

Doug Hesse

University of Denver

dhesse@du.edu | 303.871.7447

“Stories, Celebrations, Tips, Trips, and Fights:
Everyday Writing in a Climbing Community”

Douglas Hesse

Forthcoming 2020 in *The South Atlantic Review*; please don't circulate.

On Monday, August 22, 2017, Chris Hagler posted a plea on the 14ers Facebook page. A couple of climbing friends, Ryan and Carlin, have gone missing on Capitol Peak, a challenging 14,000' mountain near Aspen, Colorado, infamous for the knife edge ridge on its standard (easiest, a relative term) route, with 2000-foot dropoffs on either side. The climbers have been overdue a day. Within minutes, expressions of concern and offers for help start coming in. A few people who had been on the mountain over the weekend share sightings and recall conversations with the couple. Nate Oakes has seen them a half-mile from the trailhead at 4:45 Saturday. Walker Hines, who'd given them some batteries Saturday, has provided Aspen Mountain Rescue with GPS waypoints to their tent. Updates come throughout the day. Climbers from Denver to Durango load 4 Runners and Jeeps to head toward the Elk Range to join the search. People report having heard distant screams. ¹

Finally, at 5:35 p.m., Arvana Jarrard posts, “Pitkin County Alerts just sent out.” Two minutes later Analise Marie note that “MRA Facebook just posted a release,” and at 5:40 p.m. Jorge Medina posts a link to an *Aspen Times* story, “Missing Couple Found Dead Below Capitol Peak Summit” (Ausland). They had fallen off a cliff. The news comes obliquely, as bad news usually does to this page, with a link to information sources rather than outright declarations. There are friends and family following, after all. For another day, memories and grief pour in from hundreds of the Facebook page’s 27,000 members. Many join a communal reflection on the dangerous ecstasy of mountain climbing.

In Colorado parlance, a 14er is one of the state’s 58 mountains that rise over 14,000 feet. Hiking them is point of pride and obsession--as well as a point of tension between serious climbers and novice hobbyists pouring into the state and up the slopes, too often clad in tennis shoes and T-shirts, carrying bottles of Figi water, their iPhones on speaker. The 14er Facebook page has grown to 28,400 members as of January 2019, tripling since I joined it 6 years ago. The page itself began May 23, 2009, as an offshoot of a more venerable and serious site, 14ers.com, which catalogs route information, climbing conditions, narratives, and news. The latter was started by Bill Middlebrook, an accomplished climber and skier living in Breckenridge, and the Facebook group was started, with Middlebrook’s blessing, by Keith Kiggins. Veterans refer to the original site as “the dot.com.” Some features of the dot.com are static, most notably the descriptions of routes, complete with narratives, maps, and photographs. These are updated by the site’s admins. Other features of the dot.com allow user postings, including of trip reports (an important

genre I'll explain later) and trailhead conditions (many climbs start from trailheads miles up dirt or rock roads, at 10,000 feet of elevation and more, and these can be inaccessible due to snow, mud, washouts, avalanches, or simply ruts or rocks). There's also a conversational forum space consisting of threaded conversations, each on a single topic, and they can range from a few postings to hundreds; one has to be a member to post. The dot.com forum, born in the age of chat rooms and discussion boards, preceded and anticipated Facebook. Kiggins created the Facebook page at least partly to preserve, almost as a sanctuary, the seriousness of the dot.com, whose physical appearance conveys its serious ethos. The dot.com is plain and stodgy, one might say retro except that it has always been that way.

This article analyzes these two sites, focusing on the everyday, self-sponsored writing they contain. People post in and read them not because they have to, but because they want to, and while there are regular pieces of polished writings, usually well-wrought trip reports of some length, most postings are quick and offhand: a photo and a note, a question, a response. People write for expression and interest and--this is my key point--they write to form and consubstantiate identity. To participate in these forums is to claim yourself as a part of the climbing lineage and lifestyle, sharing the alpenglow with pantheonic figures like Bradford Washburn, Reinhold Messner, Alex Lowe, Fred Beckey, or Alex Honnold. Of course, who legitimately can claim membership is a point of some contestation, sometimes overtly, but usually with great subtlety.

These particular sites define their digital communities and, by extension, a particular ethos of mountaineering. It's a complex, collective undertaking. In

exploring them, I hope you'll see these sites as examples of a larger issue and category: the discursive motivations, practices, and goals for sharing everyday writing in relatively public forums—along with the attendant practices, genres, and tensions that arise. In other words, while I hope you'll learn something about the particular features of these sites and Colorado climbing, I hope you'll also see the value of researching interest-group sites or forums, whether for publication or for teaching.

As a matter of context, I'll note that the 14ers site comes out of a long tradition of climbers sharing information and accomplishments. Before the internet, there was Gerry Roach's Bible of Colorado climbing, *Colorado's Fourteeners*, codifying routes up the state's highest mountains. Before there was Roach, there was the Colorado Mountain Club, whose magazine *Timberline* has since 1918 published who has finished the 58 14ers, the centennials, the bicentennials, the top thousand peaks. Before the Colorado Mountain Club were other organizations, like the American Alpine Club, gathering information and circulating it. In Section 3, I'll explain this tradition and its relation to the two online spaces that are my focus here.

