

The 'Sherlock Holmes' of Himalayan mountaineering

June 4 2014, by Ammu Kannampilly



This photo taken on May 9, 2014 shows US journalist and Kathmandu-based mountaineering expert Elizabeth Hawley during an interview with AFP in Kathmandu

When a deadly avalanche hit Mount Everest last April, reporters made a beeline for 90-year-old Elizabeth Hawley, the woman Edmund Hillary once called "the Sherlock Holmes of the mountaineering world".

The ice avalanche struck a group of Nepalese guides early on April 18.

By 1 pm, nine people had been killed and the toll would eventually rise to 16, making it the worst disaster in the mountain's history.

More than 50 years after the Kathmandu-based mountaineering expert began chronicling the triumphs and tragedies on the roof of the world, recording deaths remains a struggle.

"It's the hardest part...it's just very sad", Hawley told AFP, as she recalled a busy day spent fielding calls from journalists and going through drawers containing her life's work—folders filled with thousands of pages charting every significant Himalayan ascent.

Elizabeth Ann Hawley was born on 9 November 1923 to a Chicago-based chartered accountant and a suffragist.

She attended university in Michigan and promptly moved to Manhattan after graduation in 1946, landing a job as a researcher with Fortune magazine.

Soon, she was bitten by the travel bug.

"I was mostly researching and writing profiles of businessmen or political figures. And I got bored," she said.

She saved money for the next few years, "eating only sandwiches and ice cream for lunch" and took off to see the world in 1957.

Her travels took her through France, Germany, the former Yugoslavia, and eventually to India, where the Time bureau chief asked if she would report for the magazine while visiting Nepal, a Hindu kingdom which had only recently opened its gates to foreign visitors.

By then, she was running out of money and the offer was too tempting to

refuse. She arrived in Kathmandu in February 1959, just in time for the country's first general elections.

"I knew then that this place was going to change enormously and that intrigued me," she said.

Mountaineering milestones

She landed her first major scoop during the 1963 US expedition of Everest when the American military attache offered her access to secret radio communication between Everest base camp and the embassy, enabling her to be the first to file when they reached the summit.

She soon built a reputation as one of the most authoritative voices on Himalayan mountaineering, known for ferreting out the truth from climbers claiming to set new records.



Mount Everest, the world's tallest peak, is seen from Syangboche on December 3, 2009

"I guess I am quite forceful, I come to the point and if someone thinks they can evade my questions, they can think again."

When 13-year-old Indian schoolgirl Malavath Purna made a bid to become the world's youngest female to climb Everest last month, it was Hawley's Himalayan Database which certified her summit, effectively adding the teenager's name to the record books.

Hawley's archives are considered so thorough that managers of Kathmandu's Rum Doodle restaurant, which offers free food to Everest summiteers, first call her to confirm their feat before serving up any meals.

As a journalist, she covered a string of milestones, from the first Everest summit by a woman—Japan's Junko Tabei in 1975—to the first solo ascent five years later by Reinhold Messner, who remains a close friend.

In fact, had it not been for Hawley, the Italian mountaineering legend may not have become the first man to scale Everest alone.

Japanese adventurer Naomi Uemura, who had already completed a record-making expedition to the North Pole, had his eyes set on the world's highest peak, Hawley said.

"Messner had always planned to do it but not for a few years. Then I heard about this Japanese climber wanting to summit on his own and when I told Messner about it, he moved his plans forward."

Witness to change

Today, the diminutive Hawley still drives around Kathmandu in her sky-blue 1965 VW Beetle to meet climbers before and after their ascents, but much else has changed in the mountaineering world.



In this photograph received from the SOCIAL WELFARE RESIDENTIAL EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS SOCIETY on June 2, 2014 and taken on May 25, 2014, Indian mountaineer Poorna Malavath (L) sits at the summit of Mount Everest.

Hawley began reporting during the age of national expeditions, then covered the era of solo ascents, and now views the surge of commercial

climbing outfits with wariness.

"I have known cases where sherpas have had to clip and unclip foreign clients from ropes because they don't even know how to do that. What are they even doing up there?" she said.

The April 18 avalanche spurred a debate over the risks undertaken by sherpas on behalf of foreign clients and eventually led to a virtual shutdown of Everest, with hundreds of guides reluctant to climb this season.

Hawley, who has spent decades working with the Himalayan Trust, a sherpa-focused aid organisation set up by Edmund Hillary in 1960, said the deaths of so many guides was "tremendously demoralising" for the community.

But she said the shutdown was unlikely to have a permanent impact on Nepal's [mountaineering](#) industry.

"Climbers will forget. They will keep coming because it's Everest after all...it makes them famous and important when they go back home", she said.

In the meantime, Hawley has achieved her own fame—including a biography, a documentary, and even a Himalayan peak named after her, which she has no plans to visit.

"No thank you, I don't like trekking, I prefer to sleep in a comfortable bed and eat hot meals," she said.

"I have never ever wanted to climb a mountain."

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