

Raffi Bedayn

Rock Climber, Inventor, Advocate

By Tom Gardner

Jesse McGahey, Yosemite National Park's Climbing Ranger, has a unique method of interacting with his clients: he serves coffee, tea, and hot chocolate to rock climbers on Sunday mornings from May thru September.

This informal setting has become something of a tradition since it started in 2001, as climbers and Ranger McGahey have a chance to exchange stories and discuss climbing conditions. These gatherings usually attract up to 40 climbers, and often, several foreign languages can be overheard. In July and August, Climbers Coffee is served in Tuolumne Meadows. In May, June, and September, it is served in Camp 4; the climber's camp, just west of the Yosemite Lodge. Not far from where the crowd assembles is a brass plaque that commemorates Camp 4's listing on the National Register of Historic Places in 2003.

Camp 4's coffee is dispensed next to the famous Columbia Boulder, and atop a granite slab memorial with the name and dates "Raffi Bedayn 1915-1982" inscribed on it. Obviously, to be so honored in America's second oldest National Park., that person must have been an extraordinary individual. This reporter was privileged to have learned skiing, backpacking, and basic rock climbing from Raffi Bedayn on Boy Scout field trips in the early 1960s. His memorial in Yosemite Valley is a testament to just how highly admired he was. His life story is All-American.

Raffi's parents left Armenia to escape persecution and worse. His father came first and when enough had been saved, sent passage money for his bride. Raffi was born in

California in 1915, about the same time the Turks were committing the Armenian Genocide. His parents operated a grocery store in San Francisco, so it was easy for young Raffi to become interested in the Sierra Club social activities after he

graduated from high school. These included skiing at Sugar Bowl, High Sierra camping trips, mountaineering expeditions all over the West, and a style of free rock climbing called bouldering. It was at one of these bouldering events at Cragmont Rocks in Berkeley, that he met the love of his life, Barbara.

Born in Honolulu, she attended the funeral of the last Hawaiian Monarch, Queen Liliuokalani, and later moved to Santa Cruz.

In the mid-1930s, advanced rock climbing techniques from the Alps were introduced to the USA, and Raffi was an eager student. This involved more than just a rope; hardware such as wedge-shaped pitons and oval rings called carabiners allowed climbers to scale cliffs previously off-limits. Raffi

was involved in several first ascents inside Yosemite Valley, and in 1939 participated in the first ascent of Shiprock in New Mexico. One of his partners was David Brower, who in later years served as President of the Sierra Club, and another was Bill Hewlett, of Hewlett-Packard fame.

Like everyone else his age, Raffi's life changed with Pearl Harbor, and Raffi enlisted in February 1942. The Army soon recognized his talents and sent him to the newly-forming 10th Mtn. Division at Camp Hale near Leadville, Colorado. He and Barbara were married on Christmas Day, 1942, and honeymooned near Aspen.

By mid-1943, the Army realized that excellent training for the coming Italian campaign could be found in the headwaters of the Potomac River in West Virginia and established a large maneuver area that covered most of 3 counties surrounding the town of Elkins, West Virginia.

Raffi was one of fifteen soldiers sent to start a rock climbing school at a place called Seneca Rocks. His Shiprock climbing buddy, David Brower, was Second in Command;

First Lieutenant Bedayn handled duties as Supply Officer. In the next year, thousands of GIs passed through their camp for two weeks training in rock climbing, and about 75,000 pitons were pounded into the surrounding Tucsarora Sandstone formations.

Two major events happened in the summer of 1944: Raffi's son Richard was born, and D-Day brought the end of training.

Soon all their mountaineering skills would be put to a more severe test. The Seneca Rocks School was closed, all but about a thousand pitons were recovered, and the instructors were dispersed to the three infantry regiments which formed the 10th. By December of 1944, the division was in Italy about to earn a combat record second to none in some of the most difficult terrain in the entire European Theater. Its battles and

distinguished veterans are well documented; Captain Bedayn came home with a Bronze Star, awarded for leading a week-long reconnaissance mission behind German lines.

The post-war years must have been thrilling for Barbara and Raffi. Returning to Barbara and baby Richard in early 1946, he landed

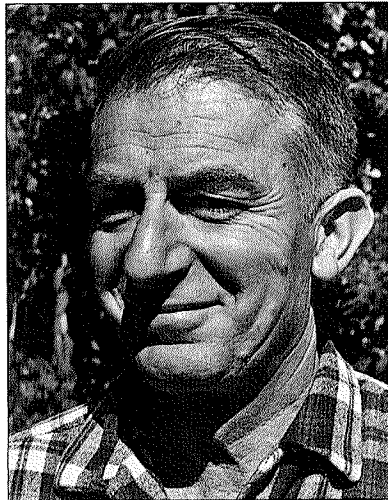


photo courtesy the Bedayn family
Raffi Bedayn, age 52; photo taken in 1967

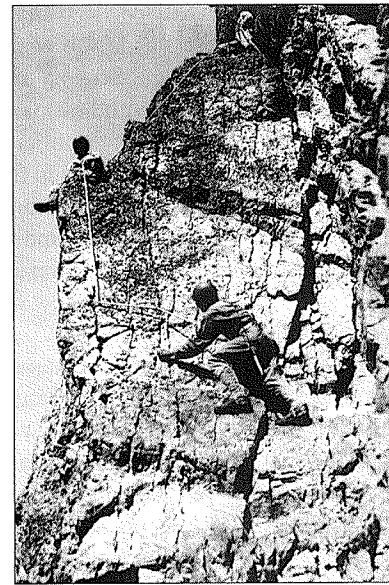


photo by Norm Lindhjorn, courtesy Rob Whetsell
Soldiers training on the Skyline route of the south end of Seneca Rock's west face at a West Virginia climbing school during World War II

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a job at U.C. Berkeley in maintenance and repair. Evenings, he studied toward obtaining a contractor's license. Raffi welcomed sons Rod, then Greg, and finally a daughter, Kathy. In 1950, he received his General Contractor's license, and began a very successful career in the San Francisco Bay Area. This included building a custom home for his family in Orinda, just east of the Oakland-Berkeley hills.

