

Barry Wilfred Prather

Died: September 5, 1987

Barry “Bear” Prather died at the age of 48 in an automobile accident on September 5 in The Dalles, a community on the Columbia River in central Oregon. With him, and also killed in the accident, was his 18 year-old son Eric.

He came to Dartmouth from Ellensburg, Washington, where he grew up — and acquired the nickname “Bear” or “Bar” — and lived most of his adult life. He resided, operated two retail businesses (television and appliance repair) in that town, and farmed in the Kittitas Valley in central Washington where the town is located, at the time of his death.

At Ellensburg High School, he was an honors student and participated in dramatics. He was also an athlete, playing baseball and basketball, and serving as co-captain of the football team.

Bear left Dartmouth during, or at the end of, his freshman year. As our classmate Tom Conger remembers, Bear “had mountain peaks in his muscles and his brain, and returned to the Pacific Northwest to challenge the lofty summits. He eventually made the cut for the first American ascent on Everest [in 1963]. Stricken with an altitude-related illness, he did not complete the ascent, but did survive, and went on to climb again.”

Bear later completed his A.B. degree at Dartmouth and went on to Michigan State University to earn an M.S. degree in geophysics.

A May 1983 account in the Alumni Magazine of the 1963 Everest expedition describes Barry “as a bear of a man in every which way,” and neatly summarizes his unique career:

“Since Everest, he has climbed in Alaska and continued glacier research there every summer. He has been on four Arctic and Antarctic trips, been married twice and fathered five children, been named the state’s outstanding Farm Bureau and Kiwanis president, built his own house, become a volunteer soccer coach, finished his M.S. in geophysics at Michigan State, been a custom harvester for 16 years with his own combines, become a district Boy Scout chairman, and spent 15 years on the board of directors and as a trustee for the Foundation for Glacier and Environmental Research. And he has run a television appliance and repair service since 1973 . . .”

Bear spent his summers, from 1958 to the time of his death nearly 30 years later, working with the renowned Dr. Maynard M. Wheeler as part of the Juneau

Icefield Research Project, run under the auspices of the Glacial and Arctic Sciences Institute at the University of Idaho.

Dr. Wheeler wrote a eulogy after Bear's death, in which he said:

"Barry was a giant of a man ... physically, mentally and spiritually. He loved the icefield and the programs there.... Barry left a positive impression on everyone he met. He was wonderfully likeable, considerate, optimistic, joyful, loyal, and selfless, with a clear vision and clarity of purpose. He had a magnificent speaking and singing voice. When Barry said everything was 'fine and dandy,' you knew it was so. He instilled confidence in those around him. When Barry was there you knew things were going to be alright." ... He could fix anything; all he needed was baling wire and electrician's tape. Repairs did not always last, but he easily fixed them again! He never lost his temper or his sense of humor; his energy was prodigious."

Dr. Wheeler named the mountains and glaciers that he and Barry traversed and studied: Everest, of course, Mt. Kennedy, Mt. Rainier, Ice Island in the Polar Sea, the Antarctic, and the Juneau icefield. He promised that a suitable mountain in the Juneau icefield would be named in Barry's and his son Eric's memory, and that "a bronze plaque will be embedded in a granite wall at Camp 18" in Bear's honor.

The author knew Bear for several years during the late 1960's in Ellensburg, the location of Central Washington University. Off and on together and with others we worked on preserving the Yakima River, prime fly-fishing and rafting waters that flowed through the Kittitas Valley, worked on trying to prevent dams from being built on the Snake River, and helped to create the Alpine Lakes Wilderness Society, that was a precursor for the wilderness area carrying that name in the Cascades. Bear gave a hand and lent his name and influence for all these causes.

Our classmate Tom Conger said of Bear, "What a man! What a life! It's just hard not to admire the big guy."

A year before his untimely death, Bear reflected on the process of aging, and physical decline for our 25th Reunion Yearbook in 1986.

"Physically I'm definitely on the downhill slide (actually it seems like freefall rather than a slide)," he wrote. "The mental deterioration is not pleasant either. I used to look at an object or idea and be able to recall it in detail six months later. Now I'd better make good notes. My joy in life is not in these two things, though. Still being able to travel the mountains and glaciers on foot is a great uplifting feeling."

Barry and his wife Kay, who survived him, had eight children and stepchildren, in descending chronological order: Doug, Ken, Liesl, Eric (deceased), Brendan, Brooks, Kara, and Thane ("Zach").