From Deb Koons (John Cooper's niece) - This is the ***New York Times*** article that was published December 9, 2023, about my Uncle John Cooper's Argentina climb in January 1973. It's long and detailed, and we think the writer did a really nice job of telling a story about all the stories going around down there. Hard to believe that was nearly 51 years ago as I can remember it like it was yesterday even though I was only 10.

Fifty years ago, eight Americans set off for South America to climb Aconcagua, one of the world's mightiest mountains. Things quickly went wrong. Two climbers died. Their bodies were left behind. Now, a camera belonging to one of the deceased climbers has emerged from a receding glacier near the summit …

… and one of mountaineering's most enduring mysteries has been given air and light.

GHOSTS ON THE GLACIER

Story by John Branch

Videos by Emily Rhyne

December 9, 2023

John Branch interviewed dozens of people, reviewed thousands of documents and made multiple reporting trips, including two to Argentina. Emily Rhyne shot video in three countries and from a helicopter above the summit of Aconcagua.

HIGH ON ACONCAGUA, the Western Hemisphere's highest mountain, the shrinking Polish Glacier spits out what it once devoured — in this case, a 50-year-old Nikomat 35-millimeter camera.

Two porters, preparing for an upcoming expedition, had been securing ropes in the thin and arid air of a clear February day. It was midsummer in South America. The camera glistened in the sun, daring to be noticed.

The lens was shattered. A dial on top showed that 24 photographs had been taken.

The bottom half of the camera was saddled into a worn leather holster with a thick strap. On the holster, in blue embossing tape, was an American name and a Colorado address.

In the snow-and-ice seasonal cycles of the mountains, abandoned and lost equipment is discovered each summer — tattered tents, dropped ice axes, lost mittens. Occasionally, a body.

This was not just another camera, though the porters did not know that yet. One of them carried it down to camp. There, a veteran guide named Ulises Corvalán was cooking lunch.

Corvalán glanced up. He casually asked about the name on the bottom of the camera.

“Janet Johnson,” came the reply.

Corvalán gasped and swore. “Janet Johnson!?” he shouted.

Excitement boiled instantly. Do you know about Janet Johnson, the schoolteacher? About John Cooper, the NASA engineer? About the deadly 1973 American expedition?

Have you heard the legend?

It had been handed down for decades, veering toward myth, whispered like a ghost story.

play1:59“The mountain can be deadly.”*Fifty years later, a journalist and a mountaineering expert recount the legend of the deadly expedition.*
Emily Rhyne and Noah Throop

Here is what was certain: A woman from Denver, maybe the most accomplished climber in the group, had last been seen alive on the glacier. A man from Texas, part of the recent Apollo missions to the moon, lay frozen nearby.

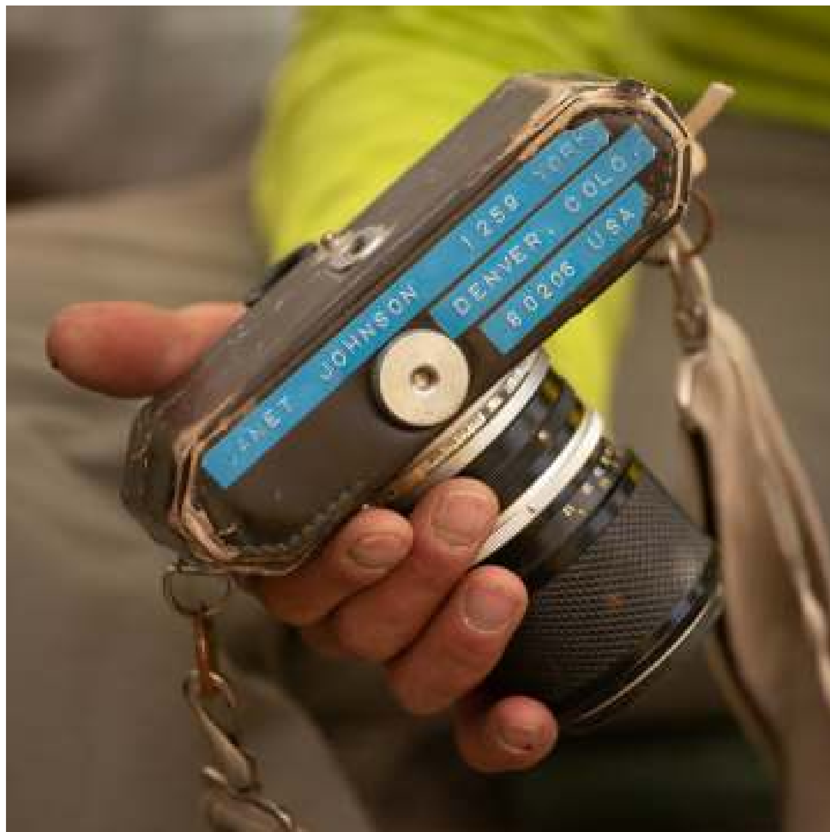
There were contradictory statements from survivors and a hasty departure. There was a judge who demanded an investigation into possible foul play. There were three years of summit-scratching searches to find and retrieve the bodies.

Listen to This Article

Their discovery stirred more intrigue, leaving more questions than answers. That's the imbalance of all the best mysteries — facts that don't quite add up, gaps that imaginations rush to fill.

That is how Janet Johnson and John Cooper became part of the folklore of Aconcagua.

And now, nearly five decades later, an old camera had emerged from the receding glacier. It was wound, prepared to take the next picture.



In February 2020, a young porter found a camera with Janet Johnson's name and address on the bottom and brought it back down to camp.

Pablo Betancourt

More clues emerged from the ice. Here was a decomposed left arm, still wearing a delicate silver Rado watch with a broken blue face. There was a tattered pack and scattered belongings: down mittens, a red jacket, a single crampon, a canister of used Kodak film.

Like that, by the whims of climate change and chance, a long-lost legend was given air and light.

THE TEAM

ACONCAGUA IS THE broad-shouldered behemoth of the Andes, shaped more like a fist than a finger.

It is brown and rocky, scrubby and dusty, dry and wind-whipped. With few trees or wildflowers, it can feel like a vertical desert.

The first person known to reach the 22,838-foot summit was Matthias Zurbriggen of Switzerland, in 1897. In 1934, a Polish expedition successfully tackled a more perilous route on the northeastern side of Aconcagua, up a massive glacier that stretches nearly 2,000 vertical feet toward the summit.

The ice sheet was named for that group: El Glaciar de los Polacos. The Polish Glacier.

By Scott Reinhard

These days, Aconcagua is part of a vast state park with helpful rangers and a helicopter rescue service. Two base camps provide hot meals, showers and internet. Some consider Aconcagua among the easiest to climb of the Seven Summits, the prestigious name given the highest mountains on each continent.

But Aconcagua is not easy. Trouble lurks in the thin air.

Through 2022, there were 153 known deaths on the mountain. In 1973, Johnson and Cooper were Nos. 26 and 27.

Fifty years ago, Aconcagua had only the most rudimentary of services. Climbers had no GPS trackers, no way to communicate between base camp and the summit. The Americans carried binoculars and a flare gun.

