



## Oral histories of Exum Mountain Guides who began guiding between 1947 and 1965

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**Abstract** Exum Mountain Guides is the oldest climbing guide service in North America. Exum guides have been integral to the growth of guiding as a profession as well as mountaineering in Grand Teton National Park, across the United States, and internationally. However, no comprehensive history of the guides and the guide service exists, nor have individual stories been consistently captured. This project conducted oral histories with guides, clients, and staff of Exum Mountain Guides, and then used those interviews to look at the pathways taken to become a guide, common experiences and characteristics between the guides, and what guiding life was like for those guides who began guiding prior to 1965. Future research is needed to collect additional oral histories and analyze the histories of guides who began guiding after 1965, as well as those of office staff, clients, and others and investigate changes that have occurred over time.

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### Introduction

Beginning with Paul Petzoldt in the 1920s, Glenn Exum in the 1930s (Exum, 1998; Petzoldt, 1953, 1976), and continuing through the present day, the guides of Exum Mountain Guides<sup>1</sup> have been integral to the growth of guiding as a profession as well as mountaineering in Grand Teton National Park (GTNP), across the United States, and internationally. Exum Mountain Guides, both as a guide service and the individual guides who make up the company, have been a part of the park's history since its inception. Understanding who these guides were, and how they came to be guides, along with how the profession and the pathways to join it have changed over the years, is important to the cultural history of the park and to American mountaineering in general.

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<sup>1</sup>The guide service has been known by several names over the years, including the Petzoldt Guide Service, the Petzoldt-Exum School of American Mountaineering, the Exum School of American Mountaineering, and Exum Mountain Guides. For this report, it will be referred to as Exum Mountain Guides.

There is a rich mountaineering and guiding history that is part of the story of Grand Teton National Park, but many of the stories and personal experiences that make up this history have not been captured. Unfortunately, the players from Petzoldt and Exum's generation are already gone, and many of those who were guiding in the 1950s and early 1960s are gone as well. While some of the more well-known guides have had books and articles written about them (Paul Petzoldt, Glenn Exum, and Willi Unsoeld, to name a few), the stories and experiences of all the guides, especially from the earlier generations, need to be recorded. Their contributions to the profession of mountain guiding and their mountaineering feats in the park and elsewhere are no less impressive. In addition, there is no comprehensive history of the Exum School of American Mountaineering, and this is a part of the park's history that needs to be illuminated. This research begins to fill this gap in the historical record.

The primary research questions for this study include:

Back in the early days of the park, and in the first few decades of Exum Mountain Guides, how did guides get into climbing? How did they become guides? Were there common experiences between them (geography, education, class, race, etc.)? What was life like as a guide in the park?

## Methods

### Data types

Oral histories with former and current guides, staff, and clients of Exum Mountain Guides were conducted by the first author. Oral history is a “method of recording and preserving oral testimony. . . [with]. . . the conscious intention of creating a permanent record to contribute to an understanding of the past” (Oral History Association, 2009).

Interviews were held either over the phone, using conference call technology to create audio recordings, or in person, using a digital recorder. All but one interviewee gave their written and/or verbal permission to have their interview recorded, and in almost all cases, also granted permission for their oral history to be included in the archives of Grand Teton National Park. A search of the Concession records and the Glenn Exum Collection in the Grand Teton National Park Archives was also undertaken.

### Data collection

Thirty people have so far participated in individual oral histories for this project, for a total of 51 separate interviews since 2015. One additional person participated in group oral histories, but not individual ones; nine people who did individual oral histories also participated in group oral histories or other recorded conversations.

Three non-interview recordings were also made – of the speeches at two memorial services for former Exum guides, and of a slide presentation. In addition, five conversations held between the researcher and guides at company gatherings were recorded, although due to the poor audio and the nature of the conversations, these will not be submitted to the GTNP archives.

<i>Becoming a Guide/Upbringing</i>	
1.	Where and when were you born? Where did you grow up?
2.	How did you get into climbing? When? Where? With whom?
3.	How did you learn how to guide? Tell me about some of your first guiding experiences.
<i>Guiding Qualities, Advice</i>	
1.	To you, what makes someone a great guide? A bad guide?
2.	Tell me about the best guides you’ve ever worked with. The worst guides? The most memorable?
3.	What advice would you give to a new guide?
<i>Experiences &amp; Clients</i>	
1.	Tell me about some of the guiding experiences or clients you have had: the best, most challenging, funniest, most exciting, strangest, most frightening, etc.
<i>Miscellaneous</i>	
1.	What was life like on Guides Hill? If you didn’t live on the Hill, where did you live?
2.	How has gear and equipment changed over your guiding career?

