

My search for Smoke Blanchard and what became of him after the publication of his book took some digging! I read Smoke's book and wondered if he had either written anything else or if there was some additional literature about the man himself. After not finding anything during two web searches, I asked in the forums on SummitPost.org and Supertopo.com and was told in a posting that he had passed some time back. A shame as I had hoped to read more about his Japanese travels and life. I then tried to find out the details of his death and was stumped by the newspaper in his hometown of Bishop, CA. It is not indexed and not available on microfiche anywhere. It is only because of the kindness of a librarian in Bishop (a one time neighbor of Smoke), digging through fragile papers from 1989 that I was provided his obituary and the details of his passing. After that I contacted a few of his friends and got some further information about his years after the book was published. I love to research and the difficulty of tracking all the information down led me to believe that Smoke's life, or at least a few general details, should be available somewhere that could be accessed in the 21st century. I decided to do a wikipedia.org article on him and I have spent months reading books that mention him, talking to friends and loved ones, twice searching the American Alpine Club Library, and searching the web for any mention of his name – tracking those leads down to their logical conclusion. What I found in all that research was a complicated man that happened to be an amazing mountaineer and guide. There are stories that were related to me that were not included in the article because they would have swelled its length to book sized proportions. I am discussing writing a longer and more encompassing article, but we will see how that pans out...

Mr. Blanchard was a world renowned mountaineer who stood in the shadow of Everest before the mountain became accessible to those with more money than sense and it took visceral determination, unflinching commitment, and blind luck to even get to that mountain's base camp. He was a great friend to Norman Clyde, cared for the man late in life and was principally responsible for scattering his ashes. Every guide on the east side of the Sierra's and in Yosemite either knew him, climbed with him, or are only separated from him by a single degree. He was a humble man, a Buddhist, and was not a self-promoter. It is a shame that so little information is available about his life and his contribution to California, American mountaineering, and climbing isn't better known or documented. Hopefully my research and the small article that I published on Wikipedia (see below) will change that somewhat.

I would like to say thank you to Ms. Lorrie Engel, Mr. James Wilson, Mr. Doug Robinson, and Mrs. Anne Kothman for all of there help and for the memories that they each share with me.



William Earl "Smoke" Blanchard was a mountaineer, climber, trekking leader, guide, world traveler, and Buddhist truck driver. He was born March 3, 1915 in Montana and moved to Portland, Oregon in his early childhood. Enamored with the visage of Mt. Hood and the world outside, Smoke began his forays into the woods at a very young age, even building his own cross-country skis in his teens. During his 20's he escaped Portland for the slopes of Mt. Hood on the back of a friend's motorcycle and was introduced to mountaineering by Bill Hackett in 1933. He spent his formative mountaineering years on Mt. Hood during the mid to late 1930s, assaulting the mountain from every route imaginable. He was present during the "Golden Age" of climbing on Mt. Hood, and under the tutelage of Gary Leech became a proponent of climbing solo and establishing new routes on the mountain. Both activities were frowned upon

by the climbing organizations that called the mountain home. Smoke was a climbing rebel from the start.

There are a couple of different tales about how the man came to be called "Smoke." One was that he had a habit in his early years of smoking a pipe during downtime or while enjoying an evening in the mountains. His friends at the time decided that such a habit in a young man called for a nickname. The actual truth is that he spent years driving a truck with black and slate-gray smoke belching from the pipes and his rig could be seen from miles away as it prowled the hills, passes, and steep roads of the Eastern Sierra. It seemed to be a fitting name for a man who worked hard all winter so that he could play even harder come summer and he relished in the name. His autobiography doesn't list his birth name on any page and it is even missing from the Library of Congress notation concerning the book.