The mountain was virtually deserted. If trouble came, there was nobody to help but the other members of the expedition.

The Climbing Party

Miguel Alfonso, 38 *Mountain guide*

Carmie Dafoe, 52 *Lawyer*

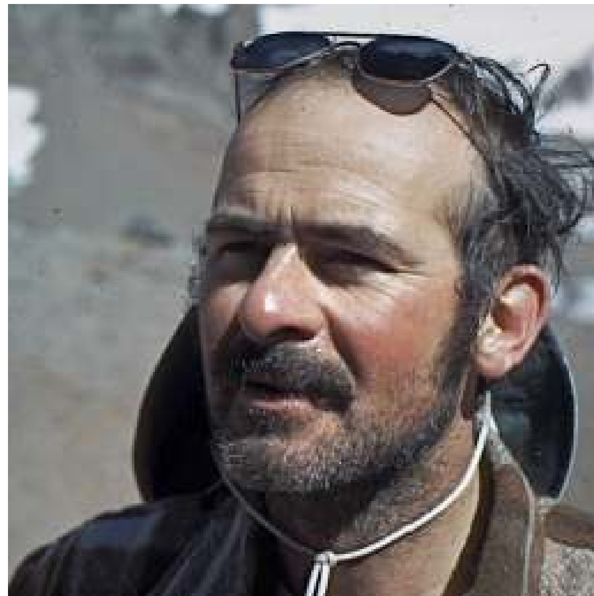
Jim Petroske, 39 *Psychiatrist*

Bill Eubank, 45 *Physician*

Arnold McMillen, 46 *Dairy farmer*

Bill Zeller, 45 *Police officer*

John Shelton, 25 *College student*



John Cooper, 35 *NASA engineer*

Janet Johnson, 36 *Teacher*

Roberto Bustos, 25 *Base camp manager*

Most of them were part of the Mazamas climbing club, founded in Oregon in 1894. Their leader was a Portland lawyer named Carmie Dafoe.

Dafoe, 52, pushed for the Aconcagua trip, noting that a Mazamas member had climbed it in the 1940s. His group, Dafoe announced, would attempt to be the fifth expedition to top Aconcagua via the Polish Route.

“Difficulties are said to be moderate — a couple of places where we’ll want handlines — not any more difficult than the normal route on Mt. McKinley,” Dafoe wrote in a 1972 memo.

The guide would be Miguel Alfonso, a 38-year-old Argentine who had been to the summit five times, once up the Polish Route. Dafoe asked for a $50 deposit from anyone interested, along with a list of successful ascents and references.

In June 1972, Dafoe announced the members of the party, all American men, whom he briefly described. Jim Petroske, a psychiatrist from Portland, Ore., would be “deputy leader,” he said. Bill Eubank, a physician from Kansas City, Mo., was “highly recommended by Petroske” and would be the expedition doctor. Then came Arnold McMillen, a dairy farmer from Otis, Ore., and Bill Zeller, a police officer in Salem, Ore. (“Bill and I shared a blizzard in the Canadian Rockies in ’69, a solid citizen.”) John Shelton, 25, was a Brigham Young geology student fluent in Spanish from a two-year church mission. (“Been through Latin American customs about 25 times — which must take more energy than climbing Aconcagua.”) And John Cooper, a NASA engineer from Houston, was “highly recommended.”

They were weekend climbers, mostly. Dafoe organized hikes in the Northwest designed as training and get-to-know-you exercises.

“I have had some trepidation about the party because of a fear that we might have someone who has unknown problems or who is some kind of a fink,” Dafoe wrote in a memo to the group. “It turned out, however, that I either know everyone in the group, or they are people I have been able to find out about. This leaves me with no reservation or qualification about the party.”

In November, Dafoe sent reminders about packing lists, passports, vaccinations.

“Everyone is probably already rounding into top physical condition,” he added. “Don’t take any chances on this. Work hard at it; especially with lots of jogging.”

He also announced the final member of the eight-person American crew: a woman from Denver named Janet Johnson.

Johnson, left, with her sister, Judie. They grew up in Minneapolis.
via Judie Abrahamson

Johnson was a strong student who earned a Ph.D. in education.
via Judie Abrahamson

SHE WAS BORN on Nov. 30, 1936, and never knew her birth mother. She was adopted by Victor and Mae Johnson, who lived in a stone-and-timber Tudor on the south side of Minneapolis. He helped run his family's paper-supply company; she was a bookkeeper.

The Johnsons believed in manners, rules and God. Janet, with a tidy bedroom upstairs, was a quiet girl and a voracious reader. She needed glasses early. She played organ at St. John's Lutheran Church.

When she was 10, she wanted a baby sister, so the Johnsons adopted a 5-year-old girl named Judie. The new sisters met at the neighborhood park. Janet took Judie home and gave her a doll named Lois.

Janet never married or had children. Judie Abrahamson, now an 83-year-old widow in Oregon City, Ore., is the only close relative alive.

“She liked to study — that was her favorite thing to do,” Abrahamson said. “Straight A’s? She would settle for nothing less.”

It was when her sister was away at college that Abrahamson discovered notes hidden in a jewelry box — love notes between her sister and another young woman. Soon, Johnson’s parents sent her to a hospital in St. Paul to “cure” her of her homosexuality. She was about 21.

“It didn’t heal her,” Abrahamson said. “But that was a big rift between Janet and my mother.”

It chased Johnson away from home. She settled in Denver, renting part of a two-story home on York Street, near the botanic gardens where she volunteered. She got her teaching certificate, then a master’s degree, eventually a Ph.D. in education at the University of Colorado. She taught in elementary schools and then became a school librarian, figuring it would be easier to keep her nights and weekends free for the mountains.

play1:57“I want to know what really, really happened to her.”*Johnson’s sister is still troubled by questions about her death.*

Emily Rhyne and Noah Throop

Johnson joined the Colorado Mountain Club. By 30, she became the 82nd known person — and among the first 20 women — to reach the summit of each of Colorado’s “fourteeners,” the more than 50 peaks higher than 14,000 feet in elevation.

Her name was regularly in the club’s magazine, Trail and Timberline, detailing various excursions. Photos she took graced the magazine’s cover.

“The companionship on the outing was tremendous — that is, except for the wood ticks, which somehow managed to find their way into my abode on the top of the hill,” she wrote in a 1961 report about a weekend trip in the Rockies. “Strangely enough, few other people even found one tick. Why they picked on me, I don’t know. They say everyone was put here for a purpose, so maybe I was meant to sustain the ticks.”

More and more, Johnson headed overseas. She was one of 38 members of a 1963 club expedition in Peru. On the way home, she detoured to climb Iztaccíhuatl, which rises more than 17,000 feet near Mexico City.

It is unclear how many of the world’s summits she reached. She climbed Kilimanjaro and hoped to climb Denali after returning from Aconcagua.

Most summers, Johnson tied a kayak atop her Nash Rambler and headed to the Northwest. She would stay with her sister, hike Mount Hood and paddle in Puget Sound. Abrahamson’s children knew her as Aunt Janet, the free spirit.

