



# NORTHERN ADVENTURERS

Wayne Merry: Finding the Essence of Adventure on El Capitan

By Kate Harris | Photo by Cathie Archbould

**“**I t’s sort of weird. I do something stupid half a century ago and now . . . ,” Wayne Merry says, chuckling as his words trail off and he shakes his head. Students pack the room at the former Atlin, B.C., hospital on a bright August morning. These 20-somethings have spent the past two months studying glaciology on the Juneau Icefield, a cold spill of rock and ice they crossed with the aid of harnesses, lightweight nylon ropes, and locking titanium carabiners. This modern safety gear bears little resemblance to the brittle coil of what looks like oversized twine against the wall next to Merry or the display of medieval iron hooks and spikes next to that. It’s all the more astounding that the spry 85-year-old used such equipment to do the “stupid” thing he’s here to talk about: the pioneering ascent of the south buttress of El Capitan, “The Nose,” in Yosemite Valley, Calif., which today is the most celebrated rock climb in the world.

The Kodachrome slides in Merry’s presentation have the gritty, vintage look of bygone days. The millennials in the audience discreetly snap iPhone photos of the legendary climber to post later on Instagram. None of these things—digital cameras, cellphones, social media, the sport of rock climbing—existed in 1957, when Merry was a seasonal naturalist in Yosemite. One evening, he drove his 1950 Studebaker into the park and came into unusually perfect radio reception at the pullout beneath El Capitan, a half-mile surge of sheer rock that lords over the Yosemite Valley. Alone in what’s been dubbed the “Valley of Light,” with all that pale, glacier-polished granite glowing over him as the sun set, Merry listened to the Eastman Symphony perform Tchaikovsky’s *1812 Overture*. Only in retrospect did this seem a harbinger. “At the time I didn’t have the slightest idea I’d ever lay a finger on that rock,” he admits.

Less than a year later, Merry was recruited by Warren Harding to attempt what was considered impossible: scaling the 900-metre wall of El Cap, whose steepness varied from vertical to overhanging. Rock climbing was so novel in 1958 that Harding and Merry (along with their support crew of Rich Calderwood and George Whitmore) had to improvise gear: pitons from sawn-off woodstove legs, water bottles from one-gallon paint-thinner cans, and hardware-store expansion bolts pounded into tiny hand-drilled holes. “I wouldn’t hang a picture from them today,” Merry says, “but back then we hung our lives on them.”

With each detail, the students’ eyes widen: the meager diet of raisins, tinned fruit, and sardines that propelled the men up the wall; the narrow ledges the climbers slept on with yachting ropes knotted around their army surplus sleeping bags; and the bushy-tailed wood rat that chewed into those bags one night, decorating the men’s whiskers with down for the rest of the climb. Lacking Gore-Tex, the men huddled beneath tarps during three days of snow and rain. “Not easy changing clothes when you’re roped up and hanging, as I’m sure you know,” says Merry to the audience.

Stunned silence from the students; they nod their heads but do not know—not at all.

After 11 grueling days, Harding, Merry, Whitmore, and Calderwood topped out on El Cap, popped some champagne, and overnight turned into what one newspaper called “rock-climbing royalty.” Today, climbers make pilgrimages to Atlin—where Merry and his wife, Cindy, settled 40 years ago—just to shake his hand. Yet he’s most proud of what he did after summiting El Cap.

“Park rangers had long considered climbers somewhere between hippies and bears,” he explains. “It was not a cordial relationship.” But Merry managed to convince rangers and the climbing community to form Yosemite Search and Rescue (YOSAR). After moving to the North, he wrote the best-selling book *Official Wilderness First Aid Guide* and a manual on search-and-rescue techniques. He spent years travelling across the territories and Alaska to run training courses based on both, efforts that led to Merry being awarded the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee Medal.

Though he’s most famous for risking his own life, Merry devoted his career to saving the lives of others. “If there’s a moral to the story, I don’t really know it. Other than that the impossible is sometimes possible,” he says as he concludes his talk. After the presentation, the students pepper him with questions: Was the ascent of El Cap his hardest climb? “Mentally, yes. Physically, a route called ‘Worst Error’ in Yosemite was harder.” Does his wife climb? “She climbed until she caught me!” Did he follow a strict training regimen for the El Cap climb? “We trained on red wine! And sometimes hung from doorsills by our fingers. Today’s climbers are real athletes, real pros, but no, we didn’t train.”

The director of the Juneau Icefield Research Program thanks Merry and dismisses the students, though many of them linger and ask more questions.

“How did you handle fear?” one inquires.

“I don’t know how to answer that,” he replies. “Recognize when you don’t feel up to something. Otherwise grit your teeth and go for it.”

Merry pauses, searching for a way to further articulate what no explorer can really put into words—a reasonable explanation for the unreasonable impulse to do something as useless, risky, and beautiful as scaling a skyscraper of granite or walking on the moon. Fear is essential for such endeavours and perhaps a healthy stupidity is too. If you’re smart, you’ll be too afraid to climb El Cap, but if you’re not smart enough, your fearlessness might finish you off.

Somewhere in between is the essence of adventure, which requires going so far that the only way back is going even further. Or as Merry puts it to the students: “When you face a choice between up and down, you get to the point when going down is no more appealing.” **Y**