. Although I still love exploring the mountains, I now gaze up at the peaks through a view camera rather than looking down upon the landscape from the roof of the Sierra Nevada.

*Robin Ingraham, Jr.*