In 1971, the graduation announcements for her Ph.D., sent out by her mother, included a formal portrait of Johnson, smiling with her cat-eye glasses on.

She wanted to reach the highest levels of education. She wanted to reach the top of the tallest mountains.

“I think it was just to prove to my mother that she can do these things, even as a gay person,” Abrahamson said.

If Johnson had a significant other, Abrahamson never knew of her. Boxes of slides that she left behind show mostly landscapes, not people.

She took the 1972-73 school year off. That fall, after a hiking trip in Europe, she proudly joined the upcoming Mazamas expedition to Aconcagua.

“Climbed all 67 of the 14,000-foot peaks in the United States (except Alaska), Kilimanjaro, Orizaba, Popocatépetl, Iztaccíhuatl, Fuji, Mt. Blanc, Matterhorn, Eiger, Peru, etc., etc.,” Dafoe wrote of Johnson. “Recommended by two of my climbing friends from Denver.”

She packed her belongings into an aluminum-frame backpack — boots, flannel shirts, a red down jacket, thick mittens, glacier glasses, a sleeping bag. She used a marker to write her name or initials on most of them. She wore a silver watch and a ring with a brown stone that she got on a trip to New Mexico.

And she brought the Nikomat, the consumer version of Nikon’s professional cameras of the era. She probably bought the camera during her trip to Japan a couple of years earlier.

She used a label maker to punch her name and address onto blue embossing tape, and stuck it to the bottom of the leather camera case, just in case she lost it.

She carried the camera with her to Aconcagua, taking photographs along the way, almost to the top.

THE CLIMB

AMERICAN NEWSPAPERS SENT them off, and Argentine newspapers greeted them at the Nutibara Hotel in Mendoza's city center.

Rafael Morán, a reporter for Los Andes, a daily newspaper in Mendoza, interviewed the mountaineers near the pool. He did not cover every Aconcagua expedition, but this one was especially intriguing: Americans. The Polish Glacier. A woman. A NASA scientist.

Seven of the eight Americans who made up the climbing team, including Cooper, at the top of the stairs, and Johnson, second from right, on their way to Mendoza, Argentina.

Bill Eubank

Morán quickly had a dark inkling about this group. The Americans seemed disconnected from one another and unprepared for the serious task of climbing Aconcagua.

Morán whispered to the photographer: Take each of their photos today. I don’t think they’re all coming back.

The next day’s newspaper previewed the planned ascent. It showed the Americans huddled around a photo of Aconcagua. The caption noted the NASA engineer at the center.

Just a month before, in December 1972, John Cooper was at mission control in Houston for the 17th and final Apollo mission, wearing a black mustache and a headset, communicating with astronauts on the moon. Cooper was a surface operations engineer, helping guide the lunar module.

Cooper also wore his new mountain-climbing boots to work, to break them in for what he anticipated would be a difficult expedition on Aconcagua.

Cooper grew up in El Dorado, Kan., with a love of the outdoors. He went to Oklahoma University to get a degree in geological engineering, but the flat oil fields where his father worked were not for him. He spent college summers working for the Forest Service and then as a smoke jumper in the American West.

Later, in the U.S. Coast Guard, he became a pilot and won awards for rescues off the coast of Florida and in the Caribbean. He learned to deep-sea dive.

And he climbed. Cooper summited Kilimanjaro and Mount Kenya, the tallest mountains in Africa, and Popocatépetl, the volcanic behemoth in Mexico.

In 1966, Cooper joined NASA just as the Apollo program got underway. He had a bit of swashbuckler in him, more like an astronaut than a desk engineer. He sometimes wore a beard. He smoked a pipe. Around NASA’s Houston campus, Cooper drove an old military Jeep, sometimes taking his nieces for a ride.

Cooper as a child. He was an Eagle Scout with a love of the outdoors.
via Deborah Koons

Cooper’s sister Joy Koons pinning on his flight wings. He was a Coast Guard pilot.

via Paul Cooper

“My mother would say, ‘John, you put the doors back on and put up that windshield before you take my girls with you,’” Deb Koons, Cooper’s niece, said.

It was at NASA that Cooper fell in love with a secretary, a young divorced woman named Sandy Myers. They were married in 1968. In 1969, they had a baby boy they called Randy.

That was the year of Apollo 11. Cooper was in the surface operations group that guided Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin as they became the first humans to walk on the moon.

Three years later, on Dec. 19, 1972, Apollo 17’s three-man crew splashed down safely in the South Pacific.

On. Jan. 12, 1973, Cooper’s flight from Houston landed in Miami, where he met Janet Johnson. They flew together to Argentina.

Cooper kept a diary of his expedition. Like other men in the group who wrote in their own diaries about Johnson — “Nothing feminine about her,” one said — Cooper was unsure what to make of the only woman.

“Janet sure is weird,” he wrote from the comfort of Hotel Nutibara. “She went swimming in her bra, blouse and panties today and the pool was full of people!”

Johnson and Petroske. Johnson took photos throughout the trip.

Bill Eubank

ON THE MOUNTAIN, the Americans struggled from the start.

On Jan. 20, 1973, aided by mules, the group hiked 25 miles to Casa de Piedra, a stone house at the confluence of the Vacas and Relinchos Rivers.

In his diary, Cooper described the “stark beauty” of a landscape “baked hard as concrete.” He mentioned that Eubank, the expedition doctor, was already sick.

The next day, the group reached base camp, a treeless, rubbled plot in a wide valley at about 13,500 feet. These days, during climbing season, it is a buzzing village. In 1973, the American expedition members were the only ones there.

Alfonso had hired Roberto Bustos, a 25-year-old climber and student, to manage the base camp. Now a retired geography professor in Buenos Aires, Bustos recalled his early impression of the group — a lot of high-quality gear, but an unsettling dynamic.

“There was no group attitude,” Bustos said. “I was thinking, Oh, I am on my own. Everyone has to take care of himself. In my opinion, they weren’t ready for such a strange and big mountain as Aconcagua.”

Alfonso, despite his experience on Aconcagua, was relegated to merely a guide, someone to point the way.

Dafoe was in charge. Petroske, his friend from Portland, was the deputy leader, followed by Eubank, the doctor, and Shelton, the interpreter for Alfonso. Then came Zeller, McMillen, Cooper and Johnson, without defined roles.

Alfonso, left, and Zeller on the two-day trip to base camp.

Early on the trip, members of the climbing group, from left: McMillen, Shelton and Zeller.

Holding a map of Aconcagua. Dafoe called it “one of the most barren places in the universe.”

McMillen, in orange jacket, and others at Camp 1.

Bill Eubank

Back then, like today, getting to the summit usually required a week or more of shuttling up and down the mountain, moving gear and adjusting to the altitude. The group carried loads to Camp 1 — at 15,500 feet, higher than anywhere in the continental United States. They returned at day's end to base camp.

The high-altitude ups and downs were made more difficult by Aconcagua's notorious obstacle course of penitentes — icy pillars, as tall as six feet, caused by solar radiation. They're sturdy enough that even the small ones can't be knocked over. The group called them "white monsters."

