

MELVIN G. MARCUS 1929–1997



Dr. Mel Marcus on Mt. Logan in 1970. Photo by J.C. LaBelle

One of America's most vital geographers and climatologists, Melvin G. Marcus, died of a heart attack on Sunday, 2 March 1997, at age 67. Mel was instructing graduate students in snow studies at the 3354 m high Molas Pass, in Colorado's San Juan Mountains, when he briefly left the group. When he failed to return, a search found him lying in the snow with his faithful dog, Akita, curled up beside him.

Mel was born in Seattle in April, 1929. He became an avid mountaineer at a young age, achieving 52 first ascents by the age of 19. He considered Hoziman Peak, near the Canadian border in the North Cascades, his finest ascent. He was the youngest member ever elected to the American Alpine Club.

He began college in 1947 at Yale University, where he majored in geology and played basketball. While there, he participated in field research at the Juneau Icefield Research Project in Alaska with Maynard Miller. From 1951–55, in the Air Force, he flew B-26s in Korea and Japan. After discharge, he switched to the field of geography. He received his B.A. in that major from the University of Miami in 1956,

then an M.A. from the University of Colorado, Boulder, in 1957. His Ph.D. was awarded by the University of Chicago in 1963.

His first teaching position was with Rutgers University, but in 1964 he moved to the Department of Geography, University of Michigan, and remained there for the next decade. He served as chairman of that department from 1969 to 1971.

In 1964, Mel began his lifelong research activities in glacier climatology and snow studies, becoming involved with the Arctic Institute of North America's Icefield Ranges Research Project (IRRP) in Canada's Yukon Territory. In 1966, the IRRP, with Mel's involvement, carried out a reconnaissance of the St. Elias, Wrangell, and Chugach Mountains of the Yukon and Alaska. The plan was to initiate an investigation of three mountainous environments: a high mountain with permanent snow and glaciers, a mountain pass with seasonal snow cover, and a rugged gorge fed by glacier meltwater. Concurrently, the IRRP planned to investigate high-altitude human physiology on Canada's highest peak, Mt. Logan (5959 m).

Supported by the U.S. Army Research Office-Durham, with Mel as principal investigator (co-investigator with Thomas R. Detwyler during some years) and faculty and graduate student researchers, the program, dubbed the High Mountain Environment Project (HMEP), got under way in 1967. The first season concentrated on pass and gorge environments at Chitistone and Skolai Passes and at the Lower Chitistone River and Skolai Creek, in Alaska's Wrangell Mountains. In addition, a transect was run from Kluane Lake (786 m) to the 5300 m summit plateau of Mt. Logan. Investigations proceeded in climatology, glaciology, geomorphology, meteorology, and botany. The Arctic Institute of North America, through IRRP, provided logistics and air support. Philip Upton pioneered the glacier landings at this time.

The following year, in cooperation with the High Altitude Physiology Studies (HAPS) project on Mt. Logan, studies related to the first objective, the high mountain with permanent snow, began at 5300 m on the Mt. Logan high plateau. All studies continued successfully until 1970, resulting in numerous publications. During this period Dr. Marcus served as IRRP's Chief Scientist.

Mel went to New Zealand for a sabbatical leave in 1971–72 as visiting professor at the University of Canterbury. In 1974 he moved to the Department of Geography at Arizona State University, Tempe, where he served as Director of the Center for Environmental Studies. In 1977 he did a stint as departmental chairman, then returned to the University of Canterbury for another sabbatical in 1981. Later he also spent visiting professorships at the University of Colorado, Boulder, and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point.

His copious field work activities included research on glacier environments in Alaska and the Yukon, New Zealand, Mt. Ararat in Turkey, and the mountains of Nepal, Peru and Bolivia, plus vegetation studies in the Grand Canyon and urban environmental studies. He published about one hundred papers, books, and book chapters. At the time of his

death he was principal scientific advisor to the filming of the IMAX spectacular, "The Greatest Places."

Mel served on many committees and governing boards with the National Science Foundation, National Academy of Sciences, Association of American Geographers (President 1978–79), American Geographical Society (Vice President for several years), Arctic Institute of North America, International Geophysical Union, Yosemite National Institutes, International Mountain Society, Explorers' Club, and American Alpine Club. At his death, he was about to receive the Cullum Geographic Medal of the American Geographical

Society, and the Lifetime Achievement Award of the Association of American Geographers.

Professor Marcus is survived by his wife, Mary Ann; his daughters, Annette and Alison; his sons, Andrew and Ben; and three grandchildren. He passed on doing what he most enjoyed, in the mountains where he was at home, high in the snow terrain he understood so well.

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