Part 1: Genres

The two spaces represent several genres: requests for or sharing of information; announcements of events or of advocacy opportunities; assertions of opinion, often for debate; brief messages about accomplishments, usually for celebratory or aesthetic purposes; and longer trip reports, a venerable genre that

includes narratives of specific hikes or climbs, increasingly accompanied by photographs. All of these genres have pre-digital antecedents, going back to the mid 19th century, and some of them (such as diaries and journals that climbers kept) were certainly everyday writing. The advent of social media, however, has vastly expanded the circulation of these genres and, as a consequence their production.

Both the dot.com site and Facebook group share advice and information, though they do so quite differently. The dot.com has an elaborate, formal, relatively static body of information, laid out in web pages as a reference source for those types information that have the status of basic reference: compilations of mountain names, locations, access points, available routes and their degree of difficulty, and so on. The pages for Maroon Peak, for example, include information about four routes. When you select the standard route (which is itself a challenging one), you see reasonably detailed directions, accompanied by pictures, maps, and sketches (Routes).

Other kinds of information on the dot.com are mutable, especially those regarding the effects of recent weather conditions on trails or on access roads to trailheads. Ideally, in the conception of the site, members would, after each trip, share information about conditions as they found them. Posts are date-stamped to provide a sense of currency. Mountain conditions can change radically in short order, especially during the winter, so even a report from a few days' past can be outdated. (One consistently desired piece of information during the winter is whether a "trench" has been formed on a route, whether the snow has been packed by hikers to create an easier path.)

The majority of informational postings on Facebook come in the form of queries. What is the road like to a trailhead? Do you need an ice ax this week to climb this route? How did an avalanche affect a trail?

The Facebook site features minor advocacy genres, usually to raise money for project, as in a few years ago, when REI opened an online voting competition to award \$75,000 to a project sponsored by outdoors nonprofit organization, and 14ers “battled” the Appalachian and Superior Trail societies to improve access to Mt. Columbia. Occasionally people discuss legislation (for example, regarding the political tug of war over the Bears Ears national monument in Utah), but this is mostly discouraged, and politicizing the site is one way to get banned. Trying to sell things is another.

Probably the most common postings (along with information requests) are briefer informational, usually aesthetic messages, single photographs or short videos accompanied by a few sentences of explanation, sometimes documenting an accomplishment, sometimes just pretty. People do write for expression, after all. Mostly people post these works simply as the spirit moves them, although a couple years ago the Facebook page started a #POTD (Peak of the Day) feature to invite images and stories of the particular mountain selected for that day. These feature invites people to go back into personal archives, proving an exigency that flows against the usual present-driven impetus of Facebook. With 58 peaks, the cycle repeated itself fairly often, perhaps causing the #POTD in recent months to yield to the #POTW (the Week). The acronyms have provided a blunt way of identifying site newbies who ask what they mean.

Part 2: The Trip Report: Genre of Genres

The most interesting genre, because of the commitment involved in writing them, is the trip report, an account of a particular outing, with narrative observations on conditions, and, often technical information like the kind of equipment used, statistics about mileage and elevation gain, and GPS coordinates and route maps produced by GPS signals transmitted along the way. Hundreds of people are taking the time to write elaborate stories of their experiences, with analogs to fanfiction, scrapbooking, and so on. These can range from skeletal lists of timelines, conditions, and difficulties to full-blown narratives, thousands of words replete with reflections, back stories, and so on. Trip reports require words, though minimally they may appear as captions to a series of photographs. While not essential, photographs are common to almost all trip reports, though how they're handled varies widely between the Facebook and the dot.com. The former bundles pictures and paragraphs in a series of screens, text accompanying on the side, with navigation arrows leading one to the next, while the latter provides continuous threads with photos interleaved. Exploring the effects of these different affordances would be a fine research and teaching opportunity, although trip report authors have mostly worked out the benefits of the dot.com. In the past couple of years, trip reports have pretty much migrated entirely to the dot.com (or to personal websites), leaving Facebook reports to consist mainly of clusters of photographs, introduced by a few sentences.

However, frequently those Facebook postings contain links to a full report on the dot.com. Typical is Brittany Nguyen's message: "Hi guys, I explored Kelso Ridge yesterday to reach the summit of Torreys Peak and wrote my first trip report. Check it out, comment as you wish, but don't judge too harshly." Accompanying the message is a photo of a climber (probably her) on the ridge, along with a link to the dot.com report. Like many savvy posters to the site, she affects modesty, though as one of a handful of site admins, Nguyen is likely not to get critiqued.

