

75 years OF MOUNTAINEERING EDUCATION

by Mathew Brock

“*You don't know an ice axe from an ice pick, or a bowline on a bight from a butterfly knot, join the climbing committee's course of instruction for climbers that meets in the clubrooms every other Friday night. It's a good way to make sure you'll be an asset instead of a menace on a mountain. And besides, it's fun.*” Those words, under the heading “Would-be Climbers!” appeared in a small box on the bottom of page two of the March 1943 Mazama **Bulletin**. It was an understated start to the Mazama climber education program. As we celebrate the 75th anniversary of Mazama climbing education, we look back at the origins of the climbing school.

Kurt Sieke first floated the idea of a climbing course in 1927. But, due to the limited resources available to the Mazamas at the time, nothing happened. In 1939 then Mazama President Don Onthank recommended that the Mazamas provide off-season opportunities to help climbers stay in shape. Al Maas led six conditioning hikes in 1940, but the outbreak of World War II sapped the organization of people and energy. The occasional conditioning hikes continued for the next couple of years. It was not until March of 1943 that the Mazamas offered their first organized courses in Pacific Building clubrooms. Randall Kester, Climbing Committee chairman, held a series of eight classes and four field trips between February and June. Kester developed most of the curriculum himself. The April *Bulletin* notes that twenty people showed up for the first three classes, a slow but promising start. The fledgling climbing courses struggled through the 1940s. Interest and engagement ebbed and flowed with

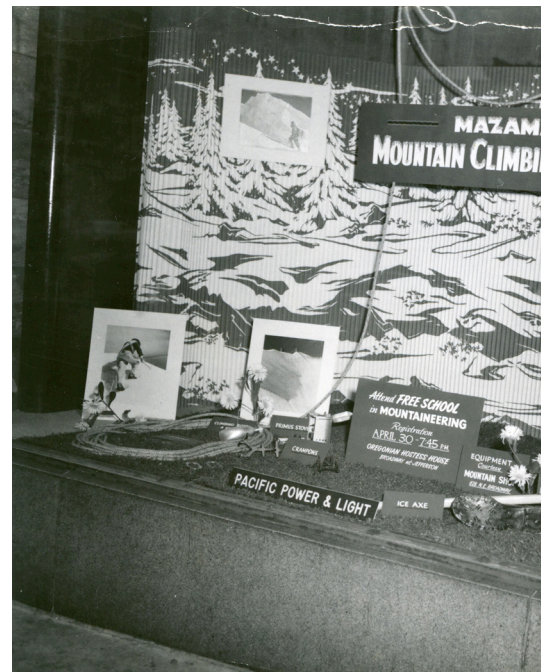
the war effort. Organizers grappled with attracting students and retaining qualified leaders. It would take the end of the war, a resurgence in interest, and the leadership of an energetic young climber to get the Mazama climbing school off the ground.

In 1950 Warren Wilson became chairman of the Climbing Committee and he wholeheartedly embraced the climbing school idea. Under Wilson's guidance, the committee scheduled six classroom sessions, eight field trips, and twenty high mountain ascents. That first year was a resounding success with 93 percent of students reaching a summit—a record for the organization. The next couple of years saw steady growth in attendance and refinement of the curriculum. The lecture topics have varied little since the classes first began: essential snow and rudimentary rock climbing; rope handling; axe and crampon use; alpine camping; food, clothing, and equipment; first aid; map and compass; group climbing; and climbing safety. The committee added climb leader

development and basic mountain rescue to the curriculum in 1954.

The Mazama Climbing School took off in 1957 under the leadership of high school teacher Bill Oberteuffer. Besides having the drive needed to make the school a success, he had the background and training to give the school a professional polish. On opening night in 1957, more than five hundred students signed up. Oberteuffer also introduced the Intermediate Climbing School in 1957 to detect and develop leadership. Intermediate students assisted new students in learning skills during field trips, allowing the classes to handle more students. By 1958 classes had outgrown the Mazama clubrooms and moved to larger quarters at the Multnomah College lecture hall. Attendance was so high that in describing the field trips, John Scott wrote that students “covered the practice rocks and snow slopes like ants at a picnic.”

As the curriculum and number of students have changed over the years, so





have the field session locations. Early field trip locations included Oneonta Ridge, Mt. Defiance, and White River glacier on Mt. Hood. Snow practice session occurred in the canyons east of Timberline Lodge, where they continue to this day. Rock practice centered on Rocky Butte, then on the outskirts of Portland, until the city cracked down and banned rock climbing. Rock practice then moved to Chimney Rocks, north of Washougal, Washington, where it would remain until 1956. That year Jack Grauer discovered an unusual rock formation on the Washington side of the Columbia River east of The Dalles. Now known as Horsethief Butte, it continues to be the principal location for Mazama rock skills practice.

Mimeographed copies of the *Mountaineers Handbook: The Techniques of Mountain Climbing* was the first textbook. When first published in 1960, *Mountaineering: Freedom of the Hills* became the first text and has remained so ever since. Other early books included *A Handbook for Ski Mountaineering* and

Belaying the Leader. By 1963 attendance topped out at 742 students, forcing the lectures to move to the Lloyd Center Auditorium. The committee instituted a \$2 registration fee in 1964 to constrain the school's growth.

Over the years the committee tried different things to keep the ratio of students to teachers manageable. Starting in 1974 basic school group size was set at 15 students and no more than 18 groups, for a total of 270 students. In recent years, wilderness restrictions have led to a cap of 240 students. The Mazama Advanced School joined the roster of climbing classes in 1965. The Advanced School, limited to 24 students, focused on technical skill and leader development. In 1980 the Advanced School launched the snow and ice program to give advanced students an opportunity to practice glacier travel, ascending and descending technique, crevasse rescue, and ice climbing. The move created two advanced courses: Advanced Rock (AR) and Advance Snow and Ice (ASI). In 1996 the Basic School became the Basic

Climbing Education Program.

Each of the programs has undergone periodic revisions as the Climbing Committee strove to offer students the most up-to-date material in an efficient manner.

In the fall of 2017, the Mazama Executive Council approved a new three-year strategic plan, Mazamas2020. The first of the plan's five goals is to modernize and expand Mazama outdoor education programs. The Climbing Committee and staff are working to improve quality while stabilizing outdoor program capacity. They are also working with other outdoor groups to standardize curriculum across the nation. One thing is certain: the Mazamas will continue working to keep our education programs rooted in our long-held values, while training the next generation of mountaineers.

Photos, clockwise, from left: Mazama Mountain Climbing School display at the Public Service Building, 1956. Mazama snow skills practice, Mt. Hood, 1956. Mazama rock skills practice, 1963. Mazama belay practice, Boy Scout Camp, 1959. Photos from the Mazama Archives.