

Fred Beckey: A Close Encounter



Wilson Peak: Photo credit Whit Richardson, The Trust for Public Land

Author's Note: Fred Beckey, a fabled mountaineer and author, made as many as a thousand first ascents of North American summits and routes, considered at the time, too difficult to climb. Fred passed away at age 94 in October of 2017.

There are two climbers. Even from this distance, I know they are experienced by their consistent and efficient pace. Hiking up the head of Silver Pick Basin, their goal is the summit of Wilson Peak. Located near Telluride Colorado, the iconic Wilson Peak, featured in Coors beer commercials, is a Colorado 14'er with classic pyramid summit, sweeping ridges, and snow fluted East Face. Having summited Wilson Peak myself, I felt a connection with these small figures in the distance, kindred spirits from afar.

It is August 1978. I am alone, 2000 feet above the climbers, prospecting a 13,000 foot ridgeline. The rock is steep, exposed, and loose. As an exploration geologist, my experience as a rock climber and mountaineer allows me to explore terrain where others couldn't, or wouldn't go. The ground north of Wilson Peak, including the Silver Pick Basin, is a confusing mix of private mining claims, National Forrest, and Wilderness Study Area. Under contract by the owner of the Silver Pick Mine, my job is to evaluate the mining property for development. I have a key to the gate that allows me to access the old Silver Pick Mill, located several miles up the road past the normal trailhead.

It is a bluebird Colorado day, the sun bright, air crisp, and views stunning. I turn my attention from the climbers back to my job. Moving to the opposite side of the ridge, I catch the distinct odor of sulphur. Following my nose, I work my way carefully down the shattered rock. Just below the ridgeline, tucked between vertical walls and hidden from view, was a collapsed shack and mine dump, remnants of the Colorado gold rush 100 years ago.

There are picks, shovels on the ground, and some cloth bags, shredded with age, full of yellow clay. It looks as if someone left in hurry, intending to return, but never made it back. I am probably the first person in 100 years to visit this hidden mining claim. Why would someone fill bags with clay, I wondered? I take some rock samples, mark the location, scoop up the clay into a bag, and climb back up to the ridge

Continuing my prospecting, I keep track of the climber's progress. I can't help but smile as they summit Wilson Peak. Several hours later, the sun's position signals quitting time and I begin my descent. Arriving at my truck around 5 pm, I noticed it listing to the side. Both passenger side tires are flat. I check my spare tire. It is also flat. I surmised what happened: the two climbers

decided my brand-new truck, which looked government or corporate, didn't belong there parked above the trailhead. In an act of environmental activism, they let the air out of my tires. I thought of Edward Abbey's book, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, written three years prior. Abbey's most famous work of fiction, the novel promotes the use of sabotage to protest environmentally damaging activities. How ironic I now find myself on the wrong side of that environmental battle.

I am furious. Grabbing my pack, I race down the road hoping to catch the climbers who would have parked at the gate 2 miles down the road. Too late, they are gone. With no cell phone back then, I walk another four miles out to the main road and hitchhike into Telluride. Another geologist takes me back to retrieve my two tires. Returning to town, we fill them with air, drive back to my truck, and replace the tires in the circle of light from a flashlight. Well after midnight, I collapse exhausted into bed.

Early the next morning, I drive back Silver Pick thinking the climbers might have signed the summit register on Wilson Peak. If they did, I could take their names and report them to the police. I flew up the mountain covering the three miles and 3000 vertical feet to the 14,016 foot summit in less than two hours, my body fueled with angry thoughts of retribution. I grab the register and open it. Sure enough, at the bottom of the last page are two names and yesterday's date. The first name I did not recognize, but the next name is Fred Beckey. I am stunned. This man is legend: a hard man who boldly climbed where none had gone before. His record of first ascents in North America is second to none.

There were only two names in the register. From my perch on the ridge the day before, I saw only two climbers. I make the assumption they were the two that let the air out of my three tires.

I sat down and thought; nothing is damaged and I'm not injured. It takes me awhile to calm down, but eventually I close the register, take a deep breath, and let it go.

On October 1st, 2011, 33 years later, I finally met Fred Becky. I was out in Utah paragliding with my friend Bob McCord. After flying in the morning, we set out from a parking lot in Little Cottonwood Canyon to climb the Schoolroom, a classic five pitch rock climb. Upon returning to the parking lot, we found an old man with two younger guys in harnesses and climbing gear. I recognized the old man. Even though he was bent from age, there was power there, a presence. His face was weather beaten, creased with age, eyes watery, and red. His hands were old leather, fingers scarred, with fresh divots cut into the flesh. One of the young guys introduced himself and said "This is Fred Beckey and we just climbed Beckey's Wall." Beckey's Wall is a two pitch "old school" 5.7 route, meaning stiff for the grade. I shook my head in admiration and took his hand in mine. "Nice to meet you" was all I managed to say. Fred mumbled something. Humbled, I turned and walked away. Fred was 89 years old. I will never know for sure if it was Beckey who sabotaged my truck. I should have asked him, but I was too awed by his presence. However, my inner voice tells me it was him.

After Fred Beckey passed away in October 2017, I thought back to our close encounter. Remember the bags of clay? Several weeks after the 1978 exploration season ended in late October, I dumped the contents of my sample bag into a gold pan. With a practiced spinning motion, the clay was quickly washed away. There at the bottom of my gold pan, shining bright like the sun, were thin wires of native gold a centimeter long. The act of environmental activism struck me to the heart. It forced me to listen to my inner voice acting as a guide to the rightness or wrongness of my behavior. The voice said "this mountain is too beautiful and wild to be mined

again." I never told anyone of my find and never went back. The bags of gold and clay are probably still there today tucked in that hidden spot on the ridge.