

# The Last Cairn

BY CHIP BROWN

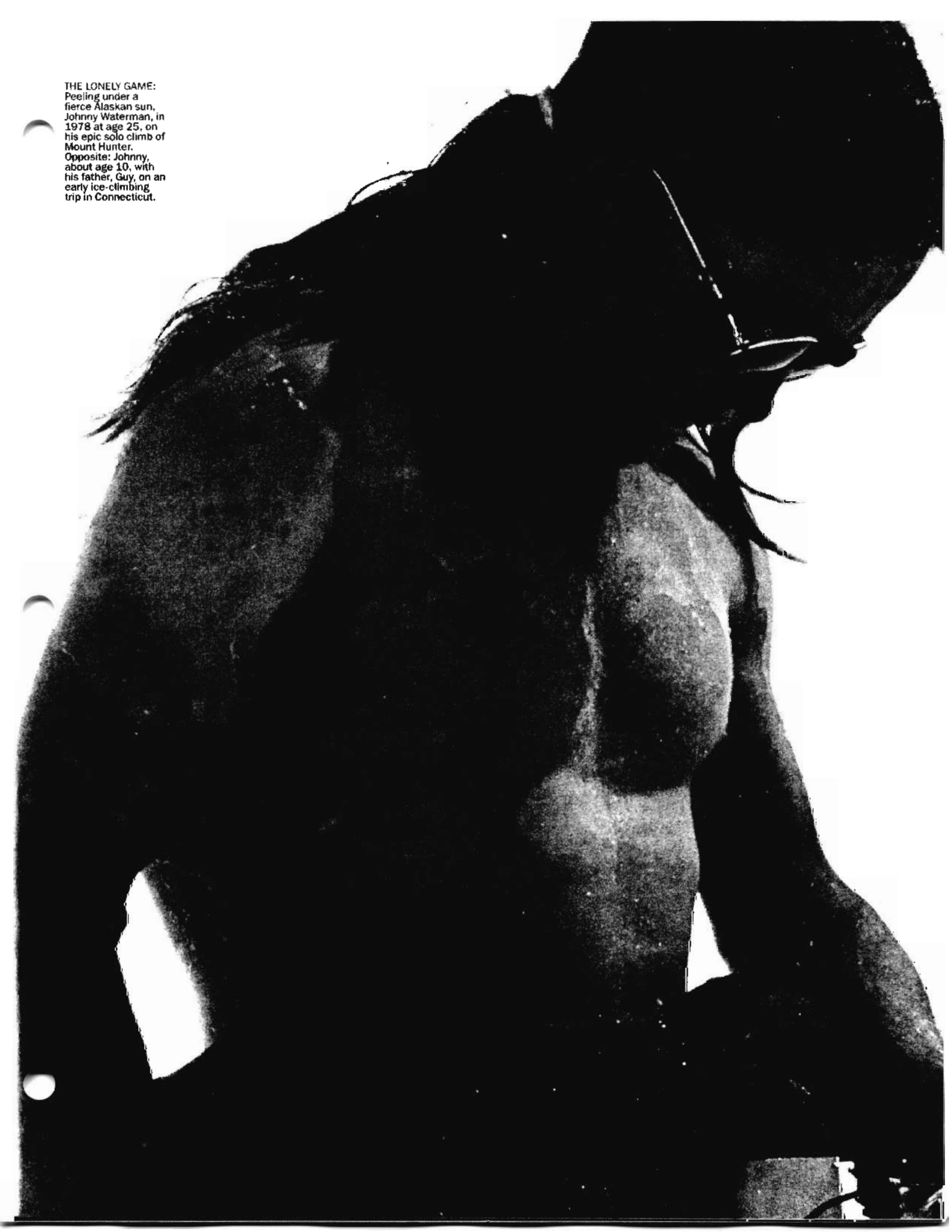
Johnny Waterman was the “crazy genius” of Alaskan mountaineering, an untamed eccentric who pulled off one of climbing’s most audacious feats—a five-month solo ascent of Mount Hunter. Then he vanished into the northern wilderness.

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Young men go into the mountains all the time to discover themselves and to propitiate the ghosts of their fathers, but it’s the rare father who goes into the mountains to join the ghost of his son. ¶ Guy Waterman died three years ago on a winter evening on a mountain ridge in New Hampshire. He was 67 years old, a climber, a homesteader, an author widely known in New England outdoors circles. He was also the father of three sons, and he believed in the peculiarly American myth that says there is something between fathers and sons that can be understood only in the context of wilderness. ¶ Before he sat down in the snow and froze to death on a February night, he wrote some notes to friends, hoping to explain his decision to take his own life. One was to an old pal

**THE LONELY GAME:**  
Peeling under a  
fierce Alaskan sun,  
Johnny Waterman, in  
1978 at age 25, on  
his epic solo climb of  
Mount Hunter.  
Opposite: Johnny,  
about age 10, with  
his father, Guy, on an  
early ice-climbing  
trip in Connecticut.



named Brad Snyder, who knew of the special kinship Guy felt with his middle son, John Mallon Waterman.