The trip report, like most on the dot.com, gets a title, "Not-So-Solo Day on Kelso Ridge," and identifies its author by her member name, "bwinners." That the site doesn't generally use real names is a striking convention in an age of self-branding, especially when reports' contents are often so personal, designed less to provide information than to render a narrative flavor of the event; the convention is a throwback to the site's roots in a smaller climbing community in which members knew each other beyond aliases. Nguyen's report consists of nine paragraphs, each followed by a photograph. A gallery of 32 thumbnail photos at the end suggests she selected nine pictures to include in the report itself, beginning with a shot of the inside of her packed car, continuing with shots along the route (including the dramatic knife edge with which she attracted readers on Facebook) and ending with a summit shot.

The report provides information, but there's more happening, as cued by the open sentence: "As cheesy as this sounds, I wanted to find a way to celebrate the one-year anniversary of being laid off from a job that I absolutely hated" (bwinners). After the personal context, the narrative focuses on the climb itself, although the

personal voice weaves throughout, as in the observation, “We had been having such a fun morning, and then we had an incline of just suck that seemed never to end,” or in commenting on crossing the knife edge, a thin portion of rock a couple hundred feet long, coming to a point, with thousand-foot drops on either side: “The boys scooted their way across, and I went last. I tried to scoot, but could[n’t] get comfortable, so finally I just stood up and walked my way across normally.” There’s even dialogue, as when one of her two climbing companions on the mountain above her dislodges a boulder and warns, “ROCK! BRITT! ROCK” and a few minutes later says, “We thought we had killed you. We just met you, and we thought we had killed you.”

Even somewhat more technical trip reports have personal elements, usually a sense of humor intermixed with more serious business. Consider Monster5’s report “Living in a Winter Lizard-Land.” Lizard Head is a famous and challenging (requiring technical climbing with ropes and gear, at 5.8 well beyond the skills of novices or intermediates) 13,000’ volcanic pillar in the San Juan Mountains of southwest Colorado. Monster5 begins,

In severe need of mixed practice, Dominic Meiser and I thought we’d wander on down toward Ouray and Telluride and pick a reclusive bearded Boggyb up along the way. In truth, the recluse’s wife paid us to watch him for the weekend. Payment via food—the best currency around. Done deal.

Humor, modesty, and affected nonchalance, even in the face of (impending) difficulty is a climbing trope. When Alex Honnold published (in *American Alpine Journal*) a trip report of his for-the-ages ascent of El Capitan, immortalized in the

Oscar-winning documentary *Free Solo*, he described himself simply as “an aspiring sport climber.” In like vein, Monster5 describes himself as simply wanting practice and wandering.

In contrast with bwinner’s report, Monster5 includes more technical descriptions, even as he retains a casual voice, as in this present-tense narrative of a critical early moment:

Dom racks up and opts for the direct SW chimney instead of that loose face microwave jug haul. Tools are handy but never used. Stem on up. He knows a 5 is to be used at the crux but also handy down low. Easy enough to place and back clean. A slow scrape and delightful smell of metal on rock and he’s up without any trouble, about 110 ft to the belay notch. We can barely tell when he hits the crux. Nearly every piece of gear placed too with his only lament a lack of hexes and nuts. Fortunately, I was in charge of the rack and I’m a modern man.

This fragmented, energetic passage is redolent with insider-language shorthand clear to the audience of experienced climbers. For example, “loose face microwave jug haul” could be translated to a steep climb up a mountain face with large handholds, where rocks the size of microwave ovens are perilously loose [“rotten”] and can dangerously dislodge, to the peril of both the climber and anyone below, as when Nguyen’s companions warn “ROCK.” The climbing jargon allows for compression and economy, of course, but it also defines the audience and situates the writer within it: a real climber writing to real climbers. While I suspect I know who Monster5 is, it’s telling that I’m not sure; my email through his dot.com profile

went unanswered. I'm sure many real climbers on the list (by whom I mean people with vastly more experience and technical skills who'd rightly consider me a poser) know Monster5 IRL (in real life); one commenter says, "Thanks for the report Ryan" (fepic1). But while he's posting in an internet space searchable and open to the world, his motive is less to extend his brand than something more autotelic and, dare I say, pure: creating an artifact of the trip that will satisfy him and friends, inform and entertain others, and solidify membership with a group of relative insiders. To see even basic profile information for Monster5 (or anyone posting reports on the dot.com), you have to register and log in, to a page that doesn't provide personal names but does allow members to list "friends and foes."

The Lizard-Land trip report includes seventeen stunning photographs, some of them magazine-quality, interspersed with short paragraphs, sometimes only a sentence. While his narrative anonymously summarizes the climb, often with technical detail, Monster5 intersperses wry touches, as in the long passage quoted above ending with "Fortunately, I was in charge of the rack and I'm a modern man," making fun of Dom's use of equipment, or in his observation that "the next part looks awkward and I figure I'll have to violate the crack in an unprofessional manner," or in his comparing himself to "a Wacky Waving Inflatable Arm-Flailing Tubeman." In the comments sections, readers appreciate all aspects of the trip, including his humor. Blazintoes salutes, "With your indelible additions to the pop-culture pantheon of American urban literature, this outing is as funny as Seinfeld's dad Morty and his desire for that ugly recliner." Oman observes, "Can't speak to the climbing, which is beyond me, but the writing here is exceeded only by your

photographs. I tip my helmet to you,” and Jay521 says simply, “After reading this, I’m not sure I can ever work up the courage to write another TR. You set the bar EXTREMELY high.”