**Table 1.** Sample Interview Question Categories and Questions

Because of technical difficulties, or the interviewee declining to have the interview recorded, two interviews, and part of a third were not recorded, and only the researcher’s notes are available.

Most individual interviews lasted approximately 1 hour. A total of 53 hours of audio of individual interviews has been recorded and transcribed. An additional 13 hours of audio of speeches, presentations, and conversations between multiple people have also been recorded and transcribed.

As recommended in the Oral History Association’s Principles and Best Practices (2009), a list of questions was prepared and used as a guide to the conversation (see Table 1). However, because oral histories are designed to “seek an in-depth account of personal experience and reflections, with sufficient time allowed for the narrator to give their story the fullness they desire” (Oral History Association, 2009) not all questions were asked of all interviewees.

Twelve people were interviewed between 2015 and

2016, and nineteen more oral histories were completed during the summer and fall of 2017. All interviewees were coded by their primary role in relation to Exum Mountain Guides: owner, guide, office staff, client, local climber, or spouse. Some overlap exists between the categories; for example, all the owners were also guides, and all the office staff were clients, as were both spouses. Both of the local climbers also guided for Exum Mountain Guides on at least one or more occasions. Four (4) owners, 15 guides, 4 office staff, 4 clients, 2 local climbers, and 2 spouses have been interviewed to date. See Appendix A for a complete list.

Interviewees were selected based on their role at Exum and years of experience, with an emphasis on those whose connection with Exum Mountain Guides began prior to the 1970s. The researcher began with those known to her personally, and then obtained recommendations and contact information for other possible interviewees from those interviews.

### Preliminary Results

Nineteen guides and owners have contributed oral histories to this project. Since all of the owners were also guides, they are collectively referred to as guides. The guides interviewed began guiding at Exum Mountain Guides between 1947 and 1983, but this report will focus on those who began guiding prior to 1965.

Oral histories are necessarily biased, in that they consist of the personal experiences, memories, and reflections of an individual. Nevertheless, they provide an intimate look into the early decades of Exum Mountain Guides and what it was like to be a guide.

### Demographic trends

Oral histories were obtained for 11 guides who began guiding at Exum Mountain Guides prior to 1965 (see Table 2). On average, these guides had 20 years of experience guiding at Exum Mountain Guides, with the least amount of time being two seasons, and several guides having a career that spanned more than four decades. The guide who began guiding the earliest out of this group was Dick Pownall, who started to

Name	Date Began Guiding at Exum	Date Stopped Guiding at Exum
Pownall, Dick	1947	1956~
Merriam, Bob	1951~	1957~
Day, Rob	1957~	1958~
Briggs, Bill	1959	1982
Read, Al	1959	2000s~
Exum, Ed	1960	1964
Lev, Peter	1960	2005
Swedlund, Herb	1960s~	1986
Newcomb, Rod	1963	2011~
Dornan, David	1964	1974
Moore, Dean	1964	1997

**Table 2.** Start and end dates of guiding careers at Exum Mountain Guides, for those guides interviewed who began guiding at Exum prior to 1965.

guide in the summer of 1947. Bob Merriam was next, beginning in 1951.

All of the early guides interviewed went to college. One-third left school before completing their bachelor’s degrees, while another third went on to get graduate degrees. Compared to the United States population as a whole – in 1960 less than a quarter of 18-24 year olds, and only slightly more than half of the country’s male high school graduates enrolled in college – these early guides were a highly educated group (Clotfelter, 1991; National Center for Education Statistics, 1999). Glenn [Exum] highly valued education – while he spent summers in the Tetons, during the school year he was a beloved high school music teacher in Kellogg, ID (Bonney, 1989). Bill Briggs appreciated Glenn’s educational philosophy:

Boy, in the handling of his guides, I mean here again was an educator because he didn’t tell you what’s what, he wanted it coming out of you. And every one of us that was ever a mountain guide grew hugely [because of Glenn’s influence]. (B. Briggs, personal communication, July 26, 2017)

When Dick Pownall began guiding in 1947, he and Mike Brewer were the only guides, along with Glenn Exum (Merriam and Pownall, personal communication, September 13, 2016). Bob Merriam remembers

joining Dick Pownall and Mike Brewer as a third guide in 1951 (B. Merriam, personal communication, April 15, 2016). When Bill Briggs started guiding in 1959, there were at least five other guides: Jake Breitenbach, Bill Byrd, Barry Corbet, Dick Pownall, and Willi Unsoeld (Al Read started at the end of that season; B. Briggs, personal communication, July 26, 2017). By the mid-1960s, there were approximately 10-15 guides working at Exum Mountain Guides (D. Dornan, personal communication, March 4, 2016). For comparison, today there are currently over 80 guides on the Exum Mountain Guides roster.

