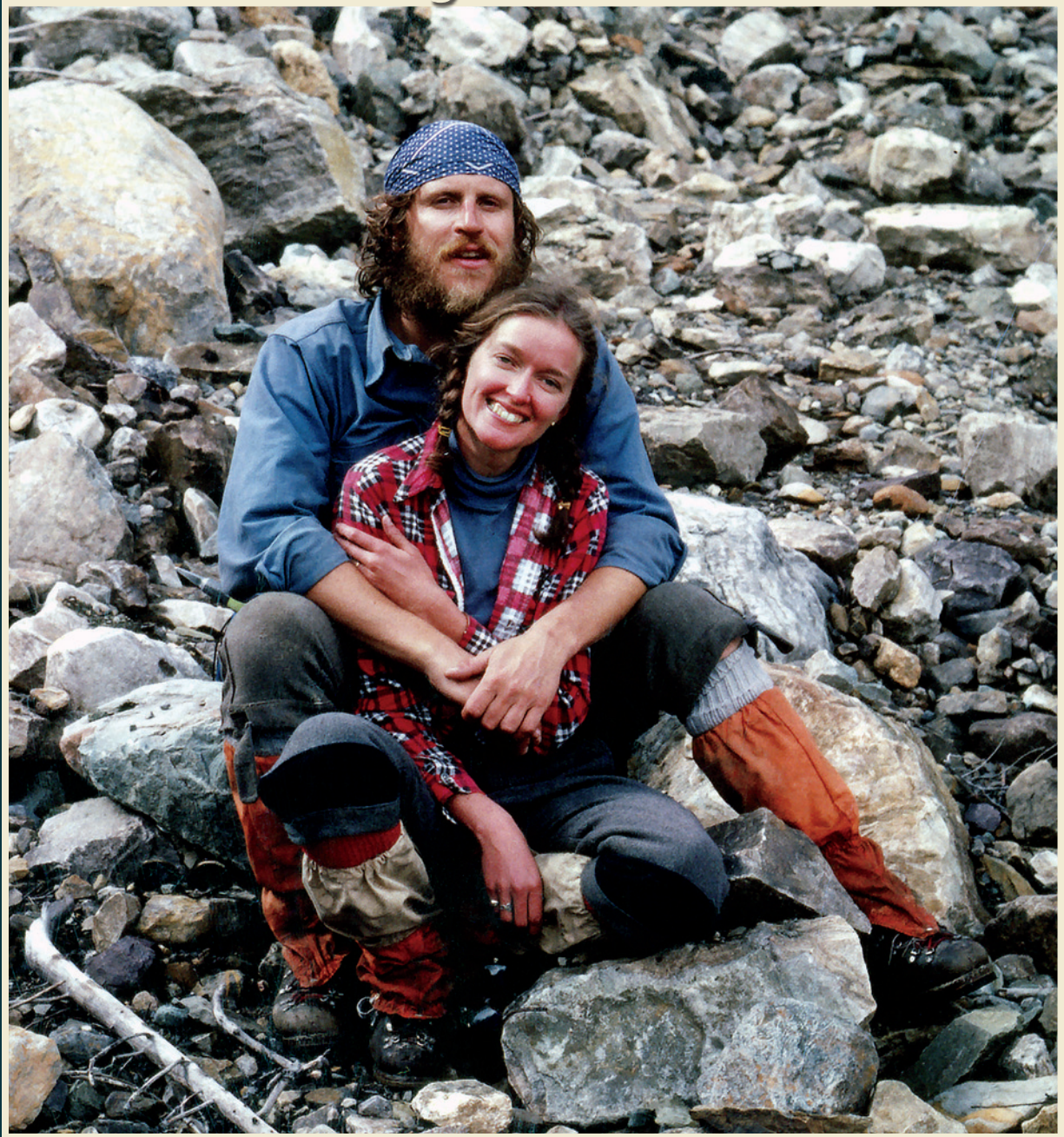


# *The Book of Mortimer*

Celebrating a Life of Volunteerism



by Chic Scott



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Cover photo: Mike and Heather on Mount Chephren in 1980. Photo: Cate Hankins

Title page: Mike and Heather climbing near Lake Louise.

Back cover: Mike and Heather at the Mountain Guides Ball.

All photos are from the Mortimer collection unless otherwise noted.

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# *A Propitious Meeting*

One morning in July of 1974, world traveller and climbing bum Mike Mortimer found himself curled up on the grass in a public park in Whitehorse, Yukon, possibly trying to sleep off the effects of the previous night's good times. Heather Roddick, a young woman from the Toronto area, who was visiting the Yukon, sat down on a nearby bench and the pair struck up a conversation.

It was a time when many young people were travelling the world, discovering new ideas, enjoying great music and experimenting with drugs. Mike had been at it for almost a decade and had roamed around Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Europe, Britain and most of North America. Heather had also travelled to Europe and was looking for more adventures. Mike and Heather took a shine to each other and, as they say,

*the rest is history . . .*

# Mike

Michael Kenneth Mortimer was born October 15, 1950 in Manchester, England. His father, Kenneth, and his mother, Irene, divorced soon after he was born, and Mike and his brother Tony were really raised by their mother and their aunt, Joyce.

Mike went off to boarding school at age six. Potterspury Lodge was a Waldorf school that was very focused on camping, hiking and other outdoor activities. It was here that Mike was introduced to the mountains. Mike remembers that they were frugal times in England. Post war rationing was still in effect and luxuries were few and far between. Mike's mother joined a hiking club, and he and his brother got to tag along.



Mike (on the left) age ten.



Mike's mom, Irene, seen here dancing the Black Bottom, loved music.

By his own admission Mike was a terrible student. "I was lippy. I was the kid who was always getting thrashed by the teachers. If there were any problems they generally knew where to look. In those days you were thrashed and they also beat you. I hated school and I think the teachers hated me. There were no medals or scholarships for me." But Mike read a lot and loved history, a passion he would keep all his life. And Mike also loved music, something that he acquired from his mother and grandfather Joe—the songs of American musicals such as *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific* as well as the comic operas of Gilbert and Sullivan. Mike had a knack for performance—even as a child.



Mike (right) in Wales with his brother Tony and their Aunt Joyce.

Perhaps a key to understanding the man that Mike would become is to know a little bit about the English public school system. It was truly a hard school for young boys and to survive you had to toughen up. The schools were full of bullies and “the fagging system”—whereby younger boys were forced to serve the older boys—was rampant. In a boarding school there was no escape, it went on 24/7. You had to learn to defend yourself, to fight back.

In the late 1950s Mike’s mother remarried, an engineer by the name of Norman Dovey, and in 1962 the four of them moved to South Africa. Britain was in terrible shape and his mom and stepfather were dreamers, always looking for their El Dorado. But South Africa was not much better than England. Hendrich Verwoerd was prime minister, the Afrikaners were in charge and apartheid was at its height. According to Mike, “It was God and the church.”

Living in Cape Town, Mike attended day school at Muizenburg on the Indian Ocean and joined the local Gilbert and Sullivan Society playing in productions of *The Pirates of Penzance* and *The Mikado*. And he began to climb more seriously, an activity he had dabbled in back in England, going up to Table Mountain with some older kids, most of whom were as inexperienced as he was. Mike remembers that the climbing was not difficult,



Mike performing in *The Pirates of Penzance*.

but it was dangerous and terrifying. Wearing nailed boots and with the rope tied around their waists, they tackled climbs with serious exposure on the 200-metre high cliff. Mike’s mother thought that he was out hiking.



Mike (the tall figure, 6th from the right) in a performance of *The Mikado*.

On Boxing Day, 1965, she learned otherwise. Mike fell 20 metres and was seriously injured—broken femur, tibia, fibula, pelvis, patella and ribs. It took 30 people all day to rescue him. Afterwards he spent five months in the hospital, three months in a wheelchair and many more months in a leg brace. Mike recalled, “At one point I was in Plaster of Paris from my armpits to my toes.” Being summertime it was very uncomfortable. In fact, the whole year was shot. However, it was in the hospital that he met Stan McCrea, who had also fallen and been injured in a completely different climbing accident. The pair shared a hospital room and a love of Gilbert and Sullivan. Stan would ultimately have a huge influence on Mike.



Mike climbing on Table Mountain.

## Boxing Day - 1965 Table Mountain Cape Town, South Africa

Cape since Christmas

### U.C.T. student survives fall on mountain

A 16-YEAR-OLD University of Cape Town student escaped death when his fall from Table Mountain yesterday was broken by trees on the mountainside.

Michael Mortimer of White Road, Plumstead, was reported today to be 'progressing favourably' in the Groote Schuur Hospital.

He received multiple injuries in his fall.

Michael was in a party of six when the accident occurred. They were walking along a ledge on the mountain, near The Saddle, when he slipped and fell over the edge.

About 50 ft. down he landed on trees, which prevented him from falling farther.

**TRANSFUSION**

The accident occurred about 3 p.m. The ambulance station was telephoned and asked to have an ambulance waiting at the lower cable station at 5.15 p.m.

When Michael was brought to the station, he was given a blood transfusion and taken to hospital.

A Native man is believed to have broken a log in a fall on the mountain earlier in the day but no particulars can be obtained about the accident.

### Youth tells of 50-ft. fall on Table Mountain

SPEAKING softly from his bed in Groote Schuur Hospital last night, Michael Mortimer said all he could remember of his 50-ft. fall from Table Mountain on Sunday was going over and over through the air.

Michael, aged 16, is a pupil at Mulzenberg Boys' High School. His stepfather and his mother, Mr. and Mrs. N. Dovey, brought him with them to South Africa from Britain in February this year. This was his first Christmas in South Africa.

