



Raised by Mountains

The adventurous upbringing of one of Canada's most talented mountaineers, Golden, BC's Rich Marshall

BY THOMAS CHALMERS

HIGH IN THE PURCELL MOUNTAINS, under the unrelenting August heat, with my trusty mountain cycle shoulder-slung, I take a final stumbling stride to the ridgeline, crying out in dismay.

"Lost!"

Far ahead, having not once subjected his enviably light bicycle to an undignified carry, my most excellent and stalwart companion in this adventure, one Mr. Richard Marshall of Golden, British Columbia, breaks his steady cadence of pedalling and turns about to confer.

"Sir," I begin, "I fear that our expedition has failed. Behold the mighty peaks and glaciers of the Selkirks to our West, whose beauty does not mark a course to the valley below."

Rich, a mountain guide of some renown, who has spent the better part of 40 years gazing on these skylines, sagely nods.

"I believe that you are correct, sir," he states flatly. "At least in the matter of a wayward course. I will not, however, talk of failure, for the weather is yet fine, the meadows redolent with the heady air of blooming flowers and our homes only hours away. Let us return to yonder tarn and there recover our faculties."

Down the track, taking a slight detour over a most excellently steep slick rock outcropping, Rich abruptly halts at a copse of small trees surrounding the little lake. Grinning, he waggles a finger at a branch overhead, where four tiny owlets are perched, with their great yellow eyes tracking our every move. What a singular, rare joy they are to see! Passing quietly beneath to find cold water refreshment beyond, we then relax on warm lakeshore rocks. All thoughts of failure fast fade, my philosophy broadening with new insight.

"Tell me, sir," I inquire, "how came you to such a clear understanding of things?"

Clockwise from top left: Rich's dad, Roger Marshall, climbing in the Lake District of North England, late 1950s (two photos). Roger, Richard and Duncan taking a break on the Bugaboo trail, 1969. The Marshalls homesteading in the Columbia Valley, near Golden, 1970. Rich scopes his bright mountaineering future in the Bugaboos, 1969. Dot Marshall and sons Rich and Duncan on a family ski trip in BC's Coast Range, 1968. Photos: Courtesy of the Marshall Family

Although Rich is a modestly reticent character, he is buoyed by shared adventure's high spirits and proceeds to relate his story.

"I was born in England, in 1963, the scion of climbing stock. My own Gramps had found a rambling love for the vertical landscape in England's Lake District. It was there my father, Roger, first clung to the famous Gritstone, whence his route skyward was joined by that of my dearest mother, Dot. Love for high and wild places beckoned them to Chamonix's hedonism of stone and ice. Still, the omnipresent footprints of others made solitude a fleeting thing, and burgeoning with two young boys,

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our flock yearned to spread its wings."

"So it was, in 1967, when I was but the tender age of four, that the Marshalls migrated to the untrammelled majesty of Canada's west. Though beginning in Vancouver at their respective careers, my father in journalism and my mother in teaching, their final destination was the small town of Golden. My parents sought any occupation available and a simple existence close to the land—and to my mother's chagrin, my father sought to work little and climb often. My parents purchased ten acres at a scant \$800 per acre. Having no skills, they set about creating a log home of interesting character, which was well complemented by outdoor family entertainment. Soon thereafter, my brother Duncan and I began skiing and climbing in the surrounding Columbia and Rocky Mountains. Destiny awaited."

"Sir!" I exclaim. "Eight hundred an acre! What fortunate homesteading!" For, some thirty years later, upon my own arrival in the valley, such land would easily fetch \$30,000 an acre.



Clockwise from above:
Roger Marshall climbing
with his buddies in the
Lake District of North
England, late 1950s. Rich
near the top of the south-
west face of Snowpatch
Spire, via “Surf’s Up,”
an eight pitch, 5.9 Bugaboo
classic. Rich mixing it up
in Haffner Creek, Alberta.
Photos: Marshall Family,
Jon Walsh, Peter Moynes.
Next page: Rich competing
in Colorado’s Ouray Ice
Fest. Photo: Alain Denis



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“Indeed,” Rich agreed, “though I do not measure such fortune in mere dollars.”
I nod, cognizant of his meaning.
“In ‘68, we began to spend weeks at a time amongst the grand Bugaboo spires. Today’s well-trodden approach, often hailed as harsh, is just a shadow of its steep and desperate former self. I clearly remember Dad’s awesome efforts to fetch another load of supplies for a lengthy family stay there. We children spent carefree days scrambling the ancient boulders, where the Conrad Kain Hut now stands, while off in the distance, the spidery speck of my father could be seen scaling granite towers. Though a pair of fiberglass igloos were available for a fee, we inhabited our old canvas tents for free, hunkering under overhanging rocks as the bears rummaged through camp. With childhood’s wide-eyed fearlessness, I watched the massive ursine beasts tear into our shelter, often leaving destruction in their wake.”
“Our school attendance was regularly interrupted by climbing safaris. Though I may have been a tad embarrassed at departing in our exceedingly loaded and decrepit vintage station wagon, the lingering stares of schoolyard chums always seemed to show a yearning for their own unorthodox family adventure.”
“Among other things, my father tempered his valued climbing time with the manufacture and sale of Marshall Mountain Equipment. Although none of it was particularly flattering in fit, our outerwear came by my father’s hand from textiles of varied textures and hues, purchased at bulk savings. I sported this clothing well into my teenage years. It was far different from the established Goldenite costume, yet somehow blended with the patches and tie-dye favoured by the conscientious objectors and other like-minded libertarians drawn to the valley. Perhaps spurred by our family’s immigration, there was also a timely influx of expat British climbers to stoke the forgotten embers of a once-fiery resident community of alpinists, begun by Swiss guides at the turn of the previous century.”
“I was fifteen years old and full of attitude when my father dragged me up the classic Becky-Chouinard route, on the South Howser Tower of our beloved Bugaboos. He led all the pitches, and we spent a night out on the wall together. Though such memories remain the fondest of my life, my young adulthood was, as one might well expect, filled with exuberance to pit my skills against the mountains unsupervised.”
“At a special rate of \$50 a day, I was sometimes privileged to accompany Golden’s father of heli, Rudi Gertsch, for a bit of helicopter skiing, supported by stocking and bagging at the local grocery. At other times, my friends would pool \$25

each to be flown and dropped into the Dogtooth Range, behind what is now Kicking Horse Mountain Resort. One such trip brought a day so particularly fine that we deemed any and all vestments unnecessary. Clad only in avalanche transceivers, we tumbled into the corn snow on the first run, receiving spectacular raspberries on our backsides.”
“In celebration, we returned to camp and consumed our entire stock of beer. In drunken stupor, we spent the duration of the day in the sun. In burnt woe, we spent the next in the shady confines of our tents. Combine this with impromptu, crowded car sorties to Lake Louise, and skiing caused our truancy to become so rampant that the school created a stringent rule equating missed days to a missed semester. Though I was fortunate enough to graduate on that dark and terrible year, my dearest younger sibling consequentially suffered.”
“By 1981, I began to climb in earnest with friends, no more a schoolboy. One such ice climbing route near Banff went well but ploddingly, and, in the encroaching darkness, I mistakenly rappelled off the end of my rope. Hitting the ice about ten feet below, I slid downward unhindered, plunging headfirst and screaming, over a 50-foot pillar. After a slow mid-air front flip, I finally crashed, feet first, onto ice. My crampons exploded upon landing and I struck and shattered my wrist on the wall behind. After an expedient trip to the Banff hospital, with a cast wrist and excruciatingly sore leg, I hobbled over to the King Eddy pub and found oblivion. The next day brought me home to my father, a sharp cuff to the head and a stern lecture on the proper art of descending a rope. Including, but not limited to, tying a knot in the end.”
“Through the years, my father would occasionally set off alone to different alpine countries to climb mountains too daunting for the short strides of children. He did this for decades, climbing many great peaks to the roof of the world, with a purist’s disdain for supplemental oxygen, and often by himself, until the year 1987 took his life on a solo attempt on Everest’s difficult North Face.”
It seems a sad coda to such a story of a life well-lived, but Rich breaks into a grin and rises to mount his cycle. Excitement builds at the prospect of a stirring descent. Clipping on his helmet, Rich turns his head.
“My fortune has been in parents who shared a good and simple life, with strong values.” He slips on dark glasses. “Especially the value of enjoying the outdoors and not working too much.”
With that, he turns. In a puff of dust and a flash of sunlight, he shoots down the trail and into the woods below. Smiling, I follow. □

