

An Ageless Climber Celebrates on Monkey Face

We all know someone who's marked a significant birthday with a celebratory climb or summit. In 2016, George Cummings decided to climb Monkey Face, Smith Rock's iconic 350-foot pillar, a strenuous four-pitch route that includes hauling oneself up a 60-foot aid ladder and then stepping out over a terrifying 150-foot drop. The special event? Turning 80.

Some of you may know George Cummings as a climb leader, a member of the Climbing, Advanced Rock, Nominating, and Publications Committees, or perhaps as a member of the Executive Council or as Mazama President. And many of you may have seen him instructing and belaying at the rock walls in the Holman Auditorium at the Mazama Mountaineering Center, wearing his classic blue bib overalls. He's a special belay favorite with the kids in the summer camps.

What many don't know is that George has been a rock climber since before most rock climbers were born. He's credited with first ascents of two stellar routes at Smith Rock, Sky Ridge and Sky Chimney—in 1968 and 1969, respectively. He had started hiking in 1959 and climbing in 1960 with the Mazamas, and became a climb leader in 1963. However, in 1975 he transitioned to doing occasional private climbs and lots of hikes.

He threw his energies into ceramics, teaching at the Arts and Crafts Society of Portland and the Museum Art School, and working at Standard Insurance until he retired in 1996. In 1999, George rejoined the Mazamas, took Intermediate Climbing School in 2006, and Advanced Rock in 2008. He also completed the requirements for leadership development and once again became a climb leader. At 72, George was probably the oldest graduate of all three programs.

George first climbed Monkey Face after his Intermediate Climbing School class in September 2007, with Dragan Dokic leading the climb up the Pioneer Route. As George stepped out on the infamous "Panic Point" exit from the Monkey's mouth cave, 150 feet off the ground, he fell at the end of the short traverse and was pulled back into the cave. He retreated as far as he could to the back of the cave and contemplated further climbing with apprehension—especially after a second climber also fell where he had. He continued on with Dragan's help, successfully summited, and descended via the 190-foot free-hanging rappel on the east face.

The experience confirmed his intention to take Advanced Rock to improve his climbing skills. Over the next eight years, George improved both his skills and equipment, climbing with John Meckel at Portland Rock Gym once a week. He also led climbs of Mount St. Helens, Unicorn Peak, the Washington-Ellinor Traverse, the East Ridge of Pinnacle Peak, and others, privately and as a Mazama climb leader.

In July 2016, a month after turning 80, George decided to tackle Monkey Face again. Close friend John Meckel led the climb, assisted by Lisa Ripps and Francisco Villa. This time, George had trouble getting into the cave after juggling 60 feet up the free-hanging rope from the Bohn Street ledge. John helped him get his ascender past the lip from inside the cave, and hikers on the Misery

Ridge Trail cheered as he made the move. Lisa led the "Panic Point" pitch out of the Monkey's mouth, then brought the rest of the team up to the summit on top of the Monkey's head.

At 80, George may be the oldest person to climb Monkey Face. He also may have oldest-climber rights on Beacon Rock and Rooster Rock. According to George, "I think I first climbed the SE Corner of Beacon Rock in 1961 (age 25) with Roger Peyton, when climbing it was illegal, and last climbed it in 2015 (age 79) with Adam Baylor.

"Climbing Beacon Rock is rated higher than Monkey Face for climbing skills. Adam and another Beacon Rock expert thought that I was its oldest climber and that no one had climbed it over a longer period than me. The same may be true of Rooster Rock, which I first climbed in 1961 and last in 2018, at age 82."

"When I first led Rooster Rock in the early 1960s, I just tied a rope around my waist, climbed it without placing any pro, belayed my companion up and down, and climbed down myself. The rope was too short to rap down—120 feet was the standard length then, and we didn't have harnesses and rappel devices." George also has been a Rooster Rock steward. On the trail and route, he got rid of poison oak, and with John Meckel collected roadside trash while returning to the parking lot.

At age 86, George has again moved away from climbing. Except for Rooster Rock in 2018, his last private climbs were in 2016 and his last Mazama climb lead in 2015. After a hiatus of 40 years, George returned to ceramics in 2020. Playing with clay has kept him busy during his lack of social life due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We will miss this inspiring Mazama leader on climbs but look forward to still seeing him at the Mazama Mountaineering Center. When you see him there, be sure to ask him about his amazing pandemic ceramic creations.

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