He said he was a keen climber and had climbed in Britain Books on mountain climbing were beside his bed and he was wearing a pair of boots on the climb, shirt he was given for Christmas.

He was in a party of six when the accident occurred on the Newlands Ravine near the Saddle.

**AFTER FIRST SLOPE**

He said he and his friends decided at a Christmas party he held at his home in White Road, Sturhof, to climb the mountain. They met at a friend's house in Rondebosch at 1.30 the following morning and left after their equipment was in order about 10.30 a.m.


The accident happened after they had climbed the first rock slope. It was not a difficult part of the climb and he did not know how he fell. All he can remember was going over and over through the air.

The fall was broken by a tree and his friends scrambled down to him and he remembered telling them to go to the cable station for help.

It was four hours before the rescue party reached him. He was conscious all the time and was gripping the hand of a friend as hard as he could from the pain.

His thigh-bone and knee-cap were broken in the fall.

Michael's parents were camping at Onrust, near Hermannus, when the accident happened. A message was sent by radio, but the first indication they received of what had happened was a letter note pinned to a tree at their camp yesterday. It said that they had to get in touch with Groote Schuur Hospital to authorize an operation on their son. They drove to Cape Town immediately.



Michael Mortimer

Not long afterwards, Mike and his family moved to Zambia where his stepfather worked in a pulp mill. According to Mike, his parents were constantly moving, always looking for some place where the grass was greener. “They were following the Union Jack that was rapidly being torn down all over Africa.” In Zambia they lived in a compound not far from the mill, with 25 other whites. Nearby was the worker’s town where a thousand Africans lived. Mike went to school in Livingstone, a full day’s journey away on an antique and dilapidated steam train.

About a year later Mike and the family moved on to Rhodesia where his parents lived in Salisbury and he went to school in Bulawayo. But Mike was still enamored of climbing and read all the mountaineering books of the era, skipping the sections on snow and ice in the instructional books as there was none nearby. Graduating in 1967, he was called up for army duty, but as Mike recalls, “I was not about to pick up the white man’s burden.” So he left Rhodesia for South Africa again.

The newspaper clippings tell the story of Mike's fall on Table Mountain.



Back in Cape Town, Mike tried to live as a climbing bum, but it was difficult with apartheid. “White guys were meant to have jobs.” He got work as a tally clerk on the docks, counting pallets that were being loaded onto ships. An unbelievably boring job, he did the night shift so that he could climb during the day. And he met up with his old friend, Stan McCrea. Stan had lost a leg from his accident but still climbed. The pair made a strange team, Mike with his limp and Stan with his prosthetic leg. They were the outcasts of the Mountaineering Club of South Africa. “At the meets, when we finished a route we would stand at the top of the climb, hold hands and sing *People Will Say We’re in Love* from *Oklahoma!*”

Stan, who was about 25 years older than Mike, was actually an experienced climber and taught him a lot. Mike refers to Stan as his Mentor. He was also a bit of a rogue, a characteristic that Mike tried to emulate. Rusty Baillie, a Rhodesian, had climbed the infamous Eiger North Face in Switzerland a few years earlier with Scotsman Dougal Haston, and Stan thought that it would be a great idea if he and Mike became the first South Africans to climb the wall. The pair talked about it a lot and planned their trip, but eventually reality took hold and Stan changed his mind. He knew their plan was completely unrealistic. Mike, however, knew that he had to go somewhere. “South Africa was just not working. It was crazy. It was a very oppressive time for everybody—the whites lived like prisoners at night.” So in 1971 he went to Australia. Having no idea what he was going to do, he just packed his climbing gear and a volume of the complete works of William Shakespeare and left.

Landing in Perth he soon had a job as a gold miner at a place called Mount Magnet. Working 250 metres underground, his job was to break up rocks with a sledgehammer so that they would fit through a grate. “As a white man from South Africa, I was not used to physical labour.” After six weeks Mike moved on, hitchhiking all over Australia, doing a number of different jobs. Then he went to New Zealand where he got a job as a pot washer at The Hermitage, the famous climber’s hotel below Mount Cook. It was here that he regretted skipping the snow and ice chapters in the instructional climbing books—one day he found himself crossing a glacier, unroped,

marvelling at the many cracks in the snow and wondering what they were.

Returning to Australia he travelled the country, hitchhiking across the Nullarbor Desert on several occasions. Then he began working his way north through Southeast Asia, visiting Portuguese Timor and onto Bali where he found he could rent a room for 25 cents a day. It was here that he was introduced to the highs of smoking hashish and marijuana. A boat trip, deck class, eating a watery mix of fish heads and rice, took him on to Singapore and from there he flew to Britain. He now decided to go to Switzerland to at least see the Eiger and, in the summer of 1972, arrived in Grindelwald. Mike loved the Swiss mountains but had less than perfect relations with the locals. He got a job working as a labourer on a construction site with a group of Italians, being paid five francs an hour. His employer held back one franc for each hour worked to ensure that they would all complete their contracts. “The day before our contract finished they laid us off. When we went to get our money, they said, ‘No. No. You didn’t finish your contract. You don’t get your money.’ It wasn’t a lot, but to us it was a fortune.”

Travelling back to the United Kingdom with a friend by the name of Nick, he went to North Wales where he lived and worked at the Hawk and Buckle pub in Denbigh. Mike remembered, “I was always able to get a job.” Then he travelled to London where he worked for the winter as a hod carrier, humping loads of bricks up a ladder. The work was hard, but the pay was good and he enjoyed the company of the Irishmen he worked with.

In 1973 he returned to Grindelwald where he spent the summer living in a tent in a farmer’s field. Unruly and noisy, Mike and his friends made themselves thoroughly unwelcome.

*We were banned from every pub in Grindelwald. Whenever there was any trouble, the police would come looking for us.*

Although Mike’s alpine record is slim, during his two summers in Switzerland he managed to climb peaks including the Schreckhorn, Monch, Jungfrau and Eiger West Flank.

# Mike's Travels



Clockwise from top left:  
 Mike and his friend Nick in a bar in Grindelwald.  
 Mike (second from left in red helmet) on the summit of the Monch, in Switzerland.  
 Mike meets two aboriginals on the way to Alice Springs, Australia.  
 Mike hitchhiking across the Nullarbor Desert in Australia.  
 Mike hitchhiking near Irishman Creek in New Zealand.  
 Mike near the ferry terminal at Ostend, Belgium.



**B**ut once again it was time to move on and Mike was invited by an American friend to come to the U.S.A. and pick fruit in Washington State. He managed to purchase a cheap one-way student flight from Paris to New York, but the difficult part was going to be at U.S. customs. Ever resourceful, Mike had made up a letter from the British Alpine Club inviting him on a climbing expedition to Alaska. Somehow he attached the Rothman's cigarette emblem to the top of the letter and at the bottom, with a flourish, he signed *Lord John Hunt*. Arriving in New York, luck was with him and he got into the right line. "The custom's officer asked me why I didn't have a return ticket and I replied that I was going to climb this peak in Alaska. I had all my climbing gear with me and I showed her the letter. She was most impressed and let me in."

Once in America, Mike began another continent-spanning adventure. He hitchhiked with a girl to Chicago, having many adventures along the way, then continued on to Washington State where he picked fruit for six weeks. Crossing the border into Canada, Mike also picked fruit at

Oyama, British Columbia. Then he went onto Lake Louise, Alberta where he worked at the King's Domain motel as a caretaker. It was here that the authorities caught up with him and he was told to leave Canada. The immigration officials gave him a piece of paper to get stamped at the border telling him that once he got the paper stamped he could re-enter Canada. Hitchhiking to the Coutts/Sweetgrass border crossing in southern Alberta, he got the Canadians to stamp the paper and crossed to the U.S. side, but the American authorities would not let him in. Caught in no-mans-land Mike finally talked the Canadian guards into re-admitting him into Canada, but they cancelled the stamp on his letter. What followed was a strange odyssey as Mike hitched across Canada dragging his two giant packs (and his volume of Shakespeare) attempting to enter the U.S.A. at various border crossings. Eventually he flew from Toronto to Virginia to visit a friend and it worked; he was allowed into the U.S. Hitchhiking back to Chicago he flew to Winnipeg and then hitchhiked to Edmonton, being introduced to the rigours of the Canadian winter along the way.



Mike on cross-country skis near Jasper in 1973.

From Edmonton Mike went to Jasper where he spent a few weeks running the Maligne Canyon Youth Hostel. "I thought I had arrived in heaven," he recalled. It was here that he tried cross-country skiing for the first time. Back in Edmonton he worked at the Stelco steel mill where he admits he was their worst employee

and was eventually fired. In the spring he hitchhiked down the Icefields Parkway on his way to Vancouver and found himself thumbing a ride at the Columbia Icefield. Carl Hannigan, a Scottish born mountaineer residing in Calgary, explained what happened:

*Standing at the side of the road was this character with a beat up old pack, a leather jacket with fringes on it and a leather Australian style hat. I pulled over and Mike hopped in. Settling into the back seat, Mike said, "Do you mind if I smoke?" and I replied, "No, not at all." Then out comes this joint the size of a cigar, which he proceeded to share with my girlfriend. And by the time we got to Lake Louise he was trying to con her into hitchhiking with him to Vancouver. Mike was a real rascal.*

Eventually Mike travelled north to Whitehorse in the Yukon where he got a job working as a diamond driller's assistant for few weeks, then after a brief trip to Alaska to look at Mount McKinley, he worked for a while repairing the White Pass to Yukon Railway line. Returning to Whitehorse, he spent some of his hard earned money on wine and song and the next day, found himself sleeping off the effects in the local park. Mike's life was about to change.