In December 1968, when Johnny was 16, Guy had set out with his son on a grand winter circuit in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. They planned to follow the string of boarded-up Appalachian Mountain Club huts along the entire length of the Presidential Range and then to traverse the ranges west—something no one had ever done in winter. They wore snowshoes and carried 80-pound packs. The temperature when they started was 12 below zero. They soon ran into a storm, and on top of Mount Jefferson got lost in an icy cloud. Guy wrote about how they survived the bitter whiteout: “To guard against losing their way—which could have been disastrous—the son would go out from the last identified cairn as far as he could and still see it. Then the father would go out from there as far as he could without losing sight of the son, and stand there waiting for some brief lapse in the wind to try to squint forward into the fury of the storm in a forlorn effort to find another cairn.”

To keep their tent from exploding in the wind, they had to stay awake most of that night holding the aluminum poles. Their clothes got soaked; their down sleeping bags had no loft. They beat a dire retreat and hiked into a town, where they found a Laundromat and dried their gear. Then—the index of their zeal—they started back in, walking up the Mount Washington Auto Road. They got to 5,500 feet when another storm hit. The temperature dropped to 26 below



Hunter, the third highest peak in the Alaska Range. Of that feat, American climber Jeff Lowe once wrote, “There is nothing else in the history of mountaineering with which to compare it.” Three years later, Johnny vanished while soloing on McKinley. The grief that seized Guy never really let him go. Saying good-bye to his old friend Snyder, Waterman wrote:

“Sorry to be leaving like this, but I’ve tried to explain my thinking about old age prospects and other shortcomings, for me, of this life. . . . It isn’t a question of going or staying—just when and how to go. Above tree line in the wind seems appropriate—I’ll be joining Johnny, to whom I was always closer akin than anyone realized.”

Here was the saddest sort of faith—faith not that a father and son would be reunited in the next world, but that they would always be paired in this one by the likeness of their deaths.

**Johnny’s teenage ascent** of Mount McKinley was the first of his many formidable achievements in Alaska. In 1978, he produced his masterpiece—a 145-day solo expedition on Mount Hunter. Of that feat, climber Jeff Lowe wrote, “There is nothing else in the history of mountaineering with which to compare it.”

zero. The winds were shrieking at a hundred miles an hour.

Father and son spent four days holed up in one of the metal bivouac sheds that once provided emergency shelter for road crews: 6 1/2-Mile Box it was called. To fetch water, one of them had to get completely dressed—boots, crampons, over-mitts, parka, face mask—go out into the storm, chop at an icy snow crest with an ax, hope the gales blew some of the chips into a stuff sack, then dive back inside the shed and melt the collection of ice chips. They played poker for lunch snacks with a handmade deck of cards. To his chagrin, Guy discovered that Dostoyevsky’s *Notes From Underground* was no help in passing the time, whereas Johnny’s trashy detective novels were riveting.

How long those hours were! And, in retrospect, how short.

Six months after the winter outing in the White Mountains, Guy let Snyder take Johnny to Alaska on a climbing expedition to Mount McKinley. The teenager became the third youngest person to stand on the highest point in North America. The ascent was the first of Johnny’s many formidable achievements in Alaska and a moment of crowning pride for his father. Then, in 1978, Johnny produced his masterpiece—a 145-day solo expedition on 14,573-foot Mount

**Johnny Waterman’s** reputation as the “crazy genius” of Alaska mountaineering was secured long before he disappeared on McKinley. Yet what people saw as madness in Johnny was often just Guy’s intensity turned inside out or carried to extremes. Johnny had his father’s passion for music, for example, but not his talent. Guy, who was gifted enough to play professional jazz piano as a teenager in Washington, D.C., was always shy about performing. Johnny, with marginal gifts, would take to the stage of a bar to honk Christmas carols on the clarinet, undaunted by booing patrons or the bartender’s plugging in the jukebox. Guy’s signature tam-o’-shanter—the very symbol of his discreet showmanship—became in Johnny a full-blown costume: He swept around Fairbanks in a black cape and oversize Elton John glasses with a big silver star glued on the bridge of the frames. Guy in his 20s had written speeches for leading Republican politicians, including one who would later become President of the United States; Johnny in his 20s once ran for President of the United States. Johnny had his father’s mania for recording the minutiae of daily life, but where Guy jotted notes on color-coded file cards stacked



**MEN FOR THE MOUNTAINS:** Guy at Barra, his homestead in East Corinth, Vermont, in 1992 (left). After Johnny's visit there in 1976, the two men never saw each other again. Opposite: Johnny, in 1970, during his first attempt on Hunter.

neatly in his left shirt pocket, Johnny had small spiral notebooks and a Harpo Marx-like entanglement of clipboards. Guy rarely talked about his feelings, but Johnny was almost compulsively confessional, broadcasting his loneliness and sexual anxieties.

But for both of them, climbing was a lifeline. Guy had nurtured his son's skill on rock and ice, top-roping the scrawny boy up his first ascents, on the Shawangunks cliffs near New Paltz, New York, and watching as the prodigy emerged and eventually outstripped him.

The mountain that loomed over both their lives was Hunter. While its giant summit plateau is more than a mile lower than the top of McKinley, eight miles to the north, Hunter has been called the hardest 14,000-foot climb on the continent. Johnny made his first attempt in May 1970, when he was 17 years old and newly emancipated from high school. His party got only 1,500 feet up the south face before bad weather forced them down.