### Pathways to guiding

Many of the guides in this group did their first climbing on their own – scrambling around on rocks while hiking or otherwise in the mountains, either solo or with friends (Lev, Newcomb, Pownall, Read, Swedlund). Others were introduced to some form of climbing through mountaineering clubs, either at the high school or college level (Briggs, Merriam, Moore). Still others started out as clients of Exum Mountain Guides, and then later became guides themselves (Day, Dornan – and Ed Exum, to some degree). In general, at some point, regardless of where they were originally from, they came to the Tetons to climb, either on their own or as a client, came into contact with Paul Petzoldt, Glenn Exum, or other guides, and through this contact were eventually brought on as guides.

Very early on, Glenn or Paul might ask someone if they wanted to be a guide. Rob Day, who had gone on several guided climbs with Glenn as a client, recalls, “I was surprised when he [Glenn] said ‘How about being a guide?’” (R. Day, personal communication, March 16, 2016). In other cases, guides remember asking Glenn or Paul directly for a job. Dick Pownall remembers,

After the end of the season [on trail crew] in ‘46, I stopped by and talked to Glenn. He was my hero. I asked him about the idea of working for him and he said, ‘Well, let’s see how it works out next year.’ The next year I hooked up with Glenn. . . that’s what started

it. (Day and Pownall, personal communication, July 15, 2016)

Al Read says, “He [Glenn] hired me because I had...written several letters to both he and Petzoldt...I kept writing letters and in 1959 I got this letter saying I could come up and guide” (A. Read, personal communication, January 21, 2016).

As the guide service grew, guides began to encourage climbers they knew to consider guiding, and would recommend climbers to Glenn as potential hiring prospects. Rod Newcomb, who started in 1963, said,

In those days if you wanted to go to work for Glenn, he would ask the other guides if they knew of somebody around who could fill in and start guiding, and so I talked to Glenn and he said, ‘Well I’ll call you the night before, so stand by.’ That’s what you had to do. (R. Newcomb, personal communication, October 14, 2015)

Bill Briggs recalls meeting Bob Merriam and Willi Unsoeld on the trail the first time he and friends climbed in the Tetons in 1952. Willi said to them, “We need guides. You guys ought to become guides,” and many years later, in 1959, Bill Briggs did become a guide (B. Briggs, personal communication, July 26, 2017). Dean Moore recalls Peter Lev and Al Read, who he had met when they were all students at the University of Colorado at Boulder, inviting him to guide:

The way Glenn always hired people...was it would become known that there was going to be an opening and so everybody would invite their friends up to unofficially try out...I remember there were two other people up here who were looking for the job that I was looking for. Actually Peter was sponsoring two of them...I came up...in mid-June or something like that, I actually rode my motorcycle up from Boulder...and so just lived in the climber’s campground over there and...then one day...Glenn just came and said, ‘You know, okay, we need somebody and here is what you are doing

tomorrow.’ (D. Moore, personal communication, July 21, 2016)

Appearances mattered to Glenn. Peter Lev thinks that one of the reasons he was hired is because “compared to most of the climbers hanging on in the climbers’ camp, I was pretty clean cut. So I passed muster” (P. Lev, personal communication, March 6, 2015). Dean Moore says, “He [Glenn] did have this idea that guides were big and strong” (personal communication, July 21, 2016a). Even as late as 1972, Dick Dorworth recalls that when friends encouraged him to talk to Glenn about guiding for Exum Mountain Guides, “Glenn was very nice and respectful and everything. And he told me that I was certainly qualified, and . . . they needed guides. . . but because I had long hair and a beard, he socially could not hire me” (two decades later, Dick, now clean shaven, did become a guide) (D. Dorworth, personal communication, July 13, 2017).