Monster5 ends his report with a decade’s long convention of trip reports, regardless of mode: the terse summary. He concludes

Stats:

~9 miles/3K gain/10.5 hrs

Snowshoes, double ropes, single rack, crampons and tools

Here’s the similar section about Honnold’s El Capitan climb:

Summary: Free solo of Freerider (33 guidebook pitches, with variations, 5.12d/13a) by Alex Honnold—the first free solo of one of the main faces of El Capitan in Yosemite Valley. Honnold climbed the route in 3 hours 56 minutes on June 3, 2017.

There are hundreds, probably thousands, of trip reports on 14ers.com, where the serious action is happening of late. As I noted above, the Facebook group has many fewer moderate to long reports these days, probably a combination of the relative more permanence of the dot.com and its aesthetic affordances, especially for elaborate, carefully crafted ones. For example, on February 7, 2019, Ted Ehrlich posted on Facebook, “I’ve been working on this trip report on and off for the last few weeks. I hope you guys enjoy it,” with a link to “Euro Highpointing,” a 6600-word, 50-photograph narrative of climbing in Switzerland that included the Grauspitze, Zugspitze, and Mont Blanc (mtn_nut). The report resides on the dot.com but many

Facebook postings link out to blogs (for example, summithound's [Steve Cummins] detailed account of his own Lizard Head climb on exploringtherockies.com).

Beyond those extensive blogs/sites are efforts even more significant. In a practical sense, they transcend the category of "everyday writing" because they're clearly the product of tens or hundreds of hours of effort. However, they're extensions of the same self-sponsored impulse that give rise to Facebook postings and trip reports. Let me give you two examples.

Ryan Paul announced on the Facebook group that he'd put together a book that "ended up at 275 pages, 300 pictures and over 65,000 words," and he included a photograph of the printed book itself (Paul). After he posted, I messaged him and explained that I'd like to see the thing and would buy one if he was willing to sell. He messaged back within hours: "Hey there...it was a project that I loved to put together. I will send u a copy [via pdf]...no need to pay for it. . . . Obviously because it is a personal thing you will have to deal with lots of my ugly mug" (Paul "Hey"). I'd never met him.

The book is exactly as Paul describes it, a hardcover with a jacket, printed by Blurb and using that company's online design tools. There's an Introduction/Preface with a brief autobiography, including a characterization that "I'm a check list kind of guy," by way of explaining what led him to climb the 58 peaks and put together a book (*Life Elevated*). True to his message, the book does have a number of selfies among its 300 photos, but there are also magnificent landscapes, pictures of other people plus mountain goats and other Colorado fauna. Paul organizes the book chronologically, from first climb (Gray's and Torry's, 2009) to last (Mt. Eolus, August

31, 2018), with extensive, detailed narratives. Interspersed are passages in which Paul invited friends and fellow climbers to write their own memories and impressions of the climb or of Paul.

Even more impressive are the efforts of J. Inness Hetzler, a polymath from Colorado Springs, musician, composer, naturalist (often posting about mountain butterflies, from scientific perspectives), and now-retired school teacher. Hetzler climbed all 14ers, many of them in the 1960s and 1970s, when jeans and cotton flannel were fine in the pre-synthetic-technical- clothing days. With technical skills, he did some of the classic difficult routes, including of Lizard Head, in 1971. Age and health issues prevent him from serious climbing anymore, but he regularly posts scanned photos from 40 or 50 years ago and includes stories “of what it was” to readers mostly third to half his age. Hetzler has become one of the few oldtimers on the Facebook page, in the space most famously held by 90-year-old Pat Eskoz, who has posted black and white pictures from her climbs with her brother and a friend in the early 1950s. (For example, see pictures of her 1952 climb of Mts. Bierstadt and Evans (Eskoz.) Hetzler’s messages illustrate one of the group’s functions, connecting people not only to the climbing community of the present but also to the past. The connection goes both ways. In his memory of climbing Lizard Head, Hetzler concluded with this address to his contemporary readers: “I love reading your accounts of climbs, and the incredible photographs you all take. I get to relive the experience of being there, and hope you find some of the same connections from my climbs. It is a church and a great renewal.”