The following year, Guy fared much worse, barely getting above his base camp. His party was defeated by bad weather and what Guy conceded were the team's "mediocre" abilities. The experience left him chastened, as if he'd flunked an important test.

It's something of a paradox that Guy, who loved bad mountain weather and went on to become one of the leading wilderness advocates of his generation, never returned to the grandest wilderness on the continent. Pressed for money, frightened of flying, and overwhelmed by the scale of Alaska, he confined himself after Hunter to what he called the dinky mountains of the Northeast and found inspiration and vicarious glory in Johnny's exploits.

As horizons were contracting for the father, they were opening for the son. In the summer of 1972, after completing his freshman year at Western Washington University, Johnny returned to Alaska, where he and four other climbers claimed the east ridge of Mount Huntington, long considered to be a deadly route. It was a resounding achievement, but while his partners celebrated, Johnny stared off at Hunter, three miles west.

The following spring he got his second crack at Hunter. He was joined by Dean Rau, from the 1970 expedition, and by two new team members, Dave Carman and Don Black. After three weeks of climbing, Waterman, Carman, and Black, who had pressed on without the more cautious Rau, reached what they believed to be Hunter's south summit. But when they returned to the town of Talkeetna, their

jumping-off point, and consulted aerial photographs, Johnny was devastated to discover that the true south summit was another point farther along the ridge, 200 feet higher. Waterman burst into tears, the whole ascent suddenly a failure in his view.

Johnny moved to Fairbanks in 1974 and enrolled at the University of Alaska. The following year, heeding his father's principle of "planning all activities in detail and well in advance," he began what turned into nearly three years of preparations for his third attempt on Hunter.

The next year, halfway through the fall term, Johnny dropped out of school and found a job working on the trans-Alaska pipeline to finance the climb. He began saving money to buy equipment. He went on long runs wearing crampons on his mountaineering boots. To acclimate himself to cold temperatures, he

developed the flesh-mortifying practice of bathing in an ice-filled bathtub.

In the midst of his training, Johnny returned to the East in June 1976 and spent two days visiting his father at Barra, Guy's homestead in East Corinth,

Vermont, where most of the food came from the garden, the firewood was cut by hand, and the water was hauled up in buckets from a little stream. Guy was impressed with how strong his son had gotten, how much the boy had ripened into a man.

"He was building himself up for Mount Hunter," recalled his stepmother, Laura Waterman. "I could tell that Guy was proud of him, wanted him to achieve great things in the mountains. . . . Guy had talked a lot about wanting to [go] back to Alaska sometime with Johnny—just the two of them. He wanted to fly into some glaciated spot where the routes stretched up and on forever, all untouched. That was his dream. He and Johnny would do route after route, all previously untrodden. Of course, it never happened."

Father and son would stay in touch by mail over the years, but after that last summer in Vermont they never saw each other again.

It proved to be a grim year for Johnny. In August, his friend and mentor Chuck Loucks died in a fall in the Tetons. Years later, Guy dug up a letter Johnny wrote to him after learning that Loucks had been killed: "Last person in the world I expected to live longer than. . . . [Loucks's death] forever removes all legitimacy from climbing to me, but will bring us all closer together, I think."

Then, in December, Johnny's friend Lief Patterson was killed in an avalanche with his 12-year-old son. "Kind of 'hilarious,'" Johnny wrote ironically to Snyder in a letter dated January 1977, "as part of the cause of [my] falling out [with Lief] was my interpretation of climbing as . . . a desperately tragic affair. Oh well. It doesn't feel good to win that argument. Maybe he agreed with me anyway. Maybe I, or you, or anyone for that matter, will join them soon. . . . I don't have a death wish, but I am trying to be realistic."

**By late March 1978,** Johnny was ready to take on what he would come to call his "nemesis": the mountain that had rebuffed his father and whose highest points had twice eluded him. The 1970 and 1973 Hunter parties had gained elevation by ascending two icefalls on the Tokositna Glacier, but the more dramatic and natural line up the south face began where the buttress rose, below and to the east of the second icefall. The route eventually rejoined the upper portion of the south ridge at around 12,700 feet, airy ground Waterman had already crossed in 1973. If he got up

the buttress, he planned to traverse from the south summit across Hunter's massive summit plateau (two miles long by half a mile wide), climb the middle and north summits, and descend by way of Hunter's difficult north ridge, which fell back to the main body of the Tokositna Glacier. Suffice it to say that the route was long, audacious, and terrifyingly hard. To make the challenge supremely exacting, Waterman was going to do the whole thing solo.

"I won't be seeing you again," he told bush pilot Cliff Hudson, who dropped Waterman off on the Tokositna ice.

"You'll be back," Hudson promised.

One of the paradoxes of Waterman's solo climb and traverse is that he was noted for moving boldly and quickly in the mountains—for ascents in what is called alpine style. On Hunter, however, he used expedition-style tactics, perfected by European climbers in their assaults on 8,000-meter Himalayan peaks. Climbing the central buttress a dozen times or more, he hauled his 800-pound base camp in repeated sorties up pitches that he fixed with anchors and ropes. He would rappel down and then reascend by using mechanical devices called jumars. He had 3,600 feet of rope and 74 bags, each containing 5,000 calories of food. He eventually ate his way through much of this enormous burden, so that higher on the mountain it was not necessary to make as many repeat trips. In his journal he noted the weather, the amount of fixed rope he placed, and the number of loads carried, and he provided terse summaries of each day's highlights.