Cooper, foreground, Johnson and McMillen among the penitentes.

John Shelton

The trek to Camp 2, at nearly 18,000 feet, took seven hours.

“Brother was it bad,” Cooper wrote in his diary. “Between the ice and scree and altitude, I was done in.”

He later wrote about others in the group.

“Bill Zeller is the real man behind the work,” he said of the Oregon State Police officer, an expert in fingerprinting. “He lugged 80 pounds up to Camp 1. Then after getting back he made the water haul — and I’m here in the sack. I guess all do our share of work but some more than others.”

Johnson was little help, Cooper wrote. “She is a real loner and appears to be for only one thing — to get herself to the summit, at the expense of everyone or on everyone’s back.”

The expedition was fracturing from the effects of altitude. Three Americans, including Dafoe, the leader, stayed at Camp 1. Five others, including Johnson and Cooper, moved up to Camp 2 with Alfonso. Cooper felt miserable.

“For 2 cents I’ll go back,” Cooper wrote.

Approximate location of base camp By Scott Reinhard | Photo: Max Whittaker for The New York Times

But they plodded upward to establish Camp 3, behind an outcropping of boulders at the base of the Polish Glacier, at about 19,400 feet.

A storm swept through, pinning the group in place for a welcome day of rest. Behind it were clear skies, a perfect window for a climb to the summit.

The group was “expecting it to take at least all day,” Zeller later wrote in his account of events, “but the lower part of the glacier seemed to present no problem as it seemed to be in good condition — no crevasses — not too steep — good snow for crampons etc.”

But after a late breakfast, Petroske suddenly lost his coordination and struggled to put on his crampons. Others diagnosed it as a sign of high-altitude cerebral edema, a potentially deadly swelling of the brain.

Alfonso escorted Petroske back to base camp. Now the American team was cleaved in half. Gone were the expedition leader, the deputy, the doctor, the interpreter and the local guide. Remaining were Cooper, Johnson, Zeller and McMillen. None had been this high, anywhere. They barely knew one another.

When they looked up, they saw the Polish Glacier, stretching to the sky.

It was sunny. Their jackets were unzipped. They wore crampons and carried ice axes and light packs, leaving most of their possessions behind at camp.

But movement up the glacier was slow. By nightfall, the four Americans gave up on reaching the summit that day. They were at roughly 21,000 feet.

They dug a small snow cave on the glacier with their ice axes. They had no sleeping bags, so the climbers lay on reflective space blankets. During the night, cramped and uncomfortable, Johnson and Zeller moved outside. They sat, shivering.

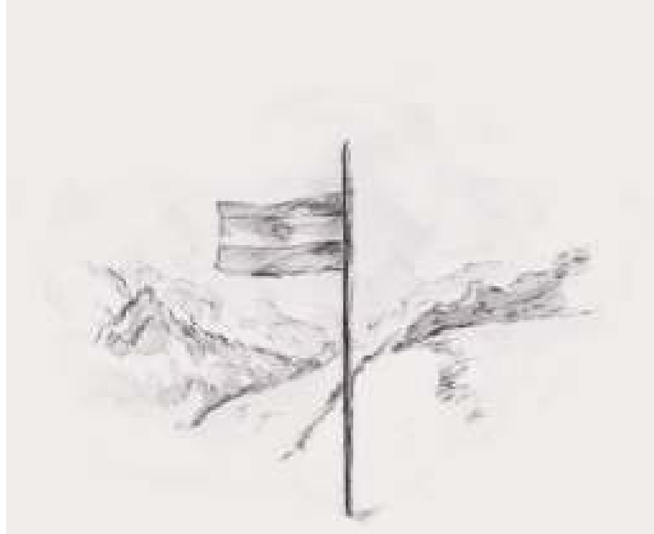
Wind blew a fine powder off the summit, filling the opening of the cave with snow and burying Cooper’s legs. Johnson unburied him about an hour before sunrise.

But Cooper was finished. Cold and tired, he announced that he was turning back, Zeller and McMillen later said. It was about two hours down the glacier back to Camp 3, McMillen figured. He and Zeller expressed little concern about letting Cooper go alone.

“He appeared to be very capable, alert,” Zeller later told his local newspaper. “He had no trouble with his reasoning. There was no concern about his climbing ability, and we were not too far above high camp.”

John Cooper never made it. He died on the glacier.

Not long after, so did Janet Johnson.



THE RUMORS

EXACTLY WHAT HAPPENED is speculation, spun around the globe for 50 years.

Two men from Oregon — Zeller, a police officer, and McMillen, a dairy farmer — were the last to see Cooper and Johnson alive.

They gave detailed versions of events. Slight contradictions and the confounding effect of high-altitude hallucinations raised questions for Argentine authorities and teased the public's imagination.

Alfonso, Shelton and Bustos were among those held by investigators when they came off the mountain. Alfonso wore a patch because of snow blindness.

Los Andes

McMillen, Zeller and Petroske were also questioned by authorities. Zeller's forehead was blackened from exposure.

Los Andes

After Cooper headed downhill alone, Zeller, McMillen and Johnson continued up. They moved slowly. They took photographs. They reached the top of the Polish Glacier, where it meets a ridge that leads to the summit.

But darkness descended again, and snow on the ridge was waist deep. The men took turns breaking the trail, 25 steps at a time. The summit in sight, the men later said, they turned to find that Johnson was not there.

"We looked and looked and called her name and got no answer," McMillen recalled in a written account, two weeks later. "Finally I stumbled across her ax and figured she couldn't be too far. We called some more and finally a faint little voice said, 'My name's Janet Johnson.' She was about 100 feet off our trail in the snow, laying there. When we got to her she said, 'Don't make me suffer, just let me lay here and die.'"

Zeller said that he roped himself to Johnson; McMillen said that Zeller "took her by the arm." Zeller said that the three got lost and camped another night together; McMillen said that he went ahead of the other two and spent the night by himself.