In 1959, through a friend, he acquired a ramshackle cabin on Echo Lake, not far from South Lake Tahoe. Over the next two summers, the old cabin was demolished, concrete piers were poured, and a heavy timber cabin erected. All the building materials were brought in over two miles by boat!

The post-war years were exciting in the rock climbing arena as well. New equipment such as shoes, ropes, and other gear began to come into use. Raffi made his contribution by first designing and then manufacturing, carabiners made

from Aluminum Alloy 7075 T6. This eliminated about five pounds from the usual climbing load, an important saving greatly appreciated by his customers.

The Bedayn Carabiner became the standard for rock and mountain climbing enthusiasts around the world. They were used in the first ascent of Mt. Everest in 1953 and by the first American Everest expedition in 1963, led by Jim Whittaker. Jim and Raffi were old friends,

and Jim gave a private slide show for Raffi, the Boy Scouts, and their dads. In later years, Sir Edmund Hilary stopped by in Orinda and reported that many of the original Bedayn carabiners from 1953 were now treasured heirlooms in Sherpa families, given places of honor in their homes.

Raffi retired from active

climbing in 1966 and phased out the contracting business in the mid 1970s. He decided to develop several industrial rental warehouses which have remained in the family to this day. Many times he drove his Chevy El Camino to the Valley,

often befriending cash-strapped park rangers with a big load of fresh fruit from the Oakland produce market.

In the spring of 1972, the Yosemite Lodge set their sights on bulldozing Camp 4 in order to expand. There were also rumblings about an outright ban on rock climbing in the Valley, as some viewed it as a very reckless and dangerous activity undertaken by hippies and vagabonds.

Raffi, on behalf of the American Alpine Club, spearheaded the fight for the preservation of Camp 4, continued Valley climbing, and getting the Park Service more involved with the climbing community. He was successful on all 3 counts, and Camp 4 memorial recognizes his efforts in leading that fight. Raffi later served a term on the Alpine Club's Board of Directors, and he continued skiing until shortly before his death in February of 1982. His funeral was attended by over 300 people. David Brower sent a eulogy via videotape.

Following the service, the family was astonished by the dozens of former Boy Scouts in attendance, many of whom reported that Raffi was a great role model for them, second only to their own fathers. Son Greg, now deceased, began the drive to erect the Camp 4 memorial

in 1983 and saw it installed a few years later. Barbara passed away in 1997.

Following the catastrophic New Years Day flood of 1997 which washed away cabins and housing near Yosemite Lodge, the Park Service considered building a multi-story dormitory for concessionaire employees adjacent to Camp 4 as part of their flood recovery plan. Once again, the American Alpine Club swung into action, the

National Park Service developed a better plan, and now the preservation of Camp 4 has been guaranteed by its listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

As 2008 winds down, it is likely three things would please Raffi Bedayn greatly:

First: The wonderful summer vacations at the Echo Lake cabin and in the High Sierra that his grandchildren and great-grandchildren enjoyed.

Second: Seneca Rocks now hosts a civilian climbing school. Sometimes, these modern instructors will clip into an old piton out of respect for those who went before, but they also add a new anchor nearby, just to be on the safe side.

Third: Finally, there can be little doubt that Raffi Bedayn would be very pleased to know his memorial supports the urns used for Climbers Coffee on Sunday mornings in Camp 4.

Tom Gardner is the crossword contributor to the Yosemite Gazette. He still skis, but gave up rock climbing in 1967, and High Sierra backpacking in 1998.

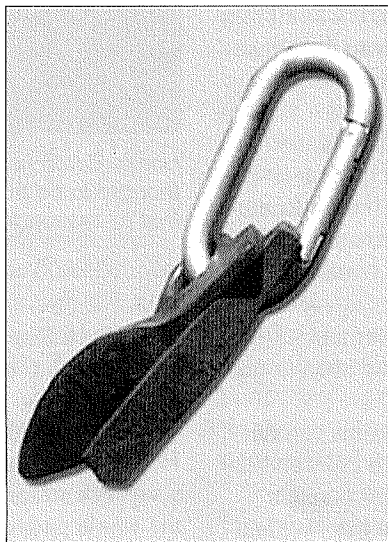


photo courtesy Yosemite Climbing Association
Bedayn carabiner with two pitons.

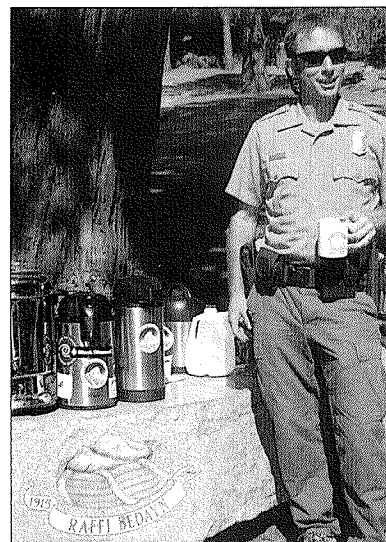



photo courtesy Yosemite Climbing Association
Jesse McGahey, Yosemite National Park's Climbing Ranger, serves coffee, tea, and hot chocolate to rock climbers on Sunday mornings from May thru September. The memorial to Raffi Bedayn is visible on the stone beneath the coffee service.



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