March 24: "Lost a contact lens and probably further damaged my frost-bitten fingers of a month ago."



would occasionally stop and scream for twenty minutes."

He prayed. He wept. He itched himself savagely, discovering an infestation of body lice. "It was some comfort to know I was not alone," he later noted drolly in the *American Alpine Journal*. His only connection to other people was a small AM radio and his citizens band radio, which he used to contact Hudson and other CB users who might get a message to him.

April 28: "Wrote a song 'Arbeit Macht Frei' comparing my Mt. Hunter climb to a concentration camp where inevitable death ensues. It summed up my dire thoughts."

May 7: "Noted I had the venereal condition known as crabs. Gouged myself in the leg trying to remove one of them."

May 28: "Jumars froze up on ropes today. . . . Wrote 'death' poem."

The names he chose for his camps and for the rock and snow formations confronting him on the buttress reflected the almost animate presence of the mountain in his mind and his sense of himself as the protagonist in a saga: Valhalla, First Judge, Court of the

**Johnny had come away from** his ultimate wilderness test with the conceit that because he was still alive, nature, mountains, even the elemental lethality of the Arctic were overrated. It was not man that was puny, it was the universe. Here was his father's idealism spinning into madness.

April 12: "Read and sang verses from the Bible."

April 24: "Cried bitterly."

As the days went by, he railed at the endless wind. He wrote poems. He dug himself out from blizzards. He repaired a rip in his wind parka using dental floss. He taped his fingers to keep from biting his nails. When a snow picket pulled out during a rappel, he was lucky not to have died. To thaw out his ice-clogged jumars, he sometimes had to blow on them until he was light-headed, and when that didn't work, he flailed at the ascenders with his ice hammer, attacking the very gadgets on which his life depended. After the climb, in a letter to Brad Snyder, he wrote that when he was dragging his bags up the steeper pitches on ropes he'd fixed, "I

Lords, Little Prince. On his 63rd day, he reached the juncture of the buttress and the ridge. He spotted ropes he and his teammates had left in 1973. He was running out of food and would not be able to be resupplied by airdrop until he reached Hunter's summit plateau.

June 3: "Worst winds yet. . . . Dug out camp. Cried and prayed."

June 6: "Bad, windy. . . . Crabs still present. Proposition 13 passed in California."

June 7: "Led the Happy Cowboy pitch. Cornice broke resulting in forty foot fall."

By mid-June, he was past the hideous barrier known as the Happy Cowboy Pinnacle. From there on, Waterman found that the going eased a bit. The high summer nights were not dark enough for stars.



**MOUNT HUNTER SOLO:** To take the photo at left, Waterman set his camera on a ledge, started the timer, then swung along the cliff face. Above: With McKinley looming in the background, Waterman celebrates on Hunter's summit after 124 days. Opposite: The treacherous south ridge.

to go down, the lost-in-a-masquerade sentiments of Leon Russell's song "This Masquerade" began to haunt his thoughts.

As he told Glenn Randall in an interview for *Climbing* magazine, "That song seemed to say it all to me—the dual nature of what I was experiencing, this intense desire to live, and then this song which suddenly had

the influence of making me realize how sad it would be if I lived through the climb. Something far more precious would be lost if I lived through it than if I died. Living through it would mean that nature wasn't as raw as everybody wanted to believe it was, that man was far superior to the Arctic, far more capable than he had otherwise thought. Living through it would mean that Hunter wasn't the mountain I thought it was. It was a lot less."

Where Guy had found uplifting and even ennobling elements in what a "puny" human being could achieve on a mountain—puniness redeemed, as it were—Johnny found only self-abnegation and more subtle and complicated ways of perceiving the meaninglessness of his life. Where Guy had been humbled and yet somehow enlivened by the winter winds blasting over Franconia Ridge and its apex, Mount Lafayette—a ridge he considered to be sacred ground, a mountain he climbed more than 300 times—Johnny had come away from his ultimate wilderness test with the conceit that because he was still alive, nature, mountains, even the elemental lethality of the Arctic were overrated. It was not man that was puny, it was the universe. Here was his father's idealism spinning into madness: Prolonged contact with one of the most sublime mountain landscapes in the world had only deepened Johnny's disillusionment. Nature at its most savage could not compare with the wilderness of his soul, with its drunk-on-oblivion logic and self-canceling superiority: *The only mountain I can truly respect is the one that denies me the glory of its summit and punishes me for the hubris of my aspiration.*

No doubt some of the disappointment Waterman felt about leaving Hunter—"discouraged about flying out," he noted during his last day on the ice—reflected a strain of survivor's guilt as well. As Randall shrewdly observed, it didn't seem right that he had lived when "all of his close friends, those who had taught him to climb and accompanied him on his greatest adventures, had died, often in senseless accidents. . . . It seemed perverse that he should be allowed

On day 81, Waterman reached the blindingly white world of Hunter's summit plateau, where he could walk without having to claw the Earth with his hands. It was, however, no paradise. Two weeks later, on June 25, six inches of snow fell, Waterman nearly stumbled into a crevasse in a whiteout, and in his log he noted: "Crampons came off boot three times, packing troubles, cried a lot." But in clear weather Hudson was able to drop a fresh supply of food, including ten pounds of potatoes and a gallon of ice cream.