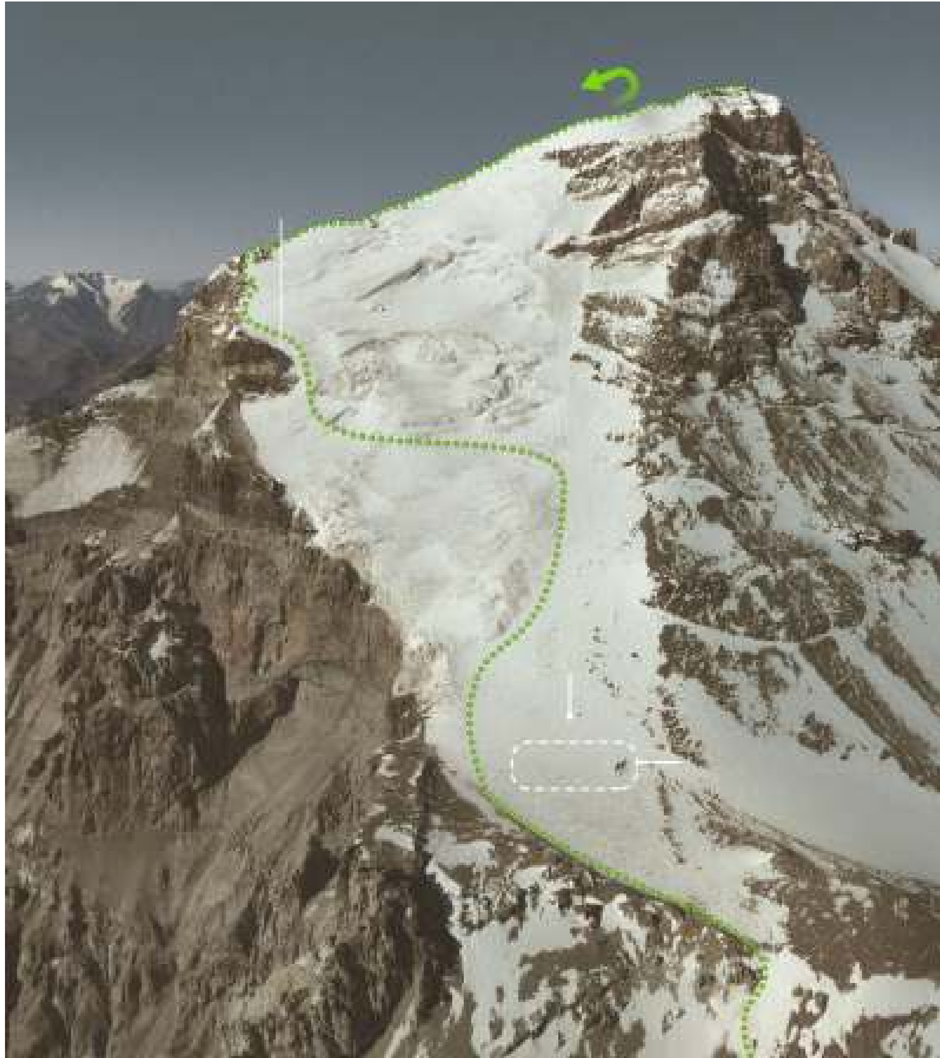
Their stories converged again the next morning. Johnson wouldn’t stand, and her hands were “swollen and black,” McMillen wrote, so they “anchored her from three different directions so we could hold her standing up” and led her past a crevasse.

They reached the snow cave where they had last seen Cooper. Some of their equipment was there, including the flare gun. McMillen said he shot it. It was 7 a.m.

“It made a noise as loud as a rifle but I guess no one heard it below,” McMillen wrote.

Johnson’s condition seemed improved, so the men decided that McMillen should go down alone to get help, following the route that Cooper presumably took 24 hours earlier.

McMillen said he lost his ice ax in a steep section of the glacier and slid 1,000 feet, head first. It would account for the black eye he had later, he said.



P O L I S H
G L A C I E R

Approximate route

Johnson’s camera
discovered

Approximate location
of bodies of Johnson
and Cooper
Camp 3

By Scott Reinhard | Photo: Pablo Betancourt for The New York Times

Then he saw members of the Argentine army coming to rescue Zeller and Johnson. He heard people calling his name. He saw dead mules. And he saw a dead soldier lying in the snow.

Only later, after reaching camp and sleeping, did it occur to him: None of that was real. The dead soldier, he learned, was John Cooper.

Up on the glacier, Zeller, too, was having hallucinations, not uncommon in the thin air of high altitudes. He later recalled visions of construction trucks working near the summit, and hearing phantom voices of rescuers who were never there.

“Janet and I continued coming down till we were through the worst part then we took a long spill also,” Zeller wrote in an account later that spring. “Again doing no serious damage but breaking both of our dark glasses & cutting our faces some. We ended up 3 or 4 city blocks from camp & could see the tents.”

He and Johnson came untethered in the fall, Zeller said, so he went back up to check on her. That is when he saw Cooper.

“I saw John’s body about halfway between us & off to the right as we faced up hill,” Zeller wrote. “I checked him & he was dead & appeared to be frozen — I didn’t see any cuts on his exposed skin & no tears in the clothing so assume that he didn’t die as a result of a fall but exhaustion & hypothermia etc.”

“Janet seemed to be OK best as I could tell so we decided that I would go ahead & set up the tent & she would follow as soon as she got her wind,” Zeller said.

He arrived at Camp 3 a couple of hours after McMillen, the men later said. They slept through the night, awoke and saw no sign of Johnson.

“The next a.m. Bill and I decided to go on down,” McMillen wrote. “Bill was so confused he didn’t know which direction to go.”

He concluded: “That’s the story as near as I can recall.”

Questions followed them downhill, like a dry, cold wind.

Año XCI — Núm. 30.128 Página 15 4 de Febrero de 1973 LOS ANDES — Doming

Se teme por la vida de dos andinistas norteamericanos

Descendían de la cumbre del Aconcagua

Newspapers in Mendoza covered the tragedy immediately and extensively. “Fears for the Lives of Two North American Climbers,” declared one headline in the newspaper Los Andes.

JOHN SHELTON, the college student who served as interpreter on the climb, turned 76 this year. He had been receiving hospice care in a V.A. hospital bed in Utah for more than a year. He had a Kringle-like white beard and eyes that sparkled when he laughed.

He was the last American from the expedition still alive.

Shelton remembered getting sick from the altitude and being the first in the group to return to base camp. He kept company with Bustos, bonding over their shared affinity for science. Both were 25, the youngest in the group.

A day later came Eubank and Dafoe, more sick than Shelton. After another day came Petroske, with the help of Alfonso, the guide.

Shelton described looking through binoculars at the Polish Glacier, expecting to see the remaining four climbers and spotting only three — and, later, only two. He remembered rushing uphill with Alfonso to see whether they could help.

They came upon Zeller and McMillen walking toward them. Shelton remembered the weight of the moment: Four people had gone up the glacier, but only two had returned.

It did not occur to Shelton that Cooper and Johnson were anything more than victims of a high-altitude tragedy. Foul play? “Hogwash,” he said, 50 years later.

Word traveled slowly off the mountain. Families were called. Wire services and hometown newspapers wrote hasty dispatches, filling gaps with presumptions and wild falsehoods.

In Cooper’s hometown in Kansas, the paper reported that he “was presumed dead after a fall from the top of the mountain into a deep crevice during a blinding snowstorm.”

The U.S. Embassy in Buenos Aires sent a memo to the U.S. secretary of state’s office, trying to stanch misinformation.

“Deaths did not occur as a result of a fall as reported by United Press International and Associated Press or as the result of an avalanche as reported by Reuters,” the embassy said.

News outlets in Mendoza were on the story more exhaustively and accurately. The first news was reported in Los Andes on Feb. 4: “Fears for the Lives of Two North American Climbers,” the headline read. There was a map of the route. Featured prominently were two smiling photos of Johnson and Cooper, taken at Hotel Nutibara two weeks earlier.

play2:26“The details remain sketchy.”*Confusion gave way to speculation. The last surviving climber never believed any of it.*

Emily Rhyne and Noah Throop

“The expedition was starting to fall apart before even the work on the ice began,” the next day’s story said, just as Americans were getting false accounts of avalanches and blinding snowstorms.