Mike working as a diamond driller's assistant in the Yukon.



Mike getting a haircut in the Yukon.

# Heather

Heather Diane Roddick was born on July 4, 1950 in the hamlet of Spencerville, Ontario, located about 80 km south of Ottawa towards the St. Lawrence River, and grew up on a small farm with seven siblings (four brothers and three sisters). Her father, Jack, worked as carpentry foreman at the local Canada Starch plant and her mother, Doris, was kept busy taking care of the family. The ages of the children spanned several decades and when Heather, who was the fifth in line, was born, her eldest sister was already in college.

Heather describes the family farm as more of a menagerie. “At various times we had a collection of goats, sheep, chinchillas, horses and cows. We learned very early not to get too close to the animals, because you would be having them on your plate later on.” Living on a farm there were lots of chores to do. Heather remembers, “If you decided that instead of doing your chores you wanted to hitch the pony up to the toboggan and run up and down the hills for a couple of hours you could do that, but when you got home your chores were still waiting for you.”



Five-year-old Heather is the flower girl at a wedding.

Heather went off to grade one at the age of four, walking half a kilometre to a one-room schoolhouse. “When you finished your exercises you could listen to what the grade threes were doing and what the grade fours were doing, so it really accelerated how you learned.” For grades 6, 7 and 8 she was bussed 10 km to a four-room schoolhouse in Spencerville and for grades 9 through 13 she was bussed to a large high school of 900 students in Prescott. A good student, with an aptitude for mathematics, Heather was always the youngest in her class and graduated from grade 13 when she was only 17 years old. After a year at a teachers’ college in Ottawa, Heather taught for two years at Cardinal and then took a job teaching at Bowmanville, located just outside Toronto. During this time, she attended second year university night classes in Peterborough, an 80 km drive away. While living in Bowmanville she was also involved in local amateur theatrical productions such as *Barefoot in the Park*.

By now the travel bug had bitten and in the summer of 1969 Heather had gone to Europe by herself as her would-be travel companion had dropped out at the last moment.

Heather Roddick.



Heather recalled, "Since I had all my vaccinations and had purchased a ticket, why shouldn't I go?" Landing at Heathrow airport she had no idea where to go next, but luckily connected with another traveller and together they found their way out of the airport into London where they located suitable accommodation. Taking the ferry to France she hitchhiked alone through France, Germany, Switzerland and Spain. Her parents were aghast. The travel urge was something her family just could not understand.

Travel fever had also infected her sister, Yvonne, and in July and August of 1972 they went to Britain where they travelled as far north as Ullapool in Scotland. Originally they had purchased two Brit Rail passes each, but later, getting low on money, they cashed in the last remaining pass and hitchhiked through Britain, staying in youth hostels along the way.

In the summer of 1974, Heather and a friend travelled to Vancouver where it rained continually for two weeks. Heather recalls opening the newspaper and searching the weather map for a place in Canada that was dry. She discovered that the sun was shining in the Yukon, so that became their destination. Sleeping in the lounge over the



Heather hitchhiking in the rain in Scotland.

engines, they travelled north on an Alaskan cruise ship. They disembarked at Skagway and made their way to Whitehorse. It was here that she met Mike and her life changed.



Heather.

# Mike and Heather

Mike and Heather hit it off immediately and soon began travelling together. First they hitchhiked to Dawson City, and then they hitched down the Alaska Highway to Calgary, camping rough. Heather recalled that they just stepped off the road and set up the tent. There were lots of mosquitoes. What they admired most about each other was their adventurous spirits.

Arriving in southern Alberta, Mike found work on a drilling rig while Heather headed back to Bowmanville to teach. In the autumn Mike flew to Toronto and the pair married on October 19, 1974, having known each other for just three months. The union took place in a large United Church that normally sat about 400 people. For the wedding, however, there were only five people—Heather, Mike, Heather's sister and brother-in-law

and Heather's girlfriend. Immediately after the wedding they applied for Mike to become a landed immigrant in Canada and Heather gave notice for her job. For a honeymoon the couple drove Heather's Beetle to New York City where, according to Heather, "the marriage nearly ended." They got completely lost and ended up screaming at each other. Finally a friendly policeman pulled them over, asked them where they were going, then, with his lights flashing, led them to their hotel. Here he rolled down his window, leaned out and said, "Welcome to New York City."

When Mike and Heather came back to Toronto they sold Heather's car and, flush with cash, set off on another adventure, this time planning to hitchhike to South America. Heather's mother was really worried and taking her aside, squeezed



Mike and Heather on their wedding day.

a \$10 bill into her hand, saying, "Take a bus sometime." They travelled to Florida where they picked oranges for a while, then continued on to Mexico and down to the Yucatan where two kids on horseback robbed them. On a boat to Belize, Heather discovered the delights of cockroaches and in Panama City the pair stayed in a whorehouse called Rosie's Pension.

From there they flew to Miami, then on to Luxembourg via Icelandic Airlines, arriving in the cool autumn air dressed in their summer clothes. Hitchhiking onto Switzerland they planned to continue to Grindelwald, but in Zurich they saw a notice on a bulletin board that said, "Driver wanted to Pakistan. All expenses paid." For Mike and Heather this was too much to resist. It turned out that two Pakistani bankers planned to buy a car in Germany and drive it to Pakistan where they hoped to sell it at a huge profit.

Mike went up to Nuremburg with one of the men leaving Heather with the other at a youth hostel. There they bought an Opel Kadet, then, after picking up Heather and the other man, the four of them set off for Asia. Mike and Heather learned very quickly that the two men could not drive. On top of that the Pakistanis took exception to Heather driving. So for the next 6,000 kilometres Mike was at the wheel—through Austria and over the Brenner Pass, through Slovenia and Bulgaria to Istanbul, through snowdrifts across Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan. Mike drove all the way. The two Pakistani fellows had a very modern-looking tape deck and speakers with them, and along the way they played all the Beatles songs in Urdu over and over while tapping out the beat on the top of the tape deck. It was all very surreal and came to an abrupt halt at the Pakistani border where they were refused admission because they did not have the cash to pay the duty on the car.

After taking a taxi through the Khyber Pass, Heather and Mike said goodbye to their companions in Lahore. Then came the realization, "What are we going to do here?" Deciding to go to East Africa where they could visit Mike's mom and dad, they travelled to Karachi where they located a boat that was sailing soon to Mombasa—it had two berths left. After getting some money transferred from Canada they went to purchase their tickets only to find that there was a big problem: although there was one berth in a cabin

and one passage in steerage class, the berth was in a male-only cabin, so Heather would have to travel steerage across the Indian Ocean. But Heather was game and they bought the tickets. According to Heather, "I provided entertainment for the 300 passengers around me while Mike was in regal splendour in his six-berth male cabin. Only the fish were below me." Luckily they had purchased second-class meal tickets and she got to eat on deck rather than the fish head soup served in steerage.

Arriving in Mombasa, Mike and Heather hitchhiked to Malawi where Mike's parents were still following their dream. After a sojourn at Monkey Bay on Lake Nyasa, Mike and Heather hitched to Nairobi where they bought student tickets to Israel, then flew onto the United Kingdom. Just south of London they found work at the Leg of Mutton and Cauliflower pub, but hearing that there were well paying jobs in the oil industry they soon headed for Scotland. In Loch Caron, they got jobs working in catering with a crew building an oil rig. As there was a high turnover, Mike was quickly promoted and soon found himself employed as chief storeman, ordering food for about 2,000 people. Heather, too, found herself advanced from the housekeeping crew to organizing and running the on-site tobacco shop. The pay was exceptional as were the perks. They had every fifth week off and bought a car to tour the country.

But it was hard for the pair to stay put for very long and in the autumn of 1975 Mike and Heather returned to Toronto. Here they bought a Datsun F10 station wagon and headed west. Would it be Calgary or Edmonton? They flipped a coin and Edmonton won. They lived there for a year, Mike working in construction, making good money while Heather worked for a crown corporation, the Environment Conservation Authority, organizing public hearings across the province. It was in Edmonton that they joined the Alpine Club of Canada, participating in several section outings. But Edmonton was a long way from the mountains and hearing that the University of Calgary was accepting mature students into degree programs, Mike and Heather drove to Calgary where Mike was soon accepted into the business faculty. Returning to Edmonton, they packed their possessions and, on New Year's Day, 1977, drove south and settled in Calgary.



# The Alpine Club of Canada

Mike went off to the University of Calgary while Heather got a job working for the Alberta Housing Authority, but it only lasted four months before she, too, decided to return to university and complete her degree. To help make ends meet, Mike got work with Alf Skrastins at the rental department of the Outdoor Program Centre at the university and Heather got a part time job at the university information centre. As a way to meet people and get out to the mountains they joined the Calgary Section of the Alpine Club of Canada and almost immediately started to rock the boat. Mike recalled, “We brought a social side to it. When we joined the Calgary Section they didn’t go to the pub after the meetings—it was just not done. We got them going to the pub. We went down to the Cecil Hotel, but shortly after there was a double murder there so that was the end of the Cecil.”

In 1979 Mike became the editor of the Calgary Section newsletter, *The Chinook*, and made changes right off the bat, rounding up advertisements to help pay the costs of the publication and to make some money for the Club. Always working as a team, Heather supported the effort through collation and distribution of the newsletter.

But it was the death of Daniel Minion on September 1, 1979, on a Calgary Section outing, that changed Mike’s approach to the mountains and to the ACC forever. Only 15 years old, Danny fell to his death on a Bugaboo Spire climb, while in the care of club members. Since Mike was on the executive, he was the one who went round to see Danny’s family. It was a nightmare. That’s when he said, “This is bullshit. We need to do better than this.”