At 1:50 p.m. on July 2, his 101st day on Hunter, Waterman ascended the south summit and stood atop a wrinkle of the Earth that had haunted him since his near miss five years earlier. Then, lugging his chattel into the endless winds, he moved across the plateau. He climbed the middle summit and then, on July 26, scaled Hunter's highest point, the north summit. His CB radio broadcast from there was recorded by Roy Davies in Montana, Alaska, 75 miles south: "I'm standing alone on the summit of Mount Hunter after a 124-day climb of the central buttress. I'm a mighty tired man."

Then he turned to the north ridge and his exit.

Waterman spent an incredible 145 days on the climb, traverse, and descent of Hunter. The time reflected not only the laboriousness of soloing with so much gear but also Waterman's desire to be alone on the mountain, to live amid the intensity of the place. At the beginning of the climb, he had wept for fear that he might die. But now, he noted in his log, he "cried at the thought of living." When he began

to survive a solo ascent of a climb with far more inherent danger." In a sense, Waterman found himself in the untenable position of having to apologize to a jury of dead friends for not dying.

He borrowed \$20 from Hudson and returned to Fairbanks to resume a life that was in some ways much harder for him to negotiate than Hunter's icy arêtes. He got a job busing tables and washing dishes. He gave Hunter slide shows—brilliant, funny, manic performances that seared the memories of everyone who witnessed them. But the shows did not relieve his poverty or the larger estrangement of his life. He quit his job and, by the end of 1978, was living on food stamps, unemployment checks, and the generosity of friends.

**To many people,** Johnny wasn't the same after Hunter. Something had happened on the mountain. Dean Rau said, "After Hunter, Johnny's eccentricities became mental illness." Even Waterman himself, in his last interview with Randall, acknowledged the existence of what he termed his "Mount Hunter psychosis." He tried to explain it: "I get very upset if I think I'm going to be cold during the night I'm facing, if I think I'm going to be hungry in the next few hours. Even if I've got a lot of food and I've got a stove, if the food isn't ready to heat up and I haven't got it figured out so I can get it into my stomach real fast, I get very distraught."

The Fairbanks newspapers had not paid much attention to Johnny's 1979 campaign for a seat on the North Star Borough school board. Undeterred—or perhaps emboldened—by defeat, he formed the Feed the Starving Party and announced a bid for President of the United States, which was otherwise shaping up as a contest between Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and John Anderson. As he told Randall, "My essential campaign priority was to ensure that nobody starved to death on the Earth. I thought feeding the starving people of the world would be the most dramatic and difficult thing I could do."

Like all politicians, Johnny looked to generate unpaid media exposure, and so he hit upon the idea of returning to McKinley. As on Hunter, he would climb McKinley solo, but this time in the lethal cold of winter. He would hew to a diet of flour, sugar, margarine, and protein powder, thereby demonstrating the immoral extravagance of American eating habits. The whole plan was rigged for disaster. Having identified cold and hunger as the triggers of his Hunter psychosis, he designed a climb guaranteed to precipitate it.

Can the danger of the route he chose and the manner in which he launched himself upon it—alone and poorly equipped—be taken to indicate an ill psyche bent on suicide? Where does self-dramatization leave off and true derangement begin? How does one gauge madness

in a person who speaks lucidly about crazy ideas or willingly embraces extremes of danger in pursuit of an epic vision?

He flew into the Kahiltna Glacier on December 20, 1979. The temperature was 15 below zero. On New Year's Day, his bush pilot arrived with another load of supplies. Faced with the prospect of not seeing anyone again for 135 days, Waterman capitulated. "Take me home," he said. "I don't want to die."

"I just plain cracked," he said two months later. "If I didn't make it to the top, or if I died—if I died three days, five days, or 50 days from the point my pilot flew out—nobody would know. It would be entirely a mystery. There is some kind of morbid pain involved with the fact that nobody will ever see you again." He returned to Talkeetna, planning to attempt McKinley again before the end of the winter.

In a conversation he taped in February 1980 with Joan Koponen, a Fairbanks homesteader who knew his father, Johnny said, "I'm very nervous about [the climb]. I never expect to come back from any of the climbs I go on, and I certainly don't expect to come back from this one, much as I would like to. It's kind of like a kamikaze mission."

Waterman went on to criticize his parents, arguing that parental dictatorship should be overthrown and children be allowed to solve problems like bed-wetting on their own.

"[Do] you feel that some of this feeling of antagonism against authority is because you resent your parents telling you what to do, or what not to do, when you were little?"

"I even resent it now," Johnny responded. "My mother detests my mountain climbing. She thinks it's some kind of suicidal activity, and she never supports me on it. My father is the exact opposite. He is a mountain climber himself; he thinks it is all I should do."

Two days after the interview, fire engulfed the cabin in which Waterman was staying. No one was inside at the time, but virtually everything Waterman owned was destroyed. Sleeping bags, poetry, journals, "two and a half feet" of files. A man who had compulsively documented the particulars of

his existence was suddenly severed from the record of his life.