There was no formal training process for the new guides; they generally were either shown the ropes by Glenn Exum or other, more experienced guides, or just sent out on climbs and told to follow another guide. Bob Merriam recalls that Glenn “showed me what was done at the climbing school and how prospective climbers were handled during the course of the school. . . he had taken me up and showed me the major routes, the Exum route and the Owen route” (B. Merriam, personal communication, April 15, 2016). Dave Dornan says that through Peter Lev and Rod Newcomb,

I learned the ways of the Exum guides, and even though I, in many ways, was a more experienced climber. . . I had to learn how to be a guide. And from them, I learned how to teach the schools, how to do the Grand, how to do Cube Point, and then after that initial year, I was able to go off and be a mentor to other people. (D. Dornan, personal communication, March 4, 2016)

Of course, this was long before there was any formalized guide training in the United States, as there is now through the American Mountain Guides Association, which certifies guides through a variety of

courses and exams, and accredits climbing schools and guiding services (American Mountain Guides Association, n.d.).

### Guiding as a profession

For the guides that began prior to the 1960s, there was generally no pathway to full time guiding. Most guided for a while, and then left to pursue other careers. In fact, according to Al Read, “Glenn never wanted - basically demanded - nobody makes their living year round from guiding. He just said that. . . no, you have to spread your wings and have a career like everybody did” (A. Read, personal communication, January 21, 2016). Therefore, all of the guides pursued some other career when they were not guiding. Several found employment that kept them in, or at least close to, the mountains – Bill Briggs ran a ski school, Dean Moore was on ski patrol, and Rod Newcomb founded the American Avalanche Institute. Peter Lev was an avalanche forecaster, and Al Read was involved in adventure travel. Others in the group went on to work in IT (Herb Swedlund), pharmaceutical sales (Ed Exum), as a high school teacher and principal (Dick Pownall), in public health (Dave Dornan), or as academics (Rob Day, Bob Merriam). Dave Dornan recalls,

It wasn’t until the early 60s that Glenn had guides who saw climbing and skiing as their profession. . . And Glenn was a little upset about that. He expected his guides to finish college and do something in the world, but the 60s were a different time in our history. (personal communication, February 26, 2016)

Guides were paid, in cash, half of the fees collected for each climb:

You were just paid by the day, you know...early in the Exum era, you made exactly half of what came in. So if there were two people for intermediate school and intermediate school was five dollars, you would make five dollars. (D. Moore, personal communication, July 21, 2016)

Ed Exum remembers that his mother, Beth, “managed all the finances, she got all the guides’ payment every day because they were paid every day, as independent contractors for their services for that day. So, she would have an envelope with money in it for them” (E. Exum, personal communication, July 16, 2016). Bob Merriam recalls that “I would come away with \$1500 in the end of the summer’s climbing and in those days that was quite a bit of money and I always went home satisfied,” (B. Merriam, personal communication, April 15, 2016). Dave Dornan remembers that “we made enough money over the summer that we could at least pay our way through school in the winter,” although he thought that for guides with families, like Willi Unsoeld, they “must have worked really hard to make enough money to get through the rest of the year” (D. Dornan, personal communication, March 4, 2016).

A climbing school for clients before attempting other peaks had been established by at least 1941 (Petzoldt, 1953; Ringholz, 2000). When Dave Dornan took climbing school from Glenn Exum in 1952,

They only had one climbing school in those days, just the basic school and it was rope management, balance, climbing, and then rappels and the rappels were body rappels. They were not overhanging, you just went down the slabs again with a body rappel. (D. Dornan, personal communication, February 26, 2016)

Best estimates are that the use of the Lower Saddle as a staging area and camp before climbs of the Grand Teton came into play at least by the 1950s. There was no hut, and clients slept in sleeping bags under a heavy canvas tarp that the guides weighed down with rocks (D. Dornan, personal communication, February 26, 2016). The first hut, the Smith Hut, was erected in 1960, with the guides doing the heavy labor of carrying the pieces up to the Lower Saddle (see Figure 1).

At least through the 1950s, the practice was to have each client climbing the Grand Teton bring a can of soup. Up at the Lower Saddle, the guides would take all the cans of soup, pour them into a big pot, heat



**Figure 1.** Al Read carrying a section of the Smith Hut up to the Lower Saddle in 1960. Photo from Al Read’s personal collection.

them up, and then ladle the soup back out to the hungry climbers for dinner the night before the summit ascent. Sometimes marmots would get their heads stuck in the empty soup cans. Bob Merriam describes it this way:

I was just learning how to make soup out of five cans of different kinds of soup into one pot and how to distribute it for eating up there in the Saddle. And, dealing with the marmots that were up there, often sticking their heads in the soup cans and getting the cans stuck on their heads. [They’d] go clunking around and need to be relieved. (B. Merriam, personal communication, April 15, 2016)