At the base of Aconcagua, Alfonso and the American survivors were held for questioning. In Mendoza, a judge was assigned to the case. So was a police investigator. Officials labeled the case “averiguación de homicidio culposo” — investigation of manslaughter.

Even the American government validated the suspicion. It was standard procedure for the case to remain open, the embassy wrote in its files, to “ensure that foul play may be ruled out.”

The seeds of speculation were planted.

“It needs a deeper investigation,” Los Andes wrote.

THE SECRET MEETING

THE AMERICANS RETURNED to Hotel Nutibara, avoiding reporters staked out in the lobby. Bustos, the base camp manager, came to say goodbye to his new American friends. They would not see him. Fifty years on, it still saddens him.

The U.S. State Department didn't have much luck, either. Consul Wilbur W. Hitchcock tried to speak to the Americans during an overnight layover in Buenos Aires.

"All five looked tired and somewhat dazed," Hitchcock wrote in a report. (The sixth survivor, Eubank, had already left the country.)

Dafoe cautioned Hitchcock about the effects of high altitude on mind and memory. He said that the others had experienced hallucinations and perhaps a "feeling of unreality" coming at such heights.

Hitchcock returned to the airport the next morning. He spent another 30 minutes trying to question the Americans before they boarded a plane to leave Argentina.

"They were unable to reconstruct the climb with sufficient accuracy," Hitchcock wrote.

Newspapers published a photograph from the tarmac. Shelton and Petroske smiled as McMillen appeared to say something over his shoulder. They carried packs and ice axes. A reporter asked Zeller to clarify the events on the mountain, papers reported, but Dafoe, a lawyer, stepped between them and would not let him answer.

It all added to the intrigue in Argentina. But if any of the smoldering speculation followed the survivors back to the United States, it was quickly snuffed out.

In Portland, the president of Mazamas wrote a secret memo. He called for a special closed meeting of club leadership and the survivors of the expedition, to be held two days later.

“NONE BUT THE ABOVE-NAMED WILL BE ALLOWED TO ATTEND. The location is to be kept SECRET … repeat … SECRET!”

The memo said that the idea was to “learn the ‘straight of things’ from people involved.”

“Presumably,” it continued, “a resultant will be the dispelling of certain suspicions, uncertainties, rumors, whatever, which may have come to your attention and have been amplified by the confused communications during the expedition and by conflicting or incomplete newspaper reports.”

The meeting was held at Dafoe’s law office. Two days later, on Feb. 15, Dafoe’s secretary typed a three-page “chronological summary of events.”

It was the story that survivors told their hometown newspapers. And it was the basis for Dafoe’s formal expedition report published in the Mazamas annual in 1973, which concluded that the deaths were an accident, that Johnson and Cooper were desperate to reach the summit, and that “they probably died of pulmonary edema.”

They did not.

THE JOHNSONS and the Coopers were religious Midwestern families. They trusted higher powers and government officials. They grieved but did not wallow, at least publicly.

It is unclear how much they interacted, if at all.

The Coopers held a memorial service in March, but desperately wanted John’s body recovered for a proper burial in Kansas.

Cooper’s father, also named John, wrote letters — to Los Andes, to Alfonso, to the State Department — in search of help. He learned Spanish so that he could read the news reports coming from Argentina.

Janet Johnson’s widowed mother, Mae Johnson, held a funeral service in April, at the Minneapolis church where her daughter played the organ as a teenager.

She did not ask for her body back. She understood that her daughter had said that if anything happened to her on Aconcagua, she wanted to be buried in the little cemetery not far from the trailhead.

Like John Cooper’s father, Mae Johnson collected newspaper clippings and documents. In places where her daughter’s name was spelled “Jeannette” by Spanish-language papers, and even by some American ones, she crossed it out and carefully wrote “Janet.”

And in places that quoted her daughter as saying, “Let me die here,” her mother blacked out the words so she never had to read them.

liam Zeller, a policeman from Salem, Ore., said he heard Miss Johnson say, “. I want to stay here. I can’t go on.” Then she lost her footing and fell. He said she was about 150 feet from him at the time.

heavy snow conditions at the mountain’s 18,000-foot level, a spokesman said.

The patrol said it had not found the body of Jeanette Johnson, [illegible], of Denver, who companions said disappeared among the steep peaks near the top of the 22,834-foot mountain.

IN ARGENTINA, JUDGE Victorio Miguel Calandria Agüero wanted to know: How did John Cooper and Janet Johnson die? There could be no sure answers without the bodies.

In late 1973, on the crest of a new summer climbing season in the Andes, a four-man team was assembled to look for them. Alfonso, wounded by criticism of his role as guide, would lead it.

A National Geographic reporter and photographer named Loren McIntyre heard about this and showed up to join the team. Alfonso was glad to have him.

They carried two plastic toboggans, the kind children use to sled down icy slopes, that they had reinforced with sheet metal screwed to the bottom.

A week later, at the foot of the Polish Glacier, they found the ghostly evidence of the American expedition — tattered tents, a torn blue sleeping bag leaking feathers.

About 150 yards uphill from camp they found Cooper's frozen body.

After Alfonso, McIntyre and a team of climbers found Cooper's body on the Polish Glacier, they spent days pulling it down the mountain on a toboggan.

Loren McIntyre/American Geographical Society Library, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries

He was stretched out on relatively flat terrain, his legs extended and crossed. His hands were bare, across his abdomen. His jacket was on but his hood had fallen behind his head.

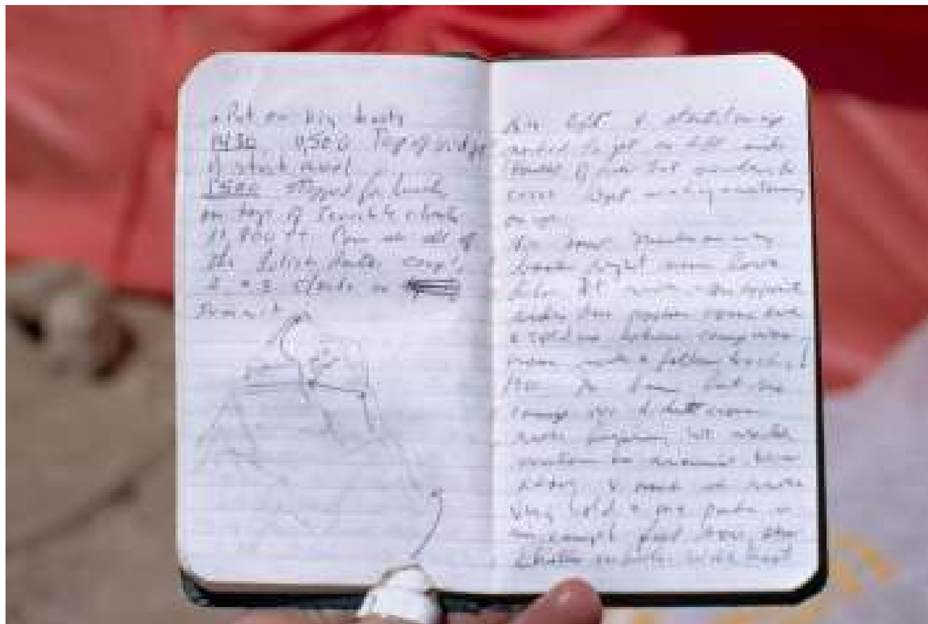
"John Cooper was a tall and large man and he was frozen stiff," McIntyre reported to investigators. "He was like a statue of ice and the toboggan was about half the length of his body so arranging him so that his clothes and body would not be damaged in the descent was not an easy thing and it was cold and windy and tempers were running short as we tried to get him lashed to the sled."