"John went berserk," Randall wrote. "He stormed into Hudson's house, seized the telephone, and called the state troopers to demand a ride to the Alaska Psychiatric Institute in Anchorage. They refused. Hudson recalled the policeman saying, 'You don't sound crazy.' Waterman shouted back, 'What do I have to do, kill a kid?' " His reaction, he later told Randall, was part of his Hunter psychosis.

The next morning, pilot Jim Okonek flew Waterman to Anchorage, and Johnny committed himself to the psychiatric institute.

"I went to visit him at API," said Carl Tobin, a climbing friend. "He was sad that he was in there. It was a (Continued on page 98)



**SACRED GROUND:** Guy Waterman builds a cairn on a trail along New Hampshire's Franconia Ridge, the beloved White Mountains prospect that he had hoped would draw Johnny home. Guy himself would later choose to die on this same ridge.

## THE LAST CAIRN

(Continued from page 90)

self-committal—he thought he was crazy—but it was really sad. He had a song he sang for me about his McKinley climb when he was 16. From his room he could look at the window and see McKinley.”

Waterman left API after two weeks, convinced the doctors were conspiring to deny him his civil rights. He returned to Fairbanks and wrote to his father, who passed on the news of Johnny’s misfortune to Snyder in a letter dated April 1980: “Johnny finally wrote. After flying out from McKinley after two weeks, he was preparing to go in again for an alpine-style attempt when the cabin containing all his gear burned. He kind of hit bottom, committed himself to a psychiatric institute in Anchorage briefly, but is now back in Fairbanks, working for the Census temporarily and wondering what to do in the future.”

He had less than a year to live.

It was not enough to write songs about the mountain. On December 11, 1980, reactivating his plans to solo McKinley, Johnny applied for a permit from the

National Park Service, choosing “Lone Wolf” for his expedition name. He mailed his itinerary on a difficult-to-read postcard to Robert Gerhard, the supervisor of mountaineering rangers at Denali National Park and Preserve. Johnny would be hiking in with 14 days’ worth of food and 18 days’ worth of white gas. He had a cache of food and gas waiting for him at 2,000 feet on the Ruth Glacier. He was hoping to reach the summit of McKinley on March 20, whereupon he would descend either to the northeast, with 70 days’ worth of food and fuel waiting for him at a cache on the Traleika Glacier, or to the southwest, where a hundred pounds of food awaited at a depot on the Kahiltna Glacier.

And so, in the second week of March, Waterman left once more to meet the mountain. “I won’t be seeing you again,” he told Hudson when he said good-bye to the bush pilot in Talkeetna—the same melodramatic farewell he’d spoken three years earlier when he set off to solo Mount Hunter.

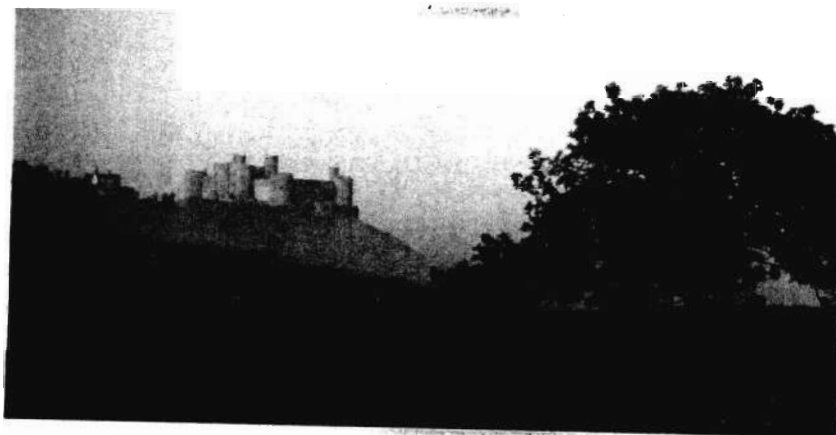
“You’ll be back,” Hudson said as he had before, but this time, as Randall noted, the bush pilot had doubts.

The Lone Wolf turned off the highway to Fairbanks at Mile 141 and shuffled toward the Ruth Glacier on snowshoes. He eventually made his way up into the Don Sheldon Amphitheater of the glacier, one of the most spectacular mountain settings in North America. Rather than follow the itinerary he had outlined, he spent two weeks fussing over his equipment and socializing with various groups of climbers camped in the vicinity of Don Sheldon’s Mountain House, an octagonal hut perched at an altitude of about 6,000 feet, along a stretch of ice where pilots can land ski planes.

Waterman radioed Hudson and asked him to bring in some prepacked boxes of supplies. When Hudson delivered the cartons to the Mountain House, Waterman returned a small CB radio he’d borrowed from his pilot. “I won’t be needing this anymore.”

In late March, fresh off an ascent of the north buttress of the Rooster Comb, a distinctive ridge to the west of the amphitheater, Jay Kerr and Keith Royster had skied down the West Fork of the Ruth to unwind for a few days near the Mountain House.