Mike became Chairman of the Calgary Section in 1980 and Heather became Membership Secretary. Their first priority was leadership development. Mike knew from personal experience what it was like to learn to climb with little instruction and just how dangerous it was. In those days there was lots of money available from the provincial government and the Canadian Mount Everest Expedition was generating a great deal of publicity, so on the last weekend in May 1982, under the auspices of the newly formed Alberta Mountain Council, Mike, Alf Skrastins and Tony Daffern organized a Mountain Leadership Conference, with Mike being the conference chairman. Tony and Alf had prior experience having organized a Winter Leadership Conference in 1979 at Camp Chief Hector and a Cross-Country Ski Touring Conference in Lake Louise in 1981. Held at the Banff Centre, the conference was a great success with over 100 participants and featured 19 presentations by leading mountaineers and guides on topics as diverse as *The Psychological Aspects of Accident*

*Prevention and Route Finding and Navigation*. Not long after a book was produced on the conference. It was to be the first of three Mountain Leadership Conferences that the three men would be involved with. They also organized a series of Avalanche Safety Conferences at about this time. Run at the University of Calgary, Tony organized the speakers and Mike handled the finances and promotion of the event.

During this period Mike was a full-time university student, as was Heather, who had enrolled in a Bachelor of Education Program, specializing in early childhood education and English. The pair lived frugally, surviving on student loans and part-time jobs. Heather manned the information booth at the south entrance to the University of Calgary, a cold job during the winter months, but there wasn’t much traffic and she could get a lot of reading done. Mike installed eaves troughs in the summer, a job that paid well. On the weekends they went to the mountains, rock climbing in the summer and waterfall ice climbing in the winter.



Heather setting off for a climb.

When Mike graduated from the U of C in 1982 with a degree in business, a party celebrating the event was held at Carl Hannigan's house. It was quite the affair. According to Mike and Shura Galbraith, Mike's mom and Aunt Joyce were there and entertained the guests, singing Gilbert and Sullivan songs. A couple of ham

artists, they were a regular Yorkshire comedy act. They loved being centre stage and so did Mike, who joined in. According to Shura it was "an explosion of Mortimers." To all those in attendance it was apparent that Mike's mom and aunt were very proud of their boy and that they loved him very much.

Almost immediately after graduating Mike began managing The Hostel Shop, a local outdoor equipment store, owned by the Southern Alberta Hostelling Association. The business suited him perfectly and would soon become the focal point for a number of initiatives and activities that Mike was involved in.

In 1982-83 Mike was the founding President of the Calgary Area Outdoor Council (CAOC), an umbrella group that provided a voice for local outdoor clubs. To fund the group he organized an outdoor equipment sale that took place at Mount Royal College and, like most of Mike's initiatives, was highly successful. Mike remembers, however, that his major interest in forming CAOC was so that they could get one of the desktop computers



Mike's aunt, Joyce, (left) and his mom, Irene, dance at his graduation party while Louise Guy (blue dress) looks on.



At Mike's graduation (l to r) Mike's mom Irene, Mike, Heather and Mike's stepfather Norman.

that were just appearing at the time, which all the clubs could use to produce their newsletters.

In 1985 Mike organized a Winter Mountain Leadership Conference. A joint Alpine Club of Canada/CAOC undertaking, the conference was held on December 7 and 8 at the Chateau Lake Louise and funded primarily by Alberta Parks and Recreation. Mike was once again the conference chairman and it was a great success, attracting about 180 participants. Twenty-three presentations were made by the most notable mountaineers, guides and park personnel in Alberta and B.C. and a book of the proceedings was published.

When asked why he was doing all this, Mike explained that the Danny Minion accident was the catalyst for his efforts. Quoting his old friend, Jay Straith, Mike said, "Just because we are amateurs doesn't mean that we don't have to act professionally. I knew that we could do better if people learned the responsibilities of leadership."



Mike Sawyer (left) and Mike Mortimer at a Calgary Mountain Club party. Photo: Chic Scott

Mike and Heather dancing at a Calgary Mountain Club party. Photo: Chic Scott



In the mid-1980s Mike and Heather joined the Calgary Mountain Club, a more casual association of Calgary area climbers. Mike recalled, "The first time I went to the Calgary Mountain Club, it was at the Cecil Hotel and I went with John Northwood. We sat there and everyone was very friendly until we said that we were from the Alpine Club and they all moved away. Later we went to the CMC's Christmas party at Heritage Park and had such a good time. It surpassed anything that the Alpine Club was doing. We decided that for our obligations we would do the Alpine Club, but for fun we would do the Mountain Club." In future years Mike would often have a good time at the CMC parties, sometime to Heather's consternation. Shura Galbraith remembered, "At Mountain Club parties, Heather would sometimes say 'That's it. I'm going home.' She would leave and we would be the ones to bring Mike home where we would pour him out onto his doorstep."

In 1984 Mike set out on the one major climbing expedition of his career. With Peter Roxburgh, Len Gottselig and Grant Carnie he attempted to climb 6,000-metre high Mount McKinley (Denali) in Alaska. Not an easy undertaking, and fearfully cold in any season, the summit eluded Mike although his companions did make it to the top traversing the mountain in the process.

# Mike & Heather Go Climbing



Clockwise from top left:  
Mike and Heather returning from a climbing trip.  
Mike ice climbing.  
Mike (left) and Len Gottselig in the tent on Mount McKinley.  
Mike carrying a big load on Mount McKinley.  
Heather ice climbing.  
Mike the mountaineer.



During his two-year term as chairman of the Calgary Section Mike began bringing in high profile speakers. English-born, American climber Chris Jones was the first speaker that he paid. Mike would go on to bring in almost three dozen speakers over the next 20 years. When he took over The Hostel Shop, he also began bringing the Best of the Banff Mountain Film Festival to Calgary, developing a long lasting relationship with this organization.



Heather on a work party at the Lloyd MacKay Hut in the Freshfields.



Mike on top of the outhouse that he built at the Lawrence Grassi Hut.



Mike on a work party at the Lloyd MacKay Hut in the Freshfields.

On November 11 and 12, 1989 Mike and his partners organized their third Mountain Leadership Conference, held this time at the Lodge at Kananaskis. Primarily an effort by the Alpine Club of Canada, this conference was once again a huge success, attracting 220 participants and noted speakers such as Lloyd Gallagher, Tim Auger and Peter Fuhrmann. Mike, who was once again chairman, was rapidly becoming the impresario of the Rockies.

But it was in his role as chairman of the Alpine Club of Canada's Huts Committee that Mike made one of his longest lasting and most enduring contributions to the Club. In the early 1980s the ACC huts were in a terrible state of disrepair. There was an inadequate booking system and

no regular maintenance schedule. When guests arrived at the huts they could not be sure what to expect: would there be firewood, would there be dishes and utensils, would the hut be clean and would there be room for them? Mike changed all that. Working with many talented and dedicated volunteers, Mike created a system of properly maintained and managed huts on a par with anything in the world.

Joining the Huts Committee in 1984 when it was chaired by Len Gotselig, Mike immediately saw a place where he could have a major effect. Peter Fuhrmann had just taken over as President of the Alpine Club of Canada and was determined to reform the moribund organization and Mike was prepared to work with him. One of their first projects was to build a new Bow Hut on the edge of the Wapta Icefield. The old hut, built in 1968, was inadequate and the surrounding rocks were polluted by years of improper sanitation. Carl Hannigan, another member of the Huts Committee, was tasked with stick-handling the new Bow Hut proposal through Parks Canada bureaucracy. Mike realized that the huts needed a lot of work and to do this the Club needed money, so he increased the overnight fees and opened the huts to non-members of the Alpine Club of Canada, greatly expanding the revenue

stream. With this extra cash he initiated a proper maintenance and supply schedule for the huts and a long-term planning process for capital projects. Most importantly, Mike gathered together a group of skilled volunteers to work on the huts: tradesmen including Dick Howe, Malcolm Talbot, John Lajeunesse, Wayne Shackleton and Gordon ‘Speedy’ Smith, most of whom were members of the Calgary Mountain Club.

Mike remembers, “After a full day of hut maintenance and repair, Dick and Tabs had decided that they wanted booze at night. Then they decided that they wanted a bottle of single malt whisky. I told the board about this and they were appalled. I said, ‘Listen, you’re getting half a dozen skilled tradesmen, bringing their own tools, and all they want is \$40 worth of booze a night. I think that you’re getting one hell of a deal.’” In addition, Dan Verrall was hired to oversee the regular servicing and maintenance of the huts.

The Bow Hut project finally came to completion in the summer of 1989. At a cost of \$98,000, a new hut that could sleep 30 guests was built in a new location, about a hundred metres lower than the old location. Carl had done his job well and received all the permissions from Parks Canada. Money had been raised through casinos and the generosity of the Calgary and Edmonton sections of the Club. The hut was built over a period of four weeks in late June and July and, except for one paid position, all the work was done by 186 volunteers. Mike oversaw the project and Heather supervised and organized the provision of more than 2,000 meals. John Lajeunesse was the general contractor and folks like Wayne Shackleton, Malcom Talbot and John McIsaac put in hundreds of hours of work. Even the Canadian army helped out, providing two large tents and cooking stoves and levelling the gravel for the hut site. In good Mortimer style all the volunteers received three beers per day, kept cold in a nearby snow bank along with the frozen meals for the camp. Stakes with numbers on them driven into the snow helped to locate which was the beer cache and which was the food cache. The project was a major tour de force and today the Bow Hut is the flagship of the ACC huts, opening up the Wapta Icefield for thousands of mountain lovers.

