

PAUL RUSSELL

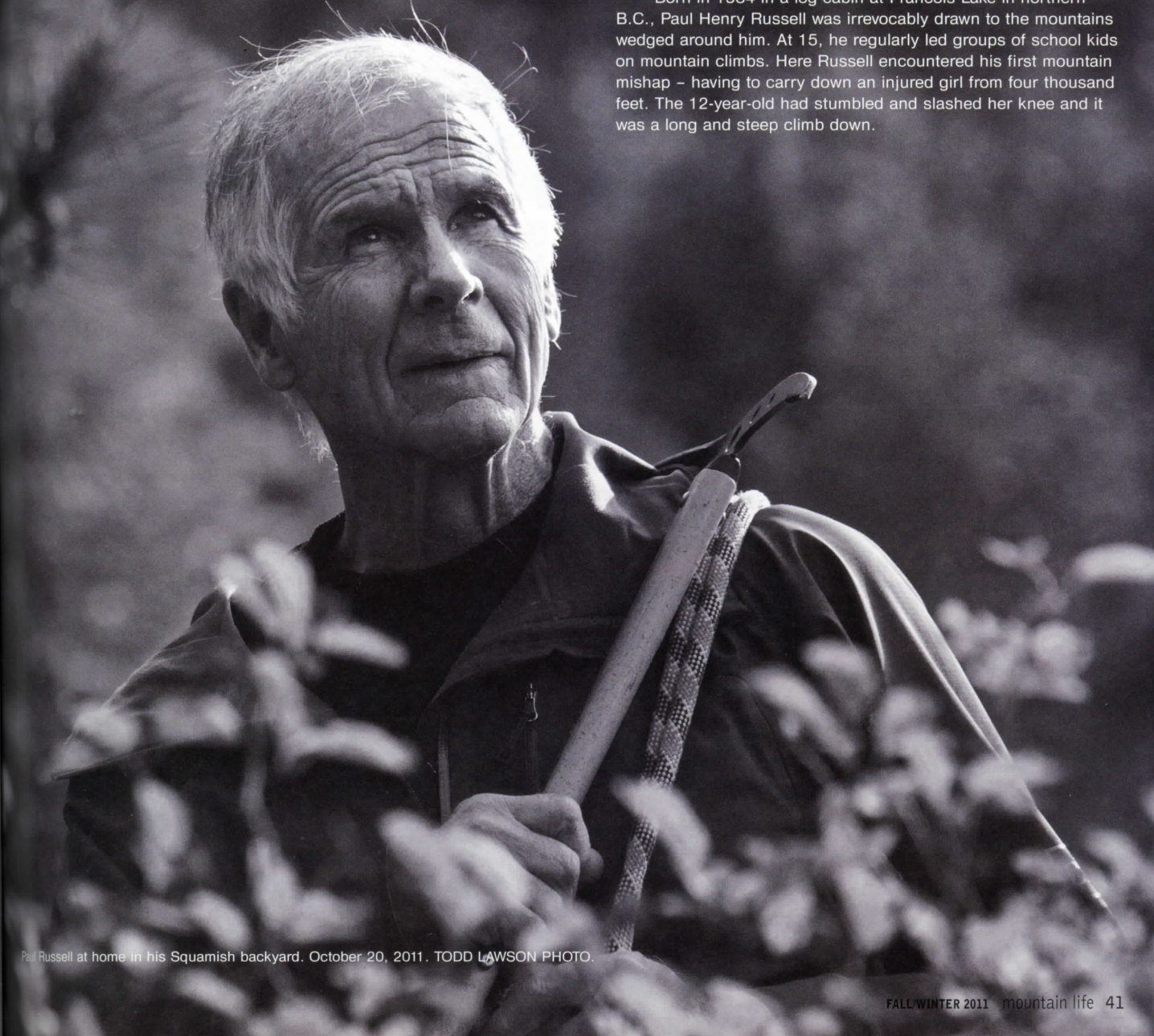
Aging gracefully, one peak at a time

By Dawn Green

Paul Russell is a seasoned mountaineer with a wealth of stories to either chill your blood or make you laugh out loud. He's serious about mountains and has some impressive items on his bucket list – like summiting a peak over 20,000 feet, completing the 298-kilometre Waddington Trail from Tatlayoko Lake to Bute Inlet, B.C., and climbing the Stawamus Chief when he's 80 years old. Right now he's 77.