\*\*\*\*\* ORIGINAL CONDITION\*\*\*\*\*



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They had camped with a couple of other climbers in their party. Around midday on March 31, sitting outside on chairs made of snow blocks and sleeping pads, they saw a skier coming up the glacier. He was wearing blue pants and a blue jacket and was hauling a red plastic sled. More notably, he was traveling unroped and alone on a course that cut a direct line through the crevasse fields close to the flanks of Mount Barrille, where the Great Gorge opens out into the amphitheater. The line was exposing the skier to hazards he could have easily circumvented by swinging more widely around the mountain.

It was Johnny Waterman.

"We had a long visit with him—about three hours," Kerr recalled. "We asked him why he liked to go through crevasse fields, and he said every time he crossed a snow bridge and it didn't fall in, he felt reborn."

Kerr was struck by Waterman's odd kit. No tent. No sleeping bag. He had a bivouac sack, a one-piece snowmobile suit, vapor-barrier boots, snowshoes, and about 20 wands for marking trail. His provisions were more bizarre—14 days' worth of sugar,

powdered milk, honey, and white flour and a bag of marijuana that was mostly sticks and lint. He said he was heading for the East Buttress and a steep, ambitious route that began at 9,000 feet in the Northwest Fork of the Ruth and topped out at 15,000 feet in Thayer Basin. It was unclimbed at the time and remains so to this day.

According to park ranger Roger Robinson, "It's a suicide line: a lot of big avalanches come down it. It would be like playing Russian roulette."

On April 1, a climber named Kate Bull, who was camped with a friend just north of the Mountain House, stopped by Royster's camp for a visit. They brewed a pot of tea and lolled on the snow-block chairs. It was a painfully brilliant day. Waterman came skiing up, dressed in his blue jacket and a funky wool hat. His old orange frame pack looked oddly empty to Bull.

"What are you up to, John?" she asked, struck by the fact that Waterman wasn't wearing sunglasses or sunscreen.

"I'm going to climb the East Buttress," He sat down and had a cup of tea. He took

some hits on a joint that was going around.

"Jeez, John, you should really have some sunscreen on," said Bull.

"Really? Wow! OK," said Waterman.

He lingered about half an hour, answering questions the climbers put to him about his solo ascent of Mount Hunter. At one point he commented on the size of the group that morning.

"That's the way to do it, all right," he said. "It's fun to have a big camp with a bunch of people."

And then he got up, shouldered his half-filled pack, and set off up the Ruth, headed for the Northwest Fork.

Later that day, Kerr and Royster skied back up the Ruth en route to the glacier's West Fork. For a while they followed the slot of Waterman's tracks. Twice they veered off the line for a safer course. After several miles, Waterman's tracks cut away to the right and angled up into the Northwest Fork toward an area notoriously riddled with crevasses. Kerr followed the line in the snow with his eyes until he saw a dot-size figure making *(Continued on page 106)*

For \_\_\_\_\_ Time \_\_\_\_\_ AM/PM  
Date \_\_\_\_\_

**WHILE YOU WERE OUT**

M. \_\_\_\_\_  
OF \_\_\_\_\_  
I PHONE \_\_\_\_\_  
I FAX \_\_\_\_\_

|              |                   |
|--------------|-------------------|
| PLEASE DON'T | NO CALL HEREIN    |
| UNDEVELOPED  | SPECIAL ATTENTION |

KERR-10  
*Worry called.  
Wondered where  
you'd been.*

Keyword: \_\_\_\_\_

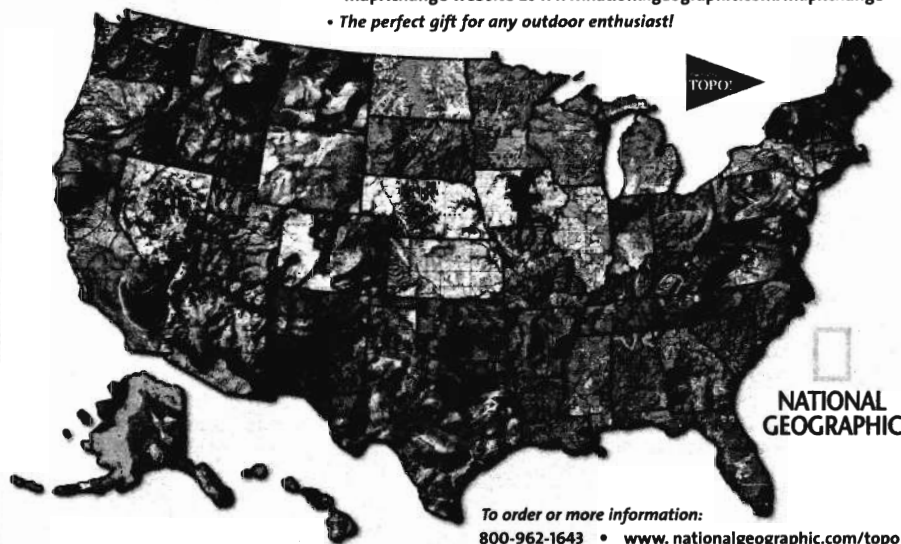
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## THE LAST CAIRN

(Continued from page 99)

a beeline through white swells of ice: John Waterman in the thrall of being reborn.

He was never seen again.