A work party at the Elizabeth Parker Hut on October 16, 1987 (back row l to r) Mike Mortimer, Mike Galbraith, Carl and Sandy Hannigan, Heather Mortimer, Malcolm Talbot, Wayne Shackleton (front left to r) unidentified, Dick Latta, unidentified, Dick Howe. Photo: Carl Hannigan collection



# Bow Hut Construction



Clockwise from top left:  
Beginning Bow Hut construction.  
The Bow Hut starts to take shape.  
Heather was responsible for the provision of 2,000 meals.  
Mike hard at work on the Bow Hut.  
Canadian soldiers enjoy a beer in the dining tent after a hard day's work.  
A small army of volunteers.





Clockwise from top left:  
 Some of the volunteers who made the Bow Hut a reality:  
 (back row l to r) Malcolm Talbot, John Lajeunesse, Sandy Hannigan  
 (in front), Tim Clinton, Carl Hannigan, Dick Howe (in front), (front row  
 sitting) Mike Mortimer, Heather Mortimer and Dick Latta.  
 The Bow Hut starts to take shape.

An overview of the Bow Hut construction site.  
 Working on the interior of the hut. Len Gottselig (in red),  
 John Northwood (in green) and Malcolm Talbot (in blue).





During those years while all the changes were being made to the management of the ACC huts, Mike and Club President, Peter Fuhrmann, had been negotiating with Parks Canada to take over the Abbot Pass Hut as well as the rest of the huts on the Wapta Icefield. In 1989 a deal was struck whereby the ACC became the owner of these huts and was responsible for their management, thus greatly expanding the hut system. The end result of all these changes was that the hut system became profitable and a great attraction for new members. Today, the ACC hut system is the economic engine that supports many activities of the Club that do not generate revenue.



The Bow Hut is now the base for adventures on the Wapta Icefield. Photo: Gilleen Daffern.





Heather's B.Ed. graduation photo, 1981.

While Mike was busy organizing conferences, running The Hostel Shop and revitalizing the Alpine Club of Canada's hut system, Heather was busy with her own life. Graduating with a B.Ed. in 1981 she worked for the Calgary Board of Education (CBE) for 10 years in Early Childhood Services, introducing computers into the classrooms. Later she moved into a consulting role with the CBE assisting teachers establish computer programs in their studies and providing workshops and courses for teachers on how to make this happen. From 1985 to '89 Heather worked part-time on a Master's degree and then took a year off to finish her thesis. In 1991 she graduated with an MBA in Instructional Design, then joined the City of Calgary as Coordinator of Education in the Department of Information Technology.

Not long after the completion of the Bow Hut, Mike and Heather acquired the first of several dogs they would own, a Norwegian Elk Hound named Thor. For many years, Thor accompanied

them everywhere, to all the work parties and even over the Woolley Shoulder to the Mount Alberta Hut. Thor was followed in 1997 by Loki, another Norwegian Elk Hound. In 2000 Loki accompanied Mike and Heather to many of the ACC huts while hosting a Japanese delegation's visit to Canada.

In 1991 Heather undertook the role of chairperson of the Mountain Guides Ball. This grand affair was held each year at the Chateau Lake Louise and organizing the event was a big job, which Heather did for 13 years. The hotel arrangements, the silent auction, the band, the ticket sales and the seating arrangements were all under her guidance and the success of the Guides Ball over the years is a testament to her leadership. Heather says that she saw herself as a leader working with a team and did not like to micro-manage any project. But she had Mike's penchant for shaking things up a bit, one year hiring a Rastafarian band called *Blue Moon*. Many people were horrified. On another occasion a Japanese group brought a sake barrel to the event and Heather and Chateau General Manager, David Bayne, had to quickly come up with 300 glasses to hold the sake—even some beer glasses from the pub were recruited for the cause. And the silent auction was a big money maker for the Club, grossing over \$30,000 some years.

Thor went everywhere with Mike and Heather.



Mike and Heather dancing at the Mountain Guides Ball.



Meanwhile Mike's business activities had snowballed. In 1983 Mike had taken over as general agent for Ortovox snow safety products (primarily avalanche beacons) in Canada, and three years later he purchased The Hostel Shop. Through The Hostel Shop and Ortovox he attended trade shows in North America and Europe and got to know most everyone in the outdoor retail world. He was now regularly bringing internationally renowned mountaineers to give public lectures and coordinating tours for them across Canada. And his association with the Banff Mountain Film Festival (BMFF) had grown too; Mike was often the master of ceremonies introducing speakers and films on the stage of the Eric Harvie Theatre in Banff. As well, Mike provided mountaineering equipment for the British and Canadian Armies and organized his leadership and safety conferences. All of this created a synergistic vortex that generated even more energy and new ideas—with Mike at the centre.



The Hostel Shop.



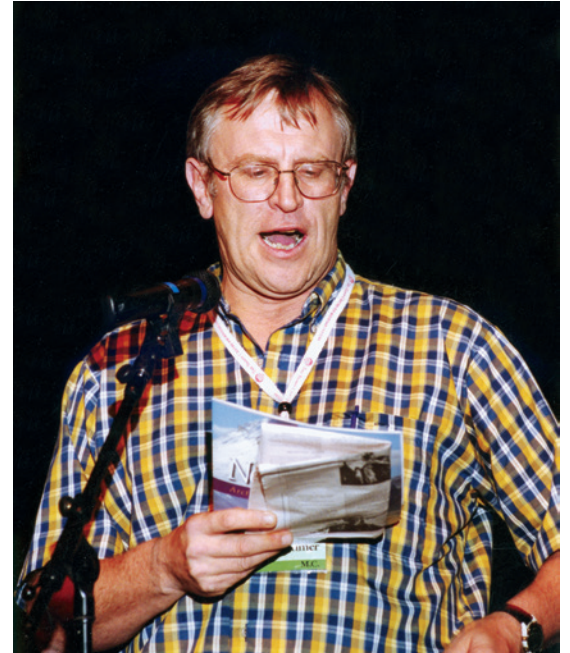
Salesman Dennis Kwiring serves a customer at The Hostel Shop.

But Mike was not always the best salesman and certainly never adhered to the tenet that the customer is always right. Kirsty Galbraith told the following story:

*One year, just before Christmas, The Hostel Shop was selling 'Cold Buster Bars'—a great stocking stuffer for the active person. Apparently the bars had been tested on animals and in protest an animal rights group had injected oven cleaner into some of the bars. One customer, who had purchased a number of these bars, called the shop and asked what to do. Mike supposedly replied, "Take the bar out of the package, put it on a cookie sheet and bake it at 300 degrees. If your oven is clean then you should probably not give it to anyone." The woman was not satisfied with Mike's answer so he concluded, "Well, if you are really worried you can bring them in here and we will feed them to Bruce, he'll eat anything." And that was when one of the senior staff pulled me aside and said, "Try not to let Mike handle the customers, that's our job."*

A controversial emcee on the stage in Banff, Mike was never at a loss for words or comments. Deb Smythe, manager of the BMFF, remembers hearing someone at an outdoor industry trade show begin his presentation with the words, "I don't really have that much to say, except that I am not Mike Mortimer." The guy next to her leaned over and whispered, "If he doesn't have much to say, then he definitely is not Mike Mortimer." Perhaps Mike's most memorable comment came at the festival in 2003, just as the United States was about to commence its ill-fated invasion of Iraq. Standing on the stage in front of 1,000 people, including some of the senior managers from the National Geographic Society of Washington D.C., Mike referred to the current American foreign policy as "Touching the Void," a reference to a very successful climbing book at the time. Needless to say the Nat Geo folks were not amused. In retrospect we can see how prescient Mike was.

For 13 years, after the film festival wound up on Sunday night, Mike and Heather organized an annual "Detox/Retox" ski trip to the Elizabeth Parker Hut. An eclectic assortment of personalities who had been drawn to the festival, such as Kurt Diemberger, Lynn Hill, Joe Simpson and



Mike on stage at the Banff Mountain Film Festival.

Alison Hargreaves, skied up the snow covered Lake O'Hara fire road on Monday for a rollicking overnight party at the ACC hut. Many of them had never been on skis before but they made it and had an opportunity to experience Canada's great mountains. Heather, of course, did the bulk of the work organizing the food and preparing it at the hut, but she had some very interesting assistants over the years.



A happy group at the Elizabeth Parker Hut on one of Mike and Heather's Detox/Retox post film festival trips.

## Mike's Speakers List

Over the years Mike brought over 30 renowned mountaineers to give presentations in Calgary and across Canada:

Conrad Anker, Rusty Baillie, Fred Beckey, Barry Blanchard, Adrian Burgess, Kim Carrigan, Dave Cheesmond, Greg Child, Dwayne Congdon, Jim Curran, Kurt Diemberger, John Dunn, Patrick Gabarrou, Ned Gillette, Peter Habeler, Warren Harding, Alison Hargreaves, Chris Jones, Michael Kennedy, Jeff Lowe, Hamish McInnes, Bill March, Pat Morrow, Paul Piana, Jan Reynolds, Doug Scott, Chic Scott, Joe Simpson, Allen Steck, Marc Twight, Jon Waterman, Richard Webber, Martyn Williams, Jim Whittaker, Mark Wilford, Sharon Wood and Andrez Zawada.

Mike remembers that the nicest person amongst all his speakers was probably Hamish McInnes. Joe Simpson gave the best presentation, but he was often so nervous that he vomited before the show. And Mike was really surprised at how good Jim Whittaker, the first American up Mount Everest, was. It was always interesting meeting people like these and the shows were a great success, usually filling Science Theatre 148 at the university. Mike says that he eventually stopped bringing in the climbing celebrities because he literally ran out of suitable choices.