He's spry for his age though, and with more than 20 major mountain summits under his belt, Russell's self-assuredness and energy is contagious. With a jovial chuckle he rewinds his memory and opens one of a scattering of aging photo albums in his Squamish home.

Born in 1934 in a log cabin at Francois Lake in northern B.C., Paul Henry Russell was irrevocably drawn to the mountains wedged around him. At 15, he regularly led groups of school kids on mountain climbs. Here Russell encountered his first mountain mishap – having to carry down an injured girl from four thousand feet. The 12-year-old had stumbled and slashed her knee and it was a long and steep climb down.



Paul Russell at home in his Squamish backyard. October 20, 2011. TODD LAWSON PHOTO.



'Well, if anybody falls, somebody has to fall off the other side.' This is because we were going up a knife-edge and we all had to alternate back and forth or else we would all get peeled off.

"I was worried what the parents would think because it was dark when we finally got out," he recalls. Fortunately for Russell the adults focused on getting the girl's knee stitched up rather than chastising him and the incident didn't deter the young mountaineer from a future in the sport.

In fact, attending UBC in the 1950s, Russell immediately joined the Varsity Outdoor Club. "That was probably the most dangerous time of my life, without realizing it," he says, grimacing. A troop of fearless young club members ascended Mount Garibaldi in 1956 with no climbing gear, save a rope. The group leader, Hans Gmoser, went on to become well-known in the mountaineering world.

"Hans had this little rule," Russell recalls. "We didn't have crampons, we were kicking steps in with our ski boots and he said, 'Well, if anybody falls, somebody has to fall off the other side.' This is because we were going up a knife-edge and we all had to alternate back and forth or else we would all get peeled off. I look at [that trip] with the climbing experience I have now and it was ridiculous, we could have all got killed on that mountain."

Yet Russell survived and went on to reach the summits of many Sea to Sky peaks. He reels off names like a roll call— Castle Tower (1956), Pearce (1983), Omega (1988), Alpha (1995), Wedge (1996), Joffre (1997), Matier (1998) and The Chief Grand Wall (2006).

When questioned about climbing peaks in his late 70s, Russell's response is rapid and sure, just as his insatiable appetite for adventure is obvious. "There is this excitement in planning a trip, getting together with your friends and then setting forth on the adventure," he explains with a smile while he skims through the pages of photos of his mountain climbs as eagerly as a child displays a prized collection.

For Russell, the pursuit of summit after summit encapsulates his overall passion for life but he claims his wife Susan has also taught him a lot. "She taught me to not make summiting a goal in itself, but to enjoy each step of the way."

Admitting that staying healthy at 77 is now his biggest challenge, Russell is also pursuing his latest bucket list item – summiting a peak over 20,000 feet. In January 2010 he launched an expedition to climb Ecuador's highest mountain, Mount Chimborazo (20,700 feet), but the summit proved an elusive catch. After reaching 19,000 feet Russell's guides took a chance, opting for an easier route up a ridge only to discover the snow was crystallised.

"You would put your crampons on and you would have no grip at all," he says. Faced with a 2,000-foot descent before attempting the traditional route to the peak, Russell was forced to turn back. "I was just about wiped at that point," he says, adding that he's already planning his next attempt to conquer the peak.

Paul Russell shrugs off any suggestions that he might be a positive influence for younger generations. Although he admits he does have advice to give.

"If you stay in shape, you are never too old to take on new challenges in life. And don't be afraid of doing something – I've always liked to have a challenge in front of me." ■

Top left & right: Altin Lake, BC, 1954. Centre: Wedge Mountain, Whistler, 2005. Bottom left: Dawson Creek, BC, 1954 (age 18). Bottom right: Mamquam Mountain, Squamish, 2006. ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF PAUL RUSSELL.