On April 4, a party of climbing rangers who knew that Waterman was traveling solo tried to pick up his tracks on the Northwest Fork, but heavy snow and wind had erased them. On April 7, mountain guide Mike Covington skied into the Northwest Fork with two clients who intended to climb the Southeast Spur of McKinley. "They noticed a single set of tracks that were either ski tracks or those left by someone pulling a sled," according to the National Park Service incident report, published in the American Alpine Club's 1982 edition of *Accidents in North American Mountaineering*. "Covington felt that the tracks only went up the glacier and did not come back down. They also seemed to be oriented more toward the East Buttress than toward the other routes on the Southeast Spur or up the Northwest Fork. Because the area was very windswept from a storm the previous week, it was very hard to distinguish the tracks and no campsite was seen. From interviews with other climbers in the area, it appears that Waterman was the only one to travel up the Northwest Fork prior to Covington's group."

Covington eventually gave up the climb he'd planned; in his judgment the avalanche danger was too great.

On April 15, the National Park Service began a small-scale search for the Lone Wolf. U.S. Army Chinook helicopters from Fort Wainwright, near Fairbanks, were practicing high-altitude landings on McKinley; Roger Robinson went along and searched the flanks of the mountain. When Kerr returned to the Talkeetna Ranger Station with his report of his encounter with Waterman, a more extensive search began.

On April 21, ranger Dave Buchanan, whose life had been changed by the week he'd spent in a White Mountains winter mountaineering course led by Guy Waterman, called the postmaster in East Corinth and requested a message be passed to Johnny's father to call the Denali park headquarters. Buchanan was there to take the call when Guy telephoned.

"Guy was very calm when I described the situation to him," Buchanan said. "It almost felt like he had been expecting a call such as this. I'm sure when he got word of a phone

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message from a ranger in Alaska, he knew what it was probably about and had to contemplate what was coming as he hiked into town from his homestead. It was the hardest call I ever had to make as a ranger."

On April 22, Robinson and Covington flew up the Ruth in a Bell helicopter. They spent three hours searching in the area of the East Buttress. On the Northwest Fork they picked up the single set of tracks Covington had seen earlier.

"You could vaguely make them out," Robinson said, "and if you projected the line—boom! There was the camp. It was right in the middle of a crevasse field. We could see tracks going in but none coming out."

The pilot landed near what seemed to be an old tent site. Robinson belayed Covington from the struts of the helicopter as the guide cautiously probed the ground. Within a rope length, Covington found three thinly bridged crevasses. Both men, roped together, moved carefully around the tent site and vicinity, peering in crevasses for a body or some sign of Waterman. The only evidence they turned up was some pale human feces. Robinson scooped a sample into a Ziploc bag. "We knew Waterman's diet, and we thought if we analyzed it we would be able to say conclusively we'd found Waterman's last known camp," he recalled. But in the end the proof seemed pointless, and for years the stool sample stayed in the freezer at the Talkeetna ranger station until finally somebody in government service got tired of looking at it.

Had his fate been sealed by avalanches pouring off the East Buttress? His father was inclined to think so. In a mimeographed appeal for funds, Johnny had described himself as "the man who might truly disappear into the wilderness, and come to be a part of something greater than himself." Maybe it wasn't that he wanted to die so much as he no longer cared whether he lived. Now he could stop wondering why, after all the risks he'd taken, he was alive when so many of his friends, with their caution, were dead.

It was Guy who was left to grieve and wonder. Six months later, in September, Johnny was declared legally dead. Guy wrote a letter to his nephew Dane Waterman:

"As with a climb that didn't go, I keep revolving in my mind (and heart) where things took the direction they did, how things might

have gone differently, what was going on inside, what kind of father I was, etc. The special quality to all this is the utter blank impossibility of calling it back and doing it again. That Jacobean ballad which I used to think was too plain to be moving, that goes 'Will ye nae come back again?'—that now says so much. When I was first up on the Franconia Ridge this year and looked over the non-road side, at all those mountains and ridges with cloud shadows on them, I thought, Why was there not this to come back to? Was there nothing for him to come back to?"

Is there any more heartrending question a father can ask himself than "What kind of father have I been?" Or, "How might I have done things differently?" Could any romanticism be more poignant than the elder Waterman's faith in the power of a Franconia prospect to draw his son home?

Earlier in the summer, on an errand of mourning, Guy had carried Johnny's old Limmer hiking boots up on that ridge. He had dropped down off the main trail, then bushwhacked to a dramatic promontory opposite Cannon Cliff. When he arrived, a thick mist

enveloped the whole ridge. For three hours he worked in the perfect privacy of a cloud, gathering rocks and piling them into a cairn. *To guard against losing their way, the son would go out from the last identified cairn as far as he could and still see it. Then the father would go out from there as far as he could without losing sight of the son...*

In the center he placed his son's boots, pointing them toward Alaska as best he could gauge the direction. He laid a bouquet of wildflowers on the little tower of stones. He sang some songs and recited poems. And then he hiked out the way he'd come in. Strangely, when he regained the ridge—the ridge on which he would sit down to die in the snow 19 years later—he looked back at where he'd been and saw that the mist was gone, and there was Johnny's cairn in a ring of mountains, like the last cairn before they'd lost their way. ▲

Can wilderness redefine a person's character? Post your thoughts online at [www.nationalgeographic.com/adventure](http://www.nationalgeographic.com/adventure). AOL Keyword: NatGeo Adventure.

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