Smoke made his first trip to the Yosemite Valley in 1937 and later that summer stumbled into the Eastern Sierra town of Bishop. He felt that in Bishop he had found a perfect staging area for the climbs and walks of the Eastern Sierras. He relocated there from Portland before 1942 and by 1943 had "discovered" the Buttermilks - an area of rocks that became his playground, and the training ground for young climbers like Doug Robinson, Galen Rowell, and Don Jenson that he took into his fold. "Smoke's Rock Course" was a route mapped out only in his head that took him and anyone with the ability or want to follow over rocks and boulders, up chimneys and across slabs with some moves in the 5.9 range. He made every move unroped and in heavy lug-soled boots. Since the 1980's the area has become a Mecca for bouldering in California and is known for its hard routes and harder ratings throughout the world of climbing and bouldering.

Smoke Blanchard wasn't one to sign a summit register so some of his feats are lost to time, but a short list of the climbs he is known to have done include: ascents of Mt. Hood, Mt. McKinley (three times and the first as part of the fourth ascent in 1958 with Col. William Hackett), Mt. Logan, an attempt on Mount St. Elias, the peaks of the Palisades, a Christmas ascent of Popocatepetl in Mexico, Mt. Fuji and Mt. Shirouma in The Kita Alps of Japan, the Italian Dolomites, Chubu Sangahu, the hills above Hong Kong, and a Hawaiian Volcano. He also trekked in the both

French and Swiss Alps, and was asked to be a member of the 1963 American Everest Expedition. In those days there was no such thing as a Northface sponsorship deal and Smoke made his living driving a truck. He had to turn down the Everest offer because it would have been impossible on a trucker's salary. Mr. Blanchard hauled propane and other goods all winter so that his summers would be free to climb and walk in the mountains. Smoke had a near photographic memory and would memorize long passages of poems and then recite them to himself in the cab of his truck to occupy his mind on the road.

In 1967 he married Su Ahlstrom after proposing to her on the top of Mt. Hood. She came into the marriage with two children, George and Laurel, and Smoke had one son, Robert, from a previous marriage. They shared a home on East Willow St. in Bishop until Su's death in 1976. Her death, by all accounts, was quite a blow to Smoke. She died in Smoke's arms after a severe fall during a single day hiking trip near Bishop. He felt and expressed in a letter to his cousin (published in his autobiography) a great deal of guilt over the accident, noting that he had taken and led people on mountains and paths all over the world and was tasked with keeping them safe. He felt couldn't prevent the death of his own wife in his preverbal backyard and couldn't understand why or how it could have happened.

Smoke always found solace in walking. In the summer of 1967 he walked across the state of California, from White Mountain to the Pacific Ocean. The hike was to commemorate his 30 years in California and he called it "The best trip I ever made." In 1968 he led a group of friends and trekkers on an Anderson Pass walk, which took them through the shadows of Mt. Huntington and Mt. McKinley in Alaska. Less than a year later he completed his almost solo walk of the Oregon and Washington Coasts (most of Oregon in '62, part of Washington in '63, and the '68 link up that involved the rest of Oregon and Washington). Smoke was a professed Buddhist and had trekked Gaya to Sarnath to visit two of India's Buddhist holy sites in the mid 1960's. Taking advantage of some time on the sub-continent after a trekking assignment, he and Lori Engel made a pilgrimage trip to all five of the most prominent Buddhist holy sites in early 1968. Smoke wanted to experience the holy sites in the way that the Indians did and they rented two blue bicycles for the trip. Smoke valued the simple elegance of a bike and appreciated its ability to move a person from

one place to another, only leaving a snaking set of tire prints behind to mark that it was ever there. When at home in Bishop he would ride a bike around town, running this errand or that.

As Smoke aged, two things happened - he became more interested in walking and trekking than in just mountaineering, and as his interest shifted so did his means of earning a living. Throughout the mid 1960's to the early 1970's Smoke's base of recognition as an excellent trekking leader and teacher in the US and abroad grew broader and broader. Smoke still found time to work and play in the Sierras and taught hundreds of people interested in mountaineering during the 1970's as the director of the Palisade School of Mountaineering. In 1971, Allen Steck, one of the founder of Mountain Travel (which became the adventure travel giant Mountain Travel Sobek in the 1980's) asked Smoke to guide a climb to the summit of Mt. McKinley. This successful trip led to others and before long Smoke was guiding trips all over the world for Mountain Travel with many return trekkers joining him because of the unique impression he made upon them on previous sojourns.