Hetzler is a Julliard-trained musician and composer, and herein lies his most remarkable productions connected to the 14ers. Everyone now and then, he'll post a link to one of the movements of his magnum opus, *The Fourteeners*, "an eleven- hour symphonic cycle in 60 movements about the 14,000' mountains of Colorado, and the people who live near, work around, and climb them. This is the largest musical composition by an American composer, and the second largest in classical music literature" (Inness54, *Summit of Colorado*). Each of these movements, available on YouTube, is accompanied by a video edited mostly from footage he has shot of the mountain inspired movement, his daughter, son, and himself among the performers. For Christmas 2018, he posted a link to a YouTube video of Christmas music, classics he had arranged and recorded, his daughter Emily singing the soprano solos, noting, "this is our gift to you" (Hetzler, "Colorado"). From 28,000 members, he got five "likes." Perhaps he strayed *too* far beyond the conventions of this discourse community. If *The Fourteeners* is a trip report, it's stretching the genre in the most multimodal fashion. I'm tempted, but it would be hard to press that case.

Often, parody best defines the parameters of a genre, and that's true for trip reports. I give you "Highest natural point in Lubbock, TX," by mikefromcraig, reporting his winter solo summit, replete with a map, and trip stats: distance "about .08 miles" and elevation gain of "12 feet," with five pictures (including of an electrical outlet next to the summit), and reports of challenges: "About halfway up I started having doubts but then summit fever took over and I pushed through and summited at 1:17:50. The view from the top was totally worth it" (mikefromcraig).

I've spent a disproportionate amount of space on the trip reports because they constitute the most complex genre in these pages: extended multimodal pieces often published purely under usernames or pseudonyms. As such, perhaps they stretch the definition of everyday writing. But they represent a high form of self-sponsored writing, done neither for obligation nor profit, but for pleasure and, perhaps, incremental status within a defined, albeit large and varied, group. Beyond that, people write them for the same reasons they climb mountains: to engage autotelic, self-defining acts, pleasurable in both process and achievement.

That said, trip reports are the minority of postings on the dot.com and most definitely in the Facebook group. Predominant are sharings of/requests for information, along with single-photo/single paragraph reports of activities and achievements. Of course, these engender replies, and extended conversations can ensue when an ongoing controversy or event captures the community's attention. Perhaps topping all was Andrew Hamilton's setting the stunning Fastest Known Time record of climbing ALL 58 fourteeners in under ten days, a time that included not only getting up and down 58 peaks but also driving hundreds of miles around Colorado between them. After 1799 postings on a dot.com forum, the thread was retired and put into "The Thread Hall of Fame" ("2015 14er Speed Record Attempt"). Less dramatic but perhaps more heartwarming was the Facebook saga of Grover. Jenny El Tee had climbed Quandary Peak with her four-year-old son's Sesame Street doll and took a picture of Grover on the summit. However, as she posted on the Facebook Group, she lost Grover on the way down and put out a plea for climbers to keep an eye out. Jokes, sympathies, and promises followed until two

days later and Michael Thomas's epic one-word reply, "FOUND!," with a picture of Grover in a gloved hand against the snow. Replies can also be harsh, even within a community organized around a common interest, with divisions due to differing levels of expertise and experience or to differing sensibilities regarding mountaineering ethics. I'll illustrate those in Section Four.

Part 3: Historical Precedents

These online conversations and reports exist in a long writing tradition, with climber's notebooks and letters circulating since the mid-19th century. In 1852, British mountaineer J.R. Bulwer published "for private circulation only" "Extracts from a Journal I kept during a Tour with my friend, Charles Sargent, through parts of Switzerland, Italy, and the Tyrol," most notably a climb on Mont Blanc, in 1852 (2). He explained that he'd been asked for an account by numerous friends "separated from me, and from each other, by many a league of land and sea," and in these obviously pre-digital days, it was impractical to send around his journal (2). "Under these circumstances," Bulwer explained, "the Deus, or rather Diabolus, ex machina was obviously the printer" (3). His trip notebook had included a number of hand-drawn sketches, which a friend, Mr. F. Sands, turned into etchings as "appropriate illustrations of the narrative."

In like fashion, in 1867, A.W. Moore published *The Alps in 1864: A Private Journal* of “my Alpine wanderings. . . not intended for general circulation” (Preface).

Moore notes that

My object in originally writing it was to compile a narrative, the subsequent perusal of which might recall to my own recollection the various details of my mountaineering campaign of that year. With this view I recorded at full length all the trivial incidents which form the staple of such a tour, and constitute its charm. (Preface)

This is quintessential everyday writing, done to remember. When, pressed by friends for his account, he decides to produce a volume, Moore apologizes for the “dull reading” that he believes ensued, as “want of time has prevented me from re-writing the book on an entirely different principle,” leaving it to stand as he drafted the account originally.

What Bulwer and Moore were doing in publishing their journals for a group of acquaintances is **exactly** what Ryan Paul was doing 170 years later in creating *Life Elevated*: collecting, arranging, designing. Paul, however, had the affordances of digital photographs, not sketches; the wonders of word processing; the means of sharing parts via social media; of sharing even the whole to a virtual acquaintance like me, via pdf. For all that technology, ultimately, just as Bulwer and Moore set their notes to type between a hardboard cover, so did Paul. Physical objects still matter.