A storm blew in. The men left Cooper for the night, driving stakes around him to keep him in place, and descended to the safety of camp.

The next day, McIntyre was first to the body and did a closer inspection. He took detailed photographs of Cooper and his belongings “to make it supremely evident how he was equipped” in case there were questions from investigators or reporters.

He found Cooper’s diary. He found an opened letter from Cooper’s wife, Sandy. McIntyre read it aloud and translated it for the others.

“Keep roped up, and don’t forget the crampons, as I don’t know how I’d replace you,” she wrote. “You are by far the best husband and loving one, and really good Dad, in the entire world.”



Cooper detailed the expedition in his diary, which also included a drawing of the Polish Glacier.

Loren McIntyre/American Geographical Society Library, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries

There was no sign of Johnson. McIntyre combed the snowfield for several hours before giving up, he said. He considered her death the bigger mystery and thought she might have wandered off the glacier’s sheer edge.

Details about Cooper got out fast. He was missing a crampon. There was no ice ax. He was on a gentle slope. His battered face held a look of frozen terror. And his abdomen had a cylindrical hole, bloody and deep. It had gone undetected until his body thawed at a lower elevation and his frozen hands could be moved.

“The highest percentage of possibility is that Cooper’s death was an accident,” Alfonso told reporters. But if Cooper had fallen on his own ice ax, it must have been very violent, he said, given the five layers of clothes he wore and the depth of the wound.

Alfonso also said that Zeller told him that he had found Cooper sitting, dead, with his head between his hands.

“But the way Cooper was found reveals that Zeller’s account was not exact,” Los Andes wrote.

McIntyre insisted that “there is no mystery at all.”

“He fell on his ice ax and he injured himself,” he said in a statement to investigators. “He was in so much discomfort and pain when he was nearly to base camp that when he finally got off the steep part of the glacier, got down on the flat, he had evidently stopped, sat down and removed his gloves and was probably trying to examine himself and his wound when he fell unconscious and froze to death.”

McIntyre left a sliver of doubt. In a 1974 letter to Sandy Cooper, he suggested that McMillen and Zeller “have probably formed some conclusions in their own minds which may be true or which may be an adjustment with conscience they can live with.” He continued, “I wonder whether you have ever talked with them?”

It is unclear if the Cooper or Johnson families ever did.

Cooper was buried in Sunset Lawns Cemetery in El Dorado, Kan., a few days after Christmas in 1973.

via Paul Cooper

Cooper’s body, per the family’s wishes, was transported to Kansas. It arrived in a metal coffin, shipped inside a plain wooden crate.

The coffin was buried in the cold December ground in El Dorado. The empty crate sat for decades in the garage of Cooper’s parents, who couldn’t part with it.

The results of the full autopsy were sealed by the judge. But he released the cover page, which noted the cause of death.

It was not exposure, not pulmonary edema, not even the mysterious wound to the abdomen that plunged through five layers of clothes.

Causa de la defunción: Contusión cráneo encefálica.

Cause of death: Cranial contusions. Injuries to the skull and brain.

The judge made only one declaration: We need Janet Johnson’s body.

FINDING JANET JOHNSON

ALBERTO COLOMBERO WAS 17 when he and two others found Johnson’s body. He keeps the photos from that day in a small box.

It was Feb. 9, 1975. Colombero was climbing Aconcagua with his father, Ernesto, and Guillermo Vieiro, both experienced Aconcagua climbers, now both deceased. A storm forced them to abort a summit attempt. The three decided to come down the Polish Glacier. They knew the story well. They knew Johnson’s body might be somewhere.

Colombero saw something reddish to his left. It was obscured by knee-high penitentes, the ice pillars characteristic of Aconcagua, and partially covered in fresh snow.

Alberto Colombero in front of an image of his father, Ernesto. They discovered Johnson’s body two years after she went missing.

Max Whittaker for The New York Times

The men thought it was a tarp, a tent, maybe a backpack.

They found Johnson face up. Her face, blackened from two years of exposure, was battered in three places. White bone stuck out of her nose, her forehead and her chin, where skin hung down like a flap. There were blood stains on her face and jacket.

A crampon was missing from one foot. Ropes were tangled around her. Her hands were bare, her light jacket unzipped. They could not find her ice ax.

The slope was shallow. Didn’t Zeller say that he and Johnson had a long fall together? There was no way this was where they fell, they thought.

Three men found Johnson's body on a shallow slope.

Ernesto and Alberto Colombero

Colombero's memory holds one other striking detail: a rock sitting on top of Johnson. Her body was in a field of ice.

Colombero said that he was too young and inexperienced at the time to draw conclusions. But the older men, for the rest of their lives, were sure Johnson was murdered, Colombero said.

"They thought everything was planned," he added. "That it wasn't an accident, that someone had hit her and tried to make it look like she rolled down the hill in exhaustion."

Their discovery and version of events were soon highlighted in the Mendoza newspapers, along with gruesome photos they took. Johnson's body was just 20 meters from where Cooper's body had been found, the reports said.

The three men were unprepared to bring Johnson's body down. So they dug it out and shifted it so that a future recovery expedition would see it.

They found a ring with a cloudy brown stone on Johnson's finger. They removed it and passed it to an American climber named Allen Steck, who happened to be on the mountain at the same time. In April 1975, he sent it to Abrahamson, Johnson's sister.

"I am enclosing the ring that Janet was wearing when we examined her," he wrote. "We did not find anything of her equipment or her camera (assuming she had one)."

The ring is the only possession from the trip that Johnson's family received for 50 years.

A ring belonging to Johnson was returned to her sister in the spring of 1975.

Max Whittaker for The New York Times

IN FEBRUARY 1976, William Montalbano, the Latin America correspondent for The Miami Herald, wrote two articles about the deadly mysteries of Aconcagua.

The second focused on plans for the recovery of Johnson's body.

"How Did Janet Johnson Really Die?" the headline read.

"There is sufficient mystery and enough unanswered questions surrounding the death of Janet Johnson and NASA engineer John Cooper on the same 1973 expedition to have raised the suspicion of foul play," Montalbano wrote.

The article focused on Ramón Arrieta Cortez, the lead investigator, who "must establish if Aconcagua killed Janet Johnson or if she was murdered," Montalbano wrote.

Soon after, a team of men, mostly police officers in Mendoza with climbing experience, found Johnson's body. Her face was darker, far more mummified than a year earlier, because of recent exposure to sun and wind. They found no other belongings.