He was widely known in the Himalayas by porters, cooks, trekking Sidars, and fellow guides. He was so accepted into this small fraternal group that he became acquainted with both Sir Edmond Hillary (who reviewed Smoke's 1984 book) and Tenzing Norgay. His relationship with Tenzing was both personal and professional, with the two leading treks in Bhutan together and sharing meals and time in Tenzing's home in Darjeeling.

Smoke's first association with nationally and internationally renowned climbers had started years earlier while still climbing the slopes of Mt. Hood and continued after his move to Bishop. His friendship with uber-climber and California mountaineering legend Norman Clyde is well documented. In 1972, Smoke led a group that included his son Robert and Jules Eichorn to the top of Clyde Peak to scatter Clyde's ashes from that summit. Smoke was one of Clyde's last great friends in life and saw to the man's needs during the illness and decline that led to his death.

During the late 1970's and early 1980's, Smoke began leading treks in the Kita Alps of Japan and opened up the region for the first time to Western trekkers and

mountaineers. During his time in Asia, Smoke gained a working knowledge of Indian and Napali, but in learning Japanese his command of an Eastern language really came into its own. Smoke's vocabulary grew and grew as did his comprehension and ability to write in Kanji. Of all of his travels, Japan was the place that Smoke was the most excited about, telling friends and clients again and again of the land's wonders and beauty.

During the early 1980's Smoke was approached to write an autobiography of his unconventional life. After some prodding he authored Walking Up and Down in the World: Memories of a Mountain Rambler. The book was published in 1984 by Sierra Club Books and is a collection of Mr. Blanchard's tales of old-school climbing, trekking and mountaineering. The book goes into detail concerning his walks, climbs, and bicycle rides in the Sierra's, The Western US, Alaska, India, Japan, and Nepal. It details his wanderings with so many notable mountaineers and climbers of the day. Smoke's writing style was humble, yet often very amusing, as it seems by all accounts like the man himself was. His tale isn't told with the usual 'We almost died!' inflection that seems to be the trap of many of today's travel/adventure writers. Instead of leaving one breathless, Walking Up and Down in the World leaves the reader with a smirking smile and a desire to take a week off from work, strap on crampons, and head up into the winter clouds and snows of the high Sierras.

By 1989, Smoke was splitting his time between a home in Japan and his small apartment above a house he still owned in Bishop. He was in a relationship with a young Japanese woman named Keiko Ishikawa. Early that summer, they traveled from Japan to Italy to lead a walk in the Dolomites and then had flown back to the US to spend some time in Bishop. During the drive home from LAX, Smoke had relinquished the wheel to Keiko and crawled in the back of his small truck to sleep under the camper shell. Somewhere near Mojave, Keiko lost control of the vehicle; it slipped from the road and rolled. She was relatively unhurt but Smoke suffered massive head trauma and after spending more than a week in intensive care, he died of his injuries on June 23, 1989.

His friends held a memorial service for him in the Buttermilk Rocks near Bishop as the summer climbing season wound down and before the Asian trekking season started,

allowing all of his friends, fellow guides, and loved ones to be there. There was a light dusting of snow on the ground that day and the air was crisp during the service attended by more than two hundred people celebrating the man's life and retelling stories of times shared with Smoke through tears and laughter. Smoke Blanchard was cremated and his remains were scattered up in Big Pine Canyon, CA between the fourth and fifth lakes in the Eastern Sierras that he so loved.

Miscellaneous details:

- Suffered severe frostbite in his feet in 1955 while climbing.
- Caught Malaria in Kenya in 1973.
- A climbing route on the Middle Palisade, named in honor of Smoke, The Smoke Buttress (IV, 5.9) put up by Steve Porcella and Cameron Burns in 1990.
- Galen Rowel and Doug Robinson developed a hard climbing route on the face of Wheeler Peak in 1972 that they named Smokestack (IV, 5.10a) for Mr. Blanchard.
- Member (Grandfathered in) of the American Mountain Guide Association - AMGA
- A direct influence on every major guide currently working in the Sierras or is only separated from them by a single degree.

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