For every climber’s notebook or journal that has been edited, typeset, and bound, there are thousands that never made it beyond handwritten scrawls in

pasteboard historical equivalents of Moleskines. A few have been preserved. Harvey Carter, a Colorado climbing legend with 5000 first ascents (counted liberally) before he died in 2012 at age 81, left behind a handwritten journal begun at age 13. It's part of a collection deemed "One of Colorado's Most Significant Artifacts" by the state history museum. The volume is a commercial ledger book with "Record" printed on the front cover, to which Carter appended "CLIMBING" in his own quirky block print handwriting. Bound with silver duct tape sometime in the past, the book is preserved with several other climbers' notebooks in the archives of the American Alpine Club library.

Close to the briefer social media of posts and replies are letters, whether to loved ones or to fellow climbers, including those in clubs, about which I'll say more in a bit. While most of those letters have long succumbed (like climbers' notebooks) to trash fires or garbage dumps, some have been preserved, in the fashion of Carter's *Climbing Record*. Some have even been collected and published. In 1869, William H. Brewer took a group of Harvard geology students on a three-month trip to Colorado's mountains. He wrote regular extensive letters to his wife, and in 1930, the Colorado Mountain Club published them as a volume. Explaining that, "The letters are informal notes, written in the field, from a man to his wife," editor Edmund Rogers noted that other than fixing spelling and adding some punctuation, he'd done no editing, either for style or grammar.

Beyond these private communications and publications, are even closer early analogs to contemporary social media spaces for climbers: the climbing clubs, organizations, and associations that began forming in the mid 19th Century. The

Alpine Club was formed in London in 1857, followed by the Austrian Alpine Club in 1862 and the Swiss Alpine Club in 1863, the last beginning to publish a journal in 1864. The American Alpine Club formed in 1902 in New York, relocating many years later to Golden, Colorado. There are now dozens in the United States, hundreds around the world. In addition to providing benefits like maps and guides, insurance, access to huts and equipment, guided/sponsored trips, climbing clubs have offered three important member benefits: affiliation/identity/camaraderie; archives; and information. Those last have historically come through lectures and member dinners, club files, newsletters, and journals. Annual publications have long included accounts of notable climbs, usually with photographs (trip reports!) and lists of the year's achievements—although in recent years, clubs have moved such lists to websites. Earlier, I mentioned Alex Honnold's lead article in the 2018 *American Alpine Journal*, the "trip report of the year," if you will, in a thick, gorgeously designed annual volume.

Rather than regale you with lengthy analyses of club traditions and their functions of supporting members through circulating information and the experiences of the best of them, let me focus on the one most pertinent to this article, the Colorado Mountain Club (CMC). Formed in 1912, the group's earliest activities included weekend climbing outings facilitated by leaders and organizers, instruction on climbing techniques, leadership in developing parks and trails, support for nature photography and science, and publications (*The Colorado Mountain Club*).

Continuously since 1918, the CMC has published the newsletter/magazine *Trail and Timberline*. It appeared monthly for decades, providing news of events, trip reports, articles and editorials, letters, poems, and records of members' accomplishments, including lists "of qualified" members, people who had scaled at least one fourteener. From the outset, the club included both men and women. In fact, the 100th person to climb all of the fourteeners was Barbara Ann (Bobbi) Scheer, announced in the January 1970 issue, a listing tradition that continues today, although *Trail and Timberline* has shrunk to an annual publication, no doubt a consequence of websites and more timely information. Over the years, some authors described accomplishments in the form of short trip reports; adumbrating pseudonyms in the dot.com trip reports, Steve Gaskill signed a 1970 article "Flying Monk." Others resorted to letters. Frank Ashley reported the significant accomplishment of being the first person to reach the highest elevation point in each of the lower 48 states in a single calendar year—but did so in a letter to the editor, months after he finished.

Today, news like Ashley's would have flashed through social media instantly and likely been picked up by news media. He would have posted it in the Facebook group or on the dot.com, where it would appear in unedited space among the dozens of pieces of everyday writing appearing there, posted by dozens of other writers. It would have gained in speed of circulation and, most likely, numbers of readers, though it would have lost the imprimatur of an editor having selected, set, and printed it, an imprimatur in a medium that allows us to find the news fifty years later.

Part 4: Identity and Ethos, Guns and Boobs

An ongoing challenge of the Facebook group is its ultimate identity. Is it serious or social? Is it mostly a source of information? A venue of self-expression and celebration? An entertainment channel? Of course, one can say, it's all three, but the ratios matter, and there are both explicit and implicit efforts to keep the group unique against the wide ranging rabble of Facebook in general. There are continual questions of purity, even down to whether the site should tolerate hiking or climbing in general or focus only on 14ers. (In the 1990s, the writing program administrators listserv, WPA-L, regularly discussed what topics belonged on the list.) A common apologetic preface to a post is "Not a 14er, but. . . ." When my acquaintance (and father of a DU student) Jim Davidson climbed Mt. Everest in May, 2017, he waggishly preambled, "Not a 14er. . . ." We could track Davidson's ascent, by the way, via a satellite GPS transponder, and he was able to send a message from the summit (Hesse; Davidson).