### Life as a guide

The majority of these guides lived in tent cabins in an area just north of the Exum Mountain Guides office, on a moraine near the outlet of South Jenny Lake known as “Guides’ Hill” (See Figure 2). As Peter Lev described it,

The cabins were rustic, they were wooden. It was a common type of camping cabin. It was used for all kinds of things. It was not unique to the guides’ camp. In fact Glenn must have acquired them second-hand. . . I think we had a little stove in there, maybe not. The canvas was so old we had to cover parts of it with plastic. (P. Lev, personal



**Figure 2.** Dave Dornan’s tent cabin at Guides’ Hill in the late 1960s. Photo by Jeff Foott.

communication, March 6, 2015)

There were no bathing facilities, but there was an outhouse to the west of Guides’ Hill. Water for cooking, cleaning, and drinking was pulled from nearby Cottonwood Creek. Jolene Unsoeld, Willi’s wife, writes in her memoir that,

The first morning chore is to get the fire blazing and start the never-ending task of heating water for baths and clothes washing. . . It takes me a good half of the day to get all the kids bathed, clothes washed, and dishes out of the way. And then there’s one more load of water – for my own bath. Delicious! (Unsoeld, 2016, p. 150-151)

Bears were not uncommon at Guides’ Hill. Dean Moore remembers “our refrigerator...had a chain around [it] because the bears kept getting into it” (D. Moore, personal communication, July 21, 2016). Peter Lev recalls walking into his cabin once and surprising a bear, who was so surprised itself that it went out the back wall of the cabin, straight through the canvas (P. Lev, personal communication, March 6, 2015).

When they weren’t working, Bob Merriam remembers that “On our days off we almost invariably climbed. We just couldn’t get enough of it. . .” (B. Merriam, personal communication, April 15, 2016). For entertainment on days they worked, some of the younger, unmarried guides would go to Jackson Lake Lodge.

Peter Lev recalls, “We’d go to the lodge after work almost every day. That’s where the girls were! That was the only place to shower unless you wanted to go to the lake” (P. Lev, personal communication, March 6, 2015).

All the guides the researcher interviewed remembered their time as an Exum guide fondly. Bill Briggs sums it up, saying “It’s really quite an honor to have been there the time that I was there. I look back at that as an outstanding portion of my life” (B. Briggs, personal communication, July 26, 2017).

## Conclusions

The oral histories of the guides interviewed for this project show that they were a well-educated group. While they were introduced to climbing in a variety of different ways, essentially all of them had a personal climbing relationship with an owner or other guides before joining the guide service. Training for this group of guides was very informal, based on apprenticing and mentorship. Living conditions at Guides’ Hill were quite simple, with no running water or showering facilities, but in a beautiful location in the park. All of these guides had fond memories of their time guiding for Exum Mountain Guides.

## Future Work

While the oral histories collected for this project are an important addition to the history of Exum Mountain Guides, much more remains to be done. Collection of oral histories with key figures associated with the guide service continues, as does analysis of documents found in the park and in the Exum archives. Analysis of how gear and guiding/climbing techniques have changed over the years would be useful. Comparisons between the experiences of the guides in the 1960s and earlier, to those of the guides who began in the 1970s and later, will also be valuable.

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## Appendix A

Interviewees and their primary role at Exum Mountain Guides, sorted alphabetically by role.

Name	Primary Role
Lev, Peter	Owner
Moore, Dean	Owner
Newcomb, Rod	Owner
Read, Al	Owner
Briggs, Bill	Guide
Carman, Dave	Guide
Day, Rob	Guide
Dornan, Dave	Guide
Dorworth, Dick	Guide
Exum, Ed	Guide
Foott, Jeff	Guide
Jern, Ken	Guide
Kelsey, Joe	Guide
Matous, Ron	Guide
Merriam, Bob	Guide
Pownall, Dick	Guide
Swedlund, Herb	Guide
Tackle, Jack	Guide
Williams, Jim	Guide
Feagin, Martha	Office Staff
Gallie, Jane	Office Staff
Krisjansons, Margo	Office Staff
Read, Susan	Office Staff
Ford, Bill	Client
Later, Monte	Client
Mansfield, Anne	Client
Porter, Anne	Client
Beardsley, Irene	Climber
Chouinard, Yvon	Climber
Breitenbach, Lou	Spouse
Moore, Muffy	Spouse