Joe Simpson on Mike and Heather's back porch.

Mike was also very involved with Pat Morrow's Seven Summits Quest. According to Mike, "In those days we would help anyone. We were the guys who you would come to if you were going on an expedition." Mike helped Pat with his expeditions and set up speaking engagements that brought in much needed cash. Pat remembered, "With Mike's promotional skills and acerbic wit when introducing me and the other presenters at the podium, his was a hard act to follow."

Just after completing construction of the Bow Hut, Mike received a study on water, energy and waste management from Georg Gruber who chaired the committee that managed 500 huts for the German Alpine Club. After having the document translated, reading it was a real eye opener for Mike: "It was the road to Damascus moment for us. Suddenly the lights went on. When we built the Bow Hut we allotted about \$1,000 for the toilets. It was totally back to front." So, in 1991, with the assistance of Dixon Thompson, Carl Hannigan, Phil Sigmund, Trevor Jones and

Leslie DeMarsh, Mike organized a Symposium on Water, Energy and Waste Management in Alpine Shelters. Held at the Chateau Lake Louise on October 27 and 28, it was a great success and changed the ACC's attitude completely. Some people were very surprised at Mike's new-found interest in sustainable environmental practices. Mike wrote:

*The subject consumed me. Care had to be taken for I was beginning to startle strangers on planes by trying to engage people in conversations about the topic. I became quite self-righteous about the issue. At a climbers' party in Munich, West Germany, I bumped into a well-known mountain guide who operated within one of the American national parks. "Are you aware of the amount of waste that your clients are depositing in the national parks?" I asked. "What are you doing about it?" He walked away. But others didn't.*

The Symposium also changed the attitude of land managers in Canada's parks—of the 88 paid attendees, two thirds represented national and provincial parks from Canada and the United States. The symposium also came at a time when many of the commercial backcountry lodges were just getting started and there was a lot of interest from them on the topic. Dixon Thompson, from the Faculty of Environmental Design at the University of Calgary, was one of the featured speakers and became involved in the ACC's newly formed Energy and Waste Management Committee. It was the beginning of the environmentally responsible approach to running the Club's huts and survives today in BEES (Backcountry Energy Environmental Solutions).

Not long afterwards, the Chateau Lake Louise organized a fundraising event featuring Hollywood stars and other celebrities. The ACC's Energy and Waste Management Committee was chosen as one of the recipients of the proceeds of the event, and Mike and Heather organized a silent auction. It turned out to be a very interesting weekend, Mike and Heather hobnobbing with people like Pierce Brosnan, Angie Dickinson and Patty Hearst. In the end \$40,000 was raised for the committee.

During the 1990s, working in partnership with

Tony Daffern, a Calgary based snow safety expert and the author of *Avalanche Safety for Skiers and Climbers*, Mike was also involved in organizing a number of avalanche safety workshops for the newly formed Canadian Avalanche Association. Held at the University of Calgary, these workshops featured many leading snow scientists and avalanche safety experts, and went a long way towards changing people's attitudes regarding snow safety. On top of that they no doubt saved a number of lives. Proceeds from these workshops went to support the *Avalanche Bulletin*, which was produced by the Canadian Avalanche Centre, based in Revelstoke, B.C.

Gord Ritchie remembered, "In the late 1990s, Mike revived the backcountry avalanche workshops in Calgary in partnership with the Canadian Avalanche Association. These well-attended workshops resulted in an annual donation to the CAA in support of the public avalanche bulletins. The support for avalanche safety didn't stop there. When the more recently formed Canadian Avalanche Foundation (CAF) held its first fundraiser in Calgary, Mike and Heather were the first to volunteer to help out. They brought to bear all their experience from running the Mountain Guides Ball over the years and showed the CAF how to run its first—and highly successful—fundraising event."



# President for Life

On October 29, 1994 Mike was elected President of the Alpine Club of Canada. Mike had lots of support and some of his friends even prepared an elaborate sash for him to wear at that year's Mountain Guides Ball, which said on the back *President for Life*. But others were worried. According to Mike, "A lot of people were very concerned because they knew that if I became President, it wasn't going to be business as usual." He explained, however, "What I was trying to do with the Club was make it more professional."



Mike wearing his President for Life sash at the Mountain Guides Ball. Photo: Carl Hannigan collection

Mike's supporters react to his election as President of the Alpine Club of Canada. (l to r) Marj Hind, Don Forest, unidentified, Glen Boles and Liz Boles.



President Mike at the ACC podium.

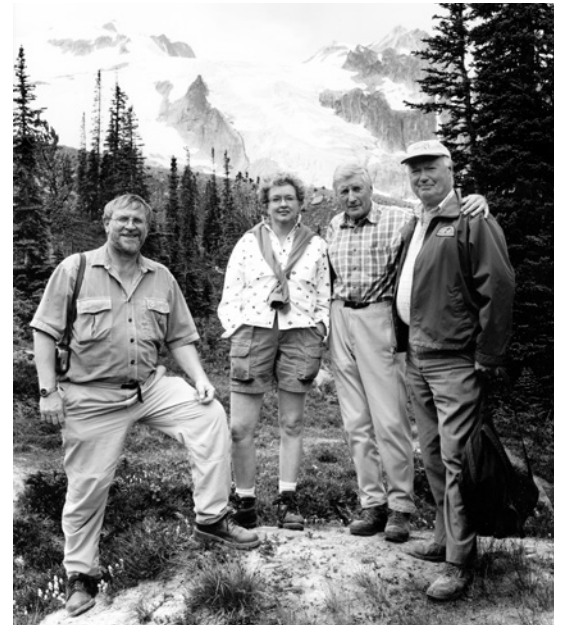
One of the first things that he did was hire a new executive director, Bruce Keith. Bruce was the Club's first professionally trained manager and had many years' experience working for the federal government at Consulting and Audit Canada. He was not a climber, but he embraced the ethos of the Club. "There wasn't a single day that I worked for the Club that wasn't fun in one way or another," Bruce recalled, "What the Club needed most at that time was somebody who could run a national office and make it the efficient office that they wanted it to be."

During the hiring process someone asked Bruce if he had met Mike Mortimer yet. Bruce laughed, "I said, 'Why would you ask me that?' and he replied, 'Well Mike's quite a character and you will have your hands full getting along with him.' Mike obviously had a reputation in the Alpine Club." According to Bruce, however, Mike was always a pleasure to work with and the next six years were the most interesting of his working career.

"Mike was always very direct. You always knew where you stood with Mike. He didn't beat around the bush. I never had any doubt about what Mike was thinking because Mike would speak his mind. Mike had a vision for the ACC and was consistent throughout my working career with him in that vision. He wanted the Alpine Club of Canada to be the most highly regarded Alpine Club in the world and he spent enormous time and energy, totally on a volunteer basis, to try to make that vision come true."

Mike remembered, “We said, the Alpine Club is open for business and we went out and got sponsors.” With Bruce he walked the floor at the Outdoor Retailer trade show in Salt Lake City making contacts and setting up partnerships, most notably with The North Face, a partnership that is still running today. Initiating a leadership training program, they got Conrad Anker up to Canada to instruct at the first TNF training session at the Bow Hut. The pair also promoted the historic partnership between the ACC and the Association of Canadian Mountain Guides as well as the friendship of the Alpine Club of Canada and the American Alpine Club (AAC). Bill Putnam, a prominent member and one time President of the AAC, as well as the North American delegate to the International Mountaineering and Climbing Federation (UIAA) became a close friend and mentor to Mike, and Heather became very close friends with Bill’s wife, Kitty. Together they travelled the world. Mike eventually took over as the North American representative to the UIAA when Bill stepped down in 2002.

One of the first jobs that Bruce was tasked with was to organize the Club’s database, which was very difficult to access. And there were also problems with the camps. Mike wanted to professionalize them so that people received a first rate experience. Liability insurance was a big issue at the time so Mike and Bruce got a proper insurance policy for the Club. And they began looking farther down the road, preparing a long-term plan for



At the dedication of the Bill Putnam (Fairy Meadow) Hut. (l to r) Mike, Heather, Hans Gmoser and Bill Putnam. Photo: Roger Laurilla

the organization. Very supportive of sport climbing, a new activity that was sweeping the world at the time, Mike worked with Dave Dornian to keep it within the ACC family. And Mike was a big supporter of the heritage and culture of the Alpine Club of Canada and worked closely with Bob Sandford, Vice President of Mountain Culture. Perhaps Mountain Culture’s biggest project during the 90s was with the legendary silver ice axe from the 1925 Mount Alberta Expedition.



Mike at the Outdoor Retailer trade show in Salt Lake City (l to r) Aid Burgess, Mike (behind), Warren Harding, Paul Piana, Mark Wilford and Greg Child.



# Mt. Alberta & the Silver Ice Axe

It was Greg Horne who started it all. While in New York at the headquarters of the American Alpine Club, Greg discovered the upper half of an ice axe that had been left on the summit of Mount Alberta in 1925 when it was first climbed by a Japanese expedition led by Swiss guides. Reputed to be made of silver it was, in fact, just a regular ice axe. The upper half had been retrieved by two American climbers in 1948 who had made the second ascent of the mountain. In the process of trying to recover the axe they had broken it in two. The bottom half, which had remained on the mountain frozen in the ice, was retrieved in 1965 by a team from the Nagano High School Old Boys Alpine Club and taken to Japan. Through Greg's efforts the upper section was repatriated from New York to the Jasper-Yellowhead Museum and Archives in 1995.

All this led to a project to unite the two halves of the axe and in the process bond the Alpine Club of Canada and the Japanese Alpine Club in friendship. Bob Sandford, as VP of Mountain Culture, spearheaded the project and Mike was heavily involved. In the ACC Gazette, Bob wrote:

*On December 6, 1997, this small delegation of Canadians made history in Japan. In front of Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto and Crown Prince Naruhito and an audience of nearly 800 Japanese mountaineers, Mike Mortimer, President of the Alpine Club of Canada and Lori Ann Perlin of the Jasper-Yellowhead Museum helped Kenichi Hara of the Japanese Alpine Club restore the historic Mount Alberta ice axe. Even after nearly 50 years, the pieces fit together so perfectly, it was difficult to pull them apart.*

During this dinner in Tokyo, Mike and Heather sat at the head table next to the Prime Minister and the Crown Prince. When Mike bummed a cigarette from the PM, the Canadian Ambassador, who was also sitting at the head table, was not impressed. Later in the evening there was the ceremonial tapping of the sake barrel where too much enthusiasm on the part of the individual with the hammer led to sake being sprayed around the table. Mike remembers the Prime Minister pulling out his handkerchief and wiping sake off his jacket. This was the first of what would be nine trips that Mike would make to Japan in varying capacities over the years; Mike would dine with the Crown Prince on three occasions.

In August of 2000 the 75th anniversary of the



Reassembling the Mount Alberta ice axe. (l to r) Dr. Saito (President Japanese Alpine Club), Bob Sandford, Lori Ann Perlin (Jasper-Yellowhead Museum), Kenichi Hara (who found the lower half of the ice axe in 1965), Mike Mortimer, Junka Haga (granddaughter of Yuko Maki who the made first ascent of Mount Alberta in 1925), Tadeo Haga (Junka's husband).



Mike with Crown Prince Naruhito (left in the grey suit) and Dr. Saito, President, Japanese Alpine Club (centre).

first ascent of Mount Alberta was celebrated. A large number of Japanese climbers and hikers came to Canada and visited a number of our huts and a joint group of Canadian and Japanese mountaineers attempted to climb the mountain. Despite the fact that poor weather and conditions made an ascent of the mountain impossible the event was a great success with about 100 Japanese alpinists visiting several ACC huts. Bob Sandford wrote, and the ACC published, a book on the event, and dozens of Alpine Club of Canada members volunteered to help out on the hut trips. At a final wind up dinner at the Jasper Park Lodge, a well-lubricated Ralph Klein, Premier of Alberta, rambled on a bit, but overall the event was a great success, bonding the two alpine clubs.

# The ACC Centennial

On May 5, 2001 Mike stepped down as President of the Alpine Club of Canada after six years in the position. He had had a huge effect and left his mark. Mike and Heather, with an unquenchable desire to volunteer and organize events, now turned their energy toward the approaching ACC centennial. Founded on March 27-28, 1906 at a meeting in Winnipeg, the Club would be soon be one hundred years old and Mike was determined that we recognize our heritage. "We wanted the Club to realize its traditions and its history."

A committee was struck with Mike as the chair and for the next five years the task consumed him. Realizing that the centennial celebrations would require money, the committee established a Centennial Fund with the earnings from the ACC's Endowment Fund for the years 2001 to 2007 being allocated, as were the proceeds from the annual Mountain Guides Balls. A successful appeal for donations was made to club members and grants were also received from Parks Canada, the Canadian Pacific Railway and the Alberta government. In total \$550,000 was raised to support centennial events.

More than half of the money raised was spent on facilities, in particular the rebuilding of the Fay Hut and the construction of the Pat Boswell (Toronto Section) Cabin at the Canmore Clubhouse, built to replace the old Toronto Section Cabin. But there were many other projects undertaken during the centennial year:

- # A meeting and gala dinner was held at the Fort Garry Hotel in Winnipeg, birthplace of the Club, on March 24-26, 2006.
- # Laurie Schwartz produced a wonderful play about Elizabeth Parker, one of the founders of the Alpine Club of Canada.
- # 25 national leadership and adventure trips were offered, including a camp based out of the Stanley Mitchell Hut in the Little Yoho Valley.
- # A postage stamp, commemorating the formation of the Alpine Club of Canada, was issued by Canada Post.
- # A stone monument was built at Yoho Pass to commemorate the location of the ACC's first camp in 1906.

The Canadian Pacific Railway generously provided their historic steam train, which took ACC members from Field to Rogers Pass where the 2006 Annual General Meeting of the Club was held at the Glacier Park Lodge. Afterwards a celebratory dinner was held at the Wheeler Hut.

Heather's big contribution to the celebrations was a project called *The Artist and the Mountaineer*. Organized in partnership with Donna Jo Massie and Sue Gottselig, the project brought together a dozen noted ACC members and a dozen fine artists. Each ACC member chose their special place in the Canadian mountains, then the artist and the mountaineer visited the location where the mountaineer attempted to convey to the artist their special connection to the place. The artist then went back to his or her studio and created a work of art to celebrate the place. Eventually a lovely book was published and the resulting artwork was displayed at the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies with 300 people in attendance at its special opening evening.

A 64-page issue of the Gazette was produced, reflecting the history and essence of the Club.

Perhaps the biggest project of all was the digitization of 100 years of Canadian Alpine Journals.

To conclude the centennial celebrations the 2006 General Assembly of the International Mountaineering and Climbing Federation (UIAA) was hosted in Banff by the ACC.

According to Mike and Heather they wanted to make the centennial celebrations as inclusive as possible and the sections were encouraged to organize their own events, as were individual members.

ACC members assemble outside the *Winnipeg Free Press* building in commemoration of the historic photo taken 100 years earlier showing the Club's founding members at their inaugural meeting.



# The ACC Centennial Events



Clockwise from top left:  
 Whyte Museum executive director Ted Hart (left) with *The Artist and the Mountaineer* organizing team (l to r) Sue Gottselig, Heather Mortimer and Donna Jo Massie.  
 Laurie Schwartz performs her Elizabeth Parker play at the Fort Garry Hotel in Winnipeg.  
 Heather and Mike at the Gala Ball in Winnipeg.  
 Unveiling of the memorial cairn at Yoho Pass.  
 The historic Canadian Pacific Railway *Empress 2816* steam locomotive at the Glacier Station in Rogers Pass.  
 First Day Cover ACC Centennial Stamp.  
 The dining room at the Fort Garry Hotel in Winnipeg.



# The UIAA

Mike jumped from the frying pan into the fire when he assumed the presidency of the UIAA in 2006. The last big events of the centennial celebrations were the UIAA meetings held in Banff, followed by the Mountain Guides Ball in the evening. The centennial year had been a big success and it was coming to a close, but Mike

still had stomach for more. At the final meeting of the UIAA, Mike was elected President, 36 votes to 35. Not a resounding mandate, the federation was filled with rivalries and discord and Mike was going to have his hands full. However, he was later to be unanimously re-elected, the first time this had happened in the UIAA in more than 30 years.



Mike at the flip chart explaining the plan of action to the UIAA delegates.

At the time there was a big fight over sport climbing—some loved it and saw it as a way to stay connected to the young people and others, the traditionalists, hated it. According to Mike the UIAA was tearing itself apart over sport climbing. Because of sport climbing and the competitions that went along with it, the UIAA was becoming rapidly involved with the International Olympic Committee and many people could see big bucks on the horizon. However, at the meeting in Banff where Mike was elected, a motion was made that the sport climbing movement and the UIAA would separate. The motion passed. Although Mike was supportive of sport climbing, he felt that the duty of the UIAA was first and foremost to represent the mountaineers of the world.

On top of that there were the usual rivalries within the organization. The Europeans showed disdain for the small North American clubs and felt that if something made sense in Europe then it had to be true everywhere. The German faction, who represented about a million club members, was very strong as were the Austrians. And good old diplomatic Mike was right in the centre of it.

The International Olympic Committee did not like the idea that the UIAA had split with the sport climbers and although Mike was exhausted from organizing the centennial celebrations, he now had his hands full again. He went regularly to Switzerland where the group was headquartered and spent a lot of time on IOC business. There were perks, of course, and Mike got to go to the Beijing Olympics and the Vancouver Olympics as the president of an international sports federation that was recognized by the IOC. Mike and Heather had lots of fun on these trips and met a lot of interesting people. Mike even chaired a UIAA meeting in Iran where he was often interviewed on television.



Mike's clear plan of action for the UIAA.

# UIAA Adventures



Clockwise from top left:  
 Mike and Heather with border guards in Manali in Northern India.  
 Mike at the podium of the 2012 ice climbing championships in Korea.  
 Mike handing out the first UIAGM mountain guide certificates in Nepal.  
 Mike giving a television interview in Azerbaijan.  
 Mike giving out ski mountaineering medals in France.  
 Mike and Heather at the Taj Mahal in India.



Mike thought that the UIAA could be much more effective and, as he had done with the ACC, he tried to professionalize the group, establishing a commission to do so. Mike would often go into meetings humming one of his favourite songs: *I've got a little list* from *The Mikado*, which is sung by the Lord High Executioner.

On the lighter side, years earlier when he was the North American representative to the UIAA, Mike had started what was called The Beer Commission. In the UIAA there are five commissions that really do the work of the Club. But Mike was frustrated with some of them so one night in the Austrian Alps, he and some of his cronies formed what they called The Beer Commission, which was devoted to the consumption and celebration of large quantities of the amber liquid. The commission even had an elite group called the 8,000 Litre Club. According to Mike, "It was the only committee that knew what the hell it was doing."



Mike Mortimer, the UIAA Chief.



Mike (in yellow down jacket) with H. Park (in blue down jacket) who donated \$2.5 million to support ice climbing competitions.

Mike Mortimer (left) and Mike Galbraith about to set off on a ski descent of the Vallée Blanche.



Then the ski mountaineers split from the UIAA. After losing sport climbing and ski mountaineering, the question arose, "Why is the UIAA even involved with the Olympics?" But the group still had ice climbing. At an ice climbing competition in Slovenia, Mike was so impressed with the energy and enthusiasm of the young folk who were organizing the event that he became pro Olympics and began to promote the activity as a demonstration event at the Sochi Olympics. In Moscow he met the CEO of the Sochi Olympics who agreed that they could demonstrate ice climbing in the cultural area.

Later Mike went to an ice climbing competition in Korea where he was introduced to a prominent businessman who was interested in sponsoring ice climbing. Mike recalled, "I had it in my mind that we could get \$100,000. We sat down for half an hour and he offered \$2.5 million." This money was for the UIAA to promote and generate ice climbing competitions in the hope that it would eventually become an Olympic sport.

In 2004, Mike contracted a virus that attacked his heart leaving him with arrhythmia (atrial fibrillation). Over the next few years this ailment was to give him serious difficulties, and Mike and Heather were to see the inside of a lot of hospitals around the world. However, on one trip, in 2010, to Chamonix, France, Mike skied the Vallée Blanche, a glacier route that descends from the summit of the Aiguille du Midi (3842 m). His partner on this adventure, Mike Galbraith, was impressed and felt that Mike was very brave to do this.

But despite his illness, Mike was rocking the boat with his shake up of the UIAA. "It was all coming to a head. They were not ready for change." On top of that, Mike was flying across the Atlantic every few weeks and the stress and aggravation were intense. In 2011, on his way to a UIAA meeting in



Mike and Heather's friends gathered at the Wheeler Hut to celebrate their retirement. Photo: Pat Morrow

Kathmandu, Mike became seriously ill in India. Although he tried to attend and chair the meetings, he was just too sick to do so. He had to admit that he was doing way too much. Heather said to him, "This is the end. It's like a playground and their squabbling is the sandbox. So get out." They came back to Canada and said, "That's it. No more mountaineering politics."

Mike resigned as President of the UIAA and stepped back from the mountain world. Trying

to organize all the major alpine clubs around the world had been a daunting task and it just wore him down. Eventually he felt that he had done about as much as he could. Not long after, in August 2013, Heather retired from her position with the City of Calgary, after 22 years on the job. Mike and Heather have now bought a deluxe van and, travelling with their golden doodle dog (a poodle/golden retriever cross) named Oscar, are spending the winters in Mexico.



Heather and Mike at their new home in Mexico.

# Summing Up

*Mike transformed the Alpine Club of Canada into an organization that people respected, an organization that could provide services that people could count on. —Bruce Keith*

During his career, Mike has been a very polarizing figure, making friends and enemies in equal proportion. Shura Galbraith commented, “People’s reactions to Mike are at the poles. You are not indifferent to Mike. You meet head on with this bright rainbow and you slide to one end or the other.” A born entertainer with a unique sense of humour, Mike has told a lot of politically incorrect jokes over the years. Sometimes they went over okay, but most of the time they just shocked people. Mike, however, didn’t seem to care. One of his great heroes was Don Whillans, the master of the put down. Perhaps this was all a result of his public school upbringing or perhaps it is a self defense mechanism born out of insecurity.

On the other hand many people feel that Heather is a saint. A strong personality like Mike, she has been the perfect companion and partner for 40 years now. Always loyal she has shared in the decision-making and supported him through many difficult times. According to Bruce Keith, “Heather was a big part of everything that Mike did; sometimes in a very up front way and sometimes not so much. But you knew that when Mike went home at night he would speak to Heather. Her advice would be a big part of why things happened so successfully. Mike and Heather complemented each other so well. They were both interested in things being done well.”

According to Dave Dornian who worked with Mike for many years on the executive of the ACC, “Perhaps my greatest take-away from Mike’s leadership style was that you don’t, and perhaps shouldn’t, feel that you need to take a stand on every little issue that frets a not-for-profit or NGO—Mike would often push an issue or a group by essentially outraging them or mocking them. He had a way of introducing a controversial topic to a meeting by metaphorically throwing a bunch of papers up into the air and saying nothing more than, ‘What are we going to do about all this?’ A staunch egalitarian, he treated everyone with equal offensiveness. His organizational energy was fearsome, because you knew that he wouldn’t stop

punching. And he was fast on his feet, changing the subject or moving on to closure—and beer—while everyone was still collecting their thoughts or marshalling their arguments. He made me crazy and I often hated him at the moment, but I loved him long term. He cared about the Club, its spirit and influence, past and future. He often overreached, but just because of that he achieved many great things.”

Bruce Keith said, “Mike’s capacity for work was enormous. I have never met anyone with a bigger sense of commitment. When he made up his mind that he wanted something to happen, you knew that it was going to happen. Mike never once wavered from the effort that was required to make those things happen. Mike was mellowed by his role as president. When he first came to the job he was the brash guy, but over time he realized that other people brought valuable input to the Club. He began more to appreciate the ideas and opinions of others.”

The last to leave the party, Mike would be up the next morning ready for the meetings. And he would have his paperwork in order and be very thorough. He was politically astute and had a keen sense of where people were coming from and what they wanted. And he was a very social person, so going to meetings was not the chore that it is for some. Meetings were just something that was necessary to get things done.

Over the years Mike and Heather have put in tens of thousands of volunteer hours and have played a huge role in creating today’s modern and dynamic Alpine Club of Canada. When they got involved in the late 70s and early 80s the Club was in serious danger of disappearing completely. Today there are over 10,000 members, 22 sections and new ones are being added regularly. Mike and Heather can take a lot of the credit for this change.

Mike and Heather believed in using the energy and effort of volunteers on many of their projects, not the time of the paid staff. According to Mike, “We always felt that it was the members who ran the Club, not the staff. The staff assisted. We had almost no staff involvement when we built Bow



Hut.” In Mike’s opinion, using volunteer members on these projects gave a sense of belonging to the Club. It was much more important than just buying a membership. During all those projects there were new members and old members all volunteering and getting to know each other. It was a way of passing on the traditions and history of the Club.

Summing it all up, Mike reflected:

*I think that we left the ACC a better club. We were there at the right time and there were the right energies. Now we are into new things. You can’t linger. You should know when to exit the stage.*

Mike and Heather. Photo: Pat Morrow



# Volunteer Service Record

Together Mike and Heather have amassed an impressive history of volunteer service:



Mike and Heather enjoy the sunset in Cape Faro, Portugal, the most western part of the European mainland.

- 1979 ACC Calgary Section Newsletter editors
- 1980 ACC Calgary Section Membership Secretary
- 1980-1982 ACC Calgary Section Chair
- 1982 Organized Mountain Leadership Conference
- 1980s Organized several Avalanche Safety Conferences
- 1982-1983 Founding President Calgary Area Outdoor Council
- 1985 Organized Winter Mountain Leadership Conference
- 1985-1987 Treasurer Calgary Mountain Club
- 1989 Organized Mountain Leadership Conference
- 1984-1994 Served on the Alpine Club of Canada's Huts Committee much of the time as Chair or as Vice President of Facilities
- 1982-2002 Brought to Calgary (and Canada) more than 30 internationally renowned mountaineers to give presentations
- 1985-2005 Volunteer emcee at the Banff Mountain Film Festival for 20 years
- 1989 Oversaw the construction of Bow Hut and prepared over 2000 meals for the volunteers.
- 1990s Organized several Backcountry Avalanche Workshops
- 1991-2004 Chair of Mountain Guides Ball Committee
- 1991 Organized Water, Energy and Waste Management Symposium
- 1994-2001 President of the Alpine Club of Canada
- 2000 Chair of Mount Alberta 75th Anniversary Celebration
- 2001-2006 Chair of the Alpine Club of Canada's Centennial Committee
- 2004-2006 Board Member Canadian Avalanche Centre
- 2006 Organized The Artist and the Mountaineer
- 2006-2011 President of the International Mountaineering and Climbing Federation (UIAA)

The Alpine Club of Canada recognizes its volunteers with Volunteer Service Awards. Over the years, Mike and Heather have received:

- 1986 Distinguished Service Award for Mike
- 1989 Distinguished Service Award for Heather
- 2001 A.O. Wheeler Legacy Award for Mike
- 2001 A.O. Wheeler Legacy Award for Heather
- 2005 Honorary Membership for Mike



# *The Book of Mortimer*

## Celebrating a Life of Volunteerism



From different backgrounds but with the same spirit of adventure, Mike and Heather Mortimer found each other while travelling the world. Within three months of meeting they were married, eventually settling in Calgary where they dedicated their lives to volunteering. This is the story of Mike and Heather's immense contribution to the mountain community as told by their long-time friend, Chic Scott.

Their volunteer efforts all started in 1979, when Mike and Heather took on the task of newsletter editors for the Calgary Section of the Alpine Club of Canada, and ended three decades later with five years as president and first lady of the International Mountaineering and Climbing Federation (UIAA), representing all the major mountaineering clubs of the world. Serving literally tens of thousands of hours in a multitude of roles, Mike and Heather's generous spirits have given new meaning to the term volunteerism. Their example will be an inspiration for a new generation of mountain lovers to carry on their good work.

For further information regarding the Summit Series of mountaineering biographies, please contact the National Office of the Alpine Club of Canada.  
[www.alpineclubofcanada.ca](http://www.alpineclubofcanada.ca)



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