The men struggled to extricate Johnson from the ice. They crudely sliced her left arm at the shoulder and left it, with a broken watch still on her wrist.

“We had to dig the ice to get her unfrozen from the glacier,” said Rudy Parra, one of the men, now a retired police officer. “It was like taking a piece of the glacier off the mountain.”

The room where the Cooper and Johnson autopsies were performed in Mendoza is still in use today. It sits in a worn, one-story stucco building that looks like a barrack. It is equipped with stainless steel tables, electric tools that hang from the ceiling and concrete floors that slope to drains.

Daniel Araujo was a medical student and an assistant to the medical examiner, Dr. Carlos DeCicco, on the Cooper and Johnson autopsies. Today he is a neurosurgeon in Mendoza.

play2:00“You could see the bone.”*The men who found Johnson’s body and witnessed her autopsy believe she was murdered.*

Emily Rhyne and Noah Throop

He still remembers Cooper because of the skull fracture and, especially, the tubular hole to his abdomen. It was like a bullet hole, perfectly round. The wound was so deep that it reached all the way to Cooper’s spine. Araujo always suspected an ice screw.

Johnson’s autopsy stands out because of the damage to her face — bone exposed in three places. Araujo recalled deep cuts on her boot that made him think someone had taken some hard whacks at her.

Johnson’s autopsy report, with photos, was submitted to the judge. Like Cooper, she officially died of contusión cráneo encefálica. A brain injury.

Araujo has been haunted by the memory of those autopsies for most of his life.

“They were killed,” he said. “Both of them. These kinds of injuries were not self-inflicted.”

Was that the consensus of the examiners in the room?

“Yes,” he said. “No doubt about it.”

News media coverage did not go that far. In “forensic circles,” Los Andes reported, “it appeared to be a crime, though the police had not made any accusations.” It left the case open for public interpretation yet again.

“Were the wounds to the head from a fall or deliberate?” Los Andes asked. “Perhaps the truth will never be known.”

That is where any serious consideration ended. On March 24, 1976, Argentina’s government under Isabel Perón fell to a deadly military coup. Argentina was turned inside out, and tens of thousands are thought to have died in the seven-year upheaval.

Any formal investigation into the American expedition was handed over to the collective imagination. The mystery seemed to freeze in place.

Days before the coup, the body of Johnson was buried in a small mountaineer’s cemetery near the trailheads to Aconcagua. No one from her family came. But a flower bouquet rested on her coffin. “De Tu Madre,” it read — From Your Mother.

Johnson was buried in a small cemetery near the trailheads to Aconcagua. Alfonso was among the two dozen in attendance at her funeral.

Alberto Colombero

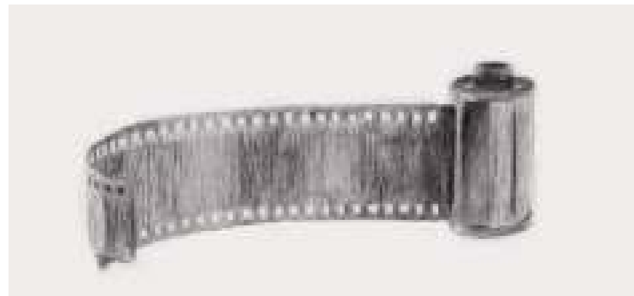
Among the two dozen witnesses were members of the police group that recovered her body, including Arrieta Cortez, the lead investigator. (According to his son, Juan, Arrieta Cortez died in 2017 and never reached a conclusion in the case.)

“Under the sky of America, we bury a daughter here on Argentine soil,” Arrieta Cortez said at the graveyard gathering.

Representatives from the American embassy had made the 650-mile trip from Buenos Aires. The ceremony took 15 minutes.

“I wish to inform you that your daughter, Janet Johnson, was buried on March 19, 1976, pursuant to your request, at the Mountain Climber’s Cemetery at Punta del Inca,” the embassy wrote to Johnson’s mother. “Funeral services at the gravesite were very dignified and impressive.”

A man arrived late, rushing to the service just as it ended. It was Miguel Alfonso, the guide, there to pay his last respects.



THE CAMERA

FOR NEARLY 50 years, a Nikomat camera, carried by an American woman, sat frozen in a high-altitude time capsule. But it was not frozen in place.

Where the camera was dropped may not be where it was found. The Polish Glacier has been shrinking and shifting, cracking and moving downhill by the pull of gravity and with the change of seasons.

And on a sunny day in February 2020, the heart of the Argentine summer, the camera sat on a stocky penitente, like a museum piece on a pedestal.

Climbers searched for other clues after the discovery of Johnson’s camera. Her arm, cut when her body was extricated from the ice in 1976, was discovered near the shifting and shrinking glacier’s edge.

Pablo Betancourt

It was Marcos Calamaro, a young porter, who brought it down to camp. It was Ulises Corvalán, the experienced guide, who recognized the name stamped on the bottom.

At the camp that day was a photographer named Pablo Betancourt. He recognized that the film inside might be evidence to be preserved, as it had been for most of five decades. He put the camera into a case and stuffed it with snow.

He contacted The New York Times, wondering whether such a discovery might be of interest. And he wondered what else the melting glacier might be revealing.

Johnson’s arm was found, in a red jacket sleeve, near the glacier’s edge. Then her knapsack, filled with gear and two more aluminum canisters, with film inside.

In Oregon, Johnson’s only surviving immediate family member got a surprise call, sharing the news of the discovery.

Abrahamson’s response was clear. Yes, develop the film. Find out everything you can. Please.

“She’s still my sister,” she said. “I still want to know what really happened to her.”

INDIAN HEAD, SASKATCHEWAN, is about an hour east of Regina. Its tallest structure is a grain elevator. There is not a mountain in sight.

On a downtown corner is a former bank, a two-story brick structure from the 1800s. Today it is home to Film Rescue International, run by a man named Greg Miller.

His small team of technicians receive and process old or damaged undeveloped film from all over the world — rolls abandoned in attics, reels discovered in shipwrecks, the forgotten Instamatic found with film inside.

Now Miller was holding a camera that had been locked in a glacier at roughly 20,000 feet for almost five decades. The camera was intact; the only crack was inside the lens. The mechanisms worked. The leather holster screwed to the camera bottom had probably protected it from leaks.

It turns out that a glacier on Aconcagua is not a bad place to preserve film. Humidity is always a detriment, but the Andes are notably dry. High-altitude radiation can be a concern, but the camera had been entombed in ice. Cold temperatures are much better for film than hot ones.

Miller took the camera into a dark room, flicked on an infrared light that would not expose the film and clicked the back of the camera open.

“I think we’re going to see something,” he said.

The processing responsibility fell to Erik LaBossiere, a 35-year-old part-time pro wrestler and metal-band guitarist with a bald head, a soft voice and arms covered in tattoos.

He was nervous. There was only one chance to do this.

Under infrared light, LaBossiere moved the rolls of film into lightproof drums. The drums went into a machine that washed the film in a cycle of solutions, precisely timed — an automated version of the dunk-and-soak method from old photographic development. When LaBossiere emerged from the dark room, he seemed pