

American Rockies: Photographs by Gus Foster

VIEW FROM THE TOP by Gus Foster

The Rocky Mountains extend from New Mexico through the continental United States and finally terminate in the Yukon Territory near Alaska. My photographs of the American Rockies exhibit a body of work that evolved from my enjoyment of outdoor life, and from the outdoor experiences that shape and give focus to my life. Before I moved to New Mexico in the mid-70s I knew the Rockies only as the spectacular scenery I passed through on highway trips. My photographs back then were of people, and my outdoor experiences revolved around the rivers, lakes, and woods of northern Wisconsin -- great hardwood and pine forests, abundant waterways, but essentially flat and no comparison to mountains. My home now is in Taos, New Mexico, situated at the edge of the Sangre de Cristo range of the Rockies. I live in the middle of town, yet I am less than ten minutes away from the forest, less than half an hour away from being above 9,000 feet elevation, and under an hour from the boundary of a true wilderness area nearly a quarter million acres in size.

In the last twenty years, I've spent hundreds of hours walking, hiking, and climbing in the Sangre de Cristos -- getting to know my "back yard." I have also learned many of the skills essential to survival in the mountain wilderness. Early in my climbing career a friend's gift allowed me to participate in an intensive Outward Bound program in winter mountaineering. I learned survival skills, ice climbing, mountaineering, skiing, and I climbed one of the Colorado "fourteeners," in January. One summer, in the Pecos Wilderness, I witnessed a rescue in progress; a hiker had fallen and broken her leg. Observing a rescue operation made me realize that every person in the wilderness becomes a member of a new "community." The assistance we too often take for granted in our cities and towns -- the 911 telephone number for instance -- is not available in the wilderness. A rescue operation becomes a far more serious matter. Realization of this need for "community" in the wilderness led me to become a member of the Taos Search and Rescue team. For eight years I learned, trained, and practiced vital survival and rescue skills: tracking, map and compass, swiftwater rescue technique, rope work, wilderness medicine, all the common sense "do and don't" skills that often make that critical difference in the outdoors.

Thinking back, I'd say that part of my attraction to mountaineering in the Rockies began with a chair. In 1977, I took a railroad trip across the Canadian Rockies with my children and their grandmother. Our trip ended in Banff, Canada, where my girlfriend met up with us. My family flew home, and before driving to New Mexico my girlfriend and I wandered around Banff antiquing; we chanced upon a wonderful, decades old, bent-alderwood chair at a trading post. The chair wasn't for sale, but the owners allowed us to photograph it. When we returned to Taos we discovered,

by chance, some furniture made by a local artist that was similar in style to the chair we had hoped to own. We eventually tracked the furniture maker down, discovering that he lived on the edge of the national forest near the Pecos Wilderness. We made an appointment to visit him and on the road to his place our vehicle got so completely stuck in the mud he had to put us up for the night. Thus began a friendship that continues to this day. Roger Badash made a version of that chair for me, and more importantly, he subsequently introduced me to wilderness backpacking using burros. I've often thought of burro packing as being the "Rolls-Royce" of backpacking; my hiking companions and I are able to travel on foot at a leisurely pace, but we don't have to carry all our own gear. With pack burros I have the luxury of bringing along a camp stove, a frying pan, fresh foods, and a bottle of wine to celebrate a successful climb. Burros, and more recently a goat, also enable my partners and me to trek deeper into the wilderness, and to save our strength for climbing the mountains. We can spend as much as a week devoted to the climb of a single peak without straining our resources, and we can contemplate excursions of up to three weeks without having to resupply. Our four-legged companions make mountaineering, with heavy photographic equipment, possible.

In 1979, I used a #10 Cirkut camera to make panoramic photographs. That camera, first manufactured in 1902, was a heavy, cumbersome device, never intended for use in the mountains. Employing ten-inch roll film, it had a spring-driven motor, and a series of gears that propelled it around a ring gear mounted on a wood tripod. The panoramic photograph it produced was ten inches high by six feet wide. Like many other eighty-year-old devices, it was unpredictable and did not always function well. Badash, a group of friends, and I climbed Jicarita Peak in the Pecos Wilderness in the early fall of 1979. Roger's burros, Stewball and Maggie, helped us pack our gear to tree line, and all six of us helped carry the various wooden cases containing the camera to the 12,800-foot summit.

I continued to use the Cirkut camera for a few more years, adding a color aerial film I had adapted for use in this camera in 1981. In that year, I also started using a 35mm panoramic camera invented and produced by Ron Globus. Called a Globuscope, this camera weighed a mere five-and-a-half pounds, and made a 360 degree revolution in less than one second. Because of the fast speed and light weight it could be used as a hand-held camera, eliminating the need for a tripod.

About this time I started climbing with Tom Simons, an energetic mountaineer/human dynamo who, as a warmup to one of our ascents, ran the twenty-six-mile mountain marathon from Ouray to Telluride, Colorado, a marathon whose course goes up and over the 13,000 foot Imogene Pass. After seeing my photograph of Jicarita Peak, Tom suggested that I go see a "real"

mountain with him. He offered to carry my camera, saying that all I would have to do was "get my own fat butt up the hill." I accepted Tom's challenge and offer. In the summer of 1982 we climbed the 14,048 foot Handies Peak in the San Juan Range of the Colorado Rockies. What an awesome view! I was hooked, and almost instantaneously gained a new perspective on the world from its mountaintops. In fairness to Jicarita, though, and in deference to Tom, I must say that Jicarita's summit is so broad that the surround and the extraordinary vistas can not be taken in from one place, a contrast to the much smaller summits of Handies Peak and subsequent peaks I have visited.

In 1985, Ron Globus invented a new camera in collaboration with Donal Holway. The Globus-Holway uses five-inch film that results in a negative significantly smaller than the old Cirkut's. The impressive advances the designers made in optics and engineering also enabled the camera to produce superbly sharp negatives. Although the Cirkut negatives resulted in contact photographic prints of fairly large size, with this new camera I could develop a negative capable of being enlarged to a truly grand scale -- a scale essential to the magnitude of the landscapes I was photographing. I devoted two years to building the enlarger and the darkroom where I created the panoramic photographs shown in the current exhibition. More compact than the clunky Cirkut camera, the Globus-Holway was not made with mountain climbing in mind, though. With its tripod and support gear stowed in a backpack, the equipment weighs sixty-five pounds -- not my favorite weight to be carrying to high places.

Viewing this planet from the top of a mountain is always an extraordinary experience for me. Each mountaintop offers a truly unique vantage point, and provides a continuous image of the distant horizon with nothing between me and that horizon line but air. I will never tire of these exhilarating moments at a mountain's apex, which must be comparable to the feelings an astronaut experiences when viewing the earth from an orbiting space shuttle. Artistically, I have always liked the 360 degree panoramic photograph, especially from a conceptual standpoint because nothing is left out of its frame. In a wilderness landscape, a panoramic camera is a unique tool with which to record a scene that extends to infinity from all points on the compass, but it can only begin to suggest the spectacular reality of the mountain peak experience.

For the next few years, I worked with my new camera, photographing from the peaks of the Pecos Wilderness. I burro-packed with my mountaineering partner Roger, his burros Maggie and her son Sid, his and my family, and friends. In 1988, I acquired two burros of my own, Chico and a youngster named Angel. I also continued climbing in the "fourteeners" of Colorado with Tom Simons, his son Quinn, and another Santa Fean, John Chamberlain. By 1989 Tom had climbed all fifty-two of the 14,000-foot summits in Colorado. He and Quinn set their sights on higher

altitudes: the Mexican volcanoes, some peaks in the Andes, and, ultimately, the Himalayan Range. So, John and I kept working at the peaks in Colorado, and venturing forth, also climbed a few mountains in the Sierra Nevada Range of California.

In 1991, I started to expand the boundaries of the places I visited, to broaden the horizons seen through my camera. During the spring of 1991, I hiked 300 miles along an ancient Japanese highway as a way to get in shape for my upcoming summertime climbing. Upon my return from Japan I did some ice climbing in Alaska's Glacier Bay. Then I drove the length of the Alcan Highway from Alaska through Canada. I met John Chamberlain in Montana where we climbed a peak in Glacier National Park. We then hiked toward a peak in the Lost Range in Idaho. I had injured myself on the Alaskan glaciers, and after the Idaho trek I could go no farther that season. I took a photo at the base of the Grand Teton's on my way home, a wonderful range I have yet to explore.

Chamberlain and I traveled to the High Uintas Wilderness Area in Utah in the summer of 1993, to climb Kings Peak. After hiking some twelve or thirteen miles we were caught in a snowstorm and spent the next forty hours huddled together in a tent with nary a book between us. During that downtime we decided we were no longer going to venture into wilderness areas carrying our own gear. I had a perfectly good burro team in New Mexico, and I began to figure out the logistics of bringing the burros on the road with me. I had also started a correspondence with a fellow in Wyoming who used goats as pack animals. I made the commitment, lying in that tent in Utah, to someday add pack goats to my hiking team. The next summer, John, Roger, and I, along with Roger's burro Sid and my Chico, returned to Utah to complete the ascent of Kings Peak. While hiking with our pack-burros, John and I kept looking at each other; we now realized that last year, without the right gear and equipment, it would have been stupid and dangerous to have persisted. We had no chance of making it to the top. The snow had kept us from true folly.

The planning of my climbing journeys evolved significantly; by the end of one season of climbing, my partners and I were seriously thinking about what, where, and how to proceed the following summer. The combined pressures of family demands and tight schedules meant that, at best, we could count on about nineteen to twenty-one days together, starting the day we left Taos and ending the day we returned. During the 1995, 1996, and 1997 seasons, these nineteen to twenty-one days were packed full: we drove 3,000 miles or more, and attempted climbs of at least five peaks. These peaks were in different wilderness areas, in one or more of the states of Oregon, Idaho, Wyoming, and Montana. We spent as little as a day, or as many as five days in each of the areas. We packed in, climbed, packed out, drove, resupplied, then did it again, until it was time to return to New Mexico. Although these excursions were exhilarating, they were grueling hard

work. We typically each year would walk 100 to 130 miles, and ascend and descend 30,000 to 40,000 vertical feet. Added to this was the long drive to the northern border states with 400 pounds of gear, hauling a stock trailer with two or three animals. Relaxation happened during the drive time from one trailhead to another, and during the pleasurable times we spent together at our high base camp at the end of each day.

In 1996, I acquired an Alpine-La Mancha goat and named him William Henry, in honor of W. H. Jackson, an early photographer of the American West and a member of the first Hayden survey of the Rocky Mountains. I proceeded to train William Henry to carry some of my camera gear. Then in 1997 he accompanied me, for the first time, on the long trip to the Big Horns of Wyoming and the Absaroka Range in Wyoming and Montana. In 1998, he was with me and my companions -- carrying forty-four pounds of camera gear, everything except the tripod -- as we traversed four wilderness areas in New Mexico.

The Rockies. The backbone of the North American continent. I love the mountains. In them, through them, and from them I continue to learn, to grow, and to mature. I love the wilderness -- the solitude, the peacefulness. I love the great richly scented forests that embrace the mountains and stand as the guardian sentries I pass through into the thinning mountaintop air that enervates my body while energizing my mind. The forests yield to the alpine strata of rocks, and give way to new varieties of plant and animal life, and to the expanding vistas, and ultimately the mountain's summit from where the view extends to forever from wherever I look. I love the mountains. They have been a source of true inspiration and a core experience from which much of my artistic energy radiates.

I recently crossed the western United States by plane. Looking out my porthole window -- from a vantage point of 37,000 feet -- I saw a vast range of mountains, at times cloud-enshrouded, at times crystalline and pristine, showing the familiar slate grays, snowy whites, and deep forest greens. I realized that for many people this could be their only view of the mountains. Few venture into the mountain environs that start where the roads end. Taking the time, doing the physical conditioning, acquiring the gear, and having the drive, stamina, and perseverance to get there requires a unique and purposeful individual. But a whole community of hardy individuals DOES go into those environs, and they have taught me, shown me, led me, and hiked and climbed with me. I am honored to be a member of this community. I hope my photographs convey the enormity of the space, and the emotion, great passion, and boundless love I have for the mountains. To be able to share these images gives me as much pleasure as being there.

Taos, New Mexico, 10 December 1998

Clambering up the Cold Mountain path,
The Cold Mountain trail goes on and on:
The long gorge choked with scree and boulders,
The wide creek, the mist-blurred grass.
The moss is slippery, though there's been no rain
The pine sings, but there's been no wind.
Who can leap the world's ties
And sit with me among the white clouds?

-- Han-shan (fl. 627-649)