Beyond the questions of purpose are more interesting issues of the site's ethos and, by extension, the ethos of its members. What it means to be someone who climbs 14ers is something more diffuse in this cosmology than merely that you've been up a few of them. What kind of person are you? What's at stake can be seen in a few topics that bring out contention.

Let me give you a couple of examples. Every now and then a question of safety comes up, sometimes in terms of how to deal with bears, moose, or mountain lions, but more often how to deal with bad guys, especially if you're women.

Inevitably, a few folks recommend the guns they carry, down to caliber and magazines. Others protest that weapons have no place in the mountains. Maybe this escalates into photos of shot deer and elk.

Or someone shares pictures of their dog on a peak, and others complain about dog shit or unleashed mutts chasing goats or about the cruelty of making animals tread sharp rocks at elevation. Even more fundamental is whether the relationship with mountains should be "special," removed from day to day domestic world of pets. At the heart of the matter is how people interpret the great outdoors credo "Leave no trace." For most members (and the vast majority of older members), the injunction extends to not playing music (yes, some folks hike with music playing on speaker), even to not talking loudly—or at all. Traces can be left not only on the mountain but in the experiences of others.

This issue figured dramatically in terms of the great debate over butts and boobs, at least before Facebook's algorithms started sorting this. A few folks had begun posting pictures of themselves in various stages of undress on summits, generally backs to the camera, occasionally not. For the most part, these were celebratory and spirit of the moment, even modest and not outrightly lewd. As you can imagine, there was a mix of "way to go" postings and a mix of scorn. Some of the latter stemmed from prudery, I'm sure, but more of it came from decorum, the sense that people were being disrespectful to the mountains and to climbing. By making the accomplishment about them, not about the natural world, people were doing the equivalent of spitting on John Muir's grave. The valued mountain climbing ethos was

to do bold things with great humility and reverence, and these actions--and a host of others like it, including posting selfies with signs or carrying flags, was sacrilegious.

Of course, not everyone shared that ethos. And like sects breaking off from parent denominations, a couple of offshoot pages have arisen. 14ers shit show, started by Hannah Bear, proclaims "We sure as hell love bewbs" and generally supports a libertarian, even right-wing ethos. A typical post complained that "the elitest douchbagery is stifling these days" (Breux), earning the rejoinder "Having a rough day bud? Why don't you take a time out. Jesus. Haha refuckinglax (McMahon). The 14ers Facebook Page Haters Facebook Page of Hate is even more strident, using Emma Lazarus's statue of liberty poem as its credo in offering sanctuary for refugees from the 14ers Group. Both groups are small, with membership in the very few hundreds, with sporadic postings at best. It seems that people interested in the Colorado mountains are more interested in celebrating them—and their relationship to others—than they are in critiquing. Beyond that, the irreverent, even profane nature of these sites may just seem risky, especially in an age when social media gets scrutinized by would-be employers, dates, and others. Or perhaps they just don't seem like the kinds of people to hang around.

A main tension in the Facebook group is between insiders and outsiders. Once people are in the club, they want to preserve some of its exclusivity. In Colorado, this enacts the larger dynamic of tensions between oldtimers and newcomers, especially those from California and Texas. You see any number of bumper stickers with the sentiment, "Thanks for visiting. Now go home." Newcomers are inefficient and take up space. They ask tired questions like, "Hey,

what's the easiest route for my first time?" They're like the student who is gone from class and asks if they missed anything. They're like people showing up in the Burkean parlor and asking people to drop everything to hold them a birthday party.

The community deals with outsiders alternatively with humor and hostility. The former has the virtue of being lost on outsiders. For example, consider Keith Kiggin's posting about "Leaving Camp 7 for the final push on Mt. Democrat." Establishing multiple camps is a practice used for long, difficult climbs of mountains like Denali, K2, or Everest. Democrat is famously counted an "easy" mountain, a walk up, Class 1, so the idea it needs a single camp, let alone 7, is ludicrous--at least to insiders, many of whom double down, as in Max Moorman's admiration that Keith had foregone the last three camps.

Language differences and references mark insider or outsider status. An outsider who proclaims, "I bagged Gray's Peak," one of the easiest of all 14ers, is ignored, occasionally greeted with sarcasm. (Good for YOU! How many Sherpas did you hire?) Beyond that, "bagging" is a term that, while commonly used, strikes many members as disrespectful of the mountain experience, hinting at conquest and mere collection. Wanting to report her accomplishment in a way more acceptable to insiders, she might instead say, "I joined the throngs hiking Grays last weekend." In contrast, establishing oneself as an insider and earning esteem is someone who reports, "The cables route on Longs was covered with ice." It's a difficult climb on a class 5.4 route, in winter, and she's reporting a condition, not boasting. Similarly, someone who writes, "Sunlight was my finisher" has major cred. Sunlight's a tough peak, she calls attention to the mountain not herself, she uses the insider term

"finisher" to signal she's climbed all 58 fourteeners, and she puts the mountain in the subject position of the sentence, not herself.

Hostility breaks out when someone violates too many conventions. Consider Andrea's innocuous query about conditions on four peaks.

Has anyone done Quandary, Elbert, or Torrey's/Greys in the past few days?
It's looking like tomorrow will be a good day to get one last 14er in before I
leave Colorado, but not sure about how much snow is up there. . . and I'm at
work, so don't have time to look up info online. . . (Don't have winter
equipment, except the clothing. . .). (Savage)

They're low status peaks (and she spells Grays wrong), she identifies herself as not from Colorado (and fails to make the usual bow to the state), she lacks equipment, and, most crucially, she's failed to consult the dot com for basic information that's already there. Others start responding with the equivalent of "It's on the syllabus," and at some point "a moderator turned off commenting for this post," thus sparing her even more lambasting.

Part Five: Concluding Observations

I'll share four observations, very quickly.

First, there is a complex relationship between information, identity, and aesthetics, especially as manifested in the trip reports. In a pre-digital age, elaborated accounts were reserved to famous expeditions or to diaries. Most published reports were laconic and spare, relishing a kind of nonchalance at risk or achievement, focusing on technical details. You still see some of those in 14ers, but

you also see extensive narrative, including reflections and references to other experiences or events. I'm tracing how the genre has evolved in ten years. As photography has gotten better and more ubiquitous, language skills have interestingly accrued more importance.

Second is the dynamic of individuals inscribing themselves on a double landscape. On the one hand is putting oneself in pines among pika and marmots, in scree above treelines. But on the other is writing oneself into the textual landscape of digital communities. The two complexly define each other. Part of what it means to climb mountains is defined by how others have written about those same mountains. Oscar Wilde famously claimed that there was no fog in London until J.M.W. Turner painted it. A version of what constitutes truly experiencing the mountains reaches back to Edmund Burke's invocation of the sublime in the 18th century. Making experience into a text and having that text read by others extends and defines the experience, in an ongoing nexus.

Third is interplay of presence and posterity. Facebook favors the ongoing new, and certainly in reporting conditions, sharing news, finding climbing partners, or sounding the alarm on lost climbers, much of it is for the now. But some is not. The older dot com site catalogs trip reports in relatively stable form. The Facebook site archives them, certainly, and one can search, but the medium conveys transience. I'm struck by how many people now double post or link to their own blogs, where they can exercise more design control and strive for more permanence than Zuckerberg's scroll. No one, remember, is doing this for money or obligation. There

is an impulse to extend one's experience through writing and reading across time and space.

Fourth is the complex nature of the community itself, simultaneously welcoming and insular. A common refrain of both 14ers and the dot com is how good things used to be. Even the founders are doubted. In 2017, on the dot com, someone asserted for the good of the site, it was time for Bill Middlebrook to give it away or sell it. Middlebrook replied, eloquently, "Blow me." I suspect every community undergoes cycles of doubt and purification, dreaming of how it used to be better. The highest status climbers in Colorado don't much deign to participate in the forums.

I began this talk with a sad story. I owe you a happier ending. In August 2017, a dog ran off at the foot of Mt. Bross. Folks looked for Chloe for weeks, before giving her up for dead. In mid-September, however, climbers heard barking, and Trinity Smith and Sean Nichols spent two days climbing and searching (Smith). They found Chloe trapped high on a ledge. They carried her down a couple thousand feet, to heroic acclaim, and a Facebook update that drew hundreds of replies. Most were congratulations; Smith and Nichols won't need to buy beer in Colorado for a decade. But the site being the site, an undertow arose. Why did the dog get lost in the first place? Knowing the page all too well, Michael Rowe asks "Can the witch hunt begin now, Darrin Nicholas? Nicholas, one of 6 moderators, replies, "Honestly, I hope they can keep the pitchforks in the shed for a little bit. We need time to celebrate just how fucking awesome this really is. There are some stellar people in this group."

Notes

¹I'd like to thank the staff of the American Alpine Club library, in Golden, Colorado, for their generous help. I'd also like to thank Ryan Paul and Joel Quevillon for their generosity and assistance. I deeply admire hundreds hundreds of climbers in 14ers.com and in the 14ers.com Facebook group, not only for their climbing achievements but also for their writing exuberance and accomplishment, efforts of passionate expression and community building.

embargoed until publication

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Biographical Statement

Douglas Hesse is professor and founding executive director of writing at the University of Denver, where he's been named Distinguished Scholar. He is a past president of NCTE, past chair of CCCC, past president of WPA, and past editor of *Writing Program Administration*. Previously, he taught 20 years at Illinois State University, directing the writing, graduate, and honors programs. His 75+ articles and chapters focus largely on creative nonfiction, composition programs and pedagogies, and professional issues in English studies. He is co-author (with Becky Bradway) of *Creating Nonfiction*, and three other books. His email is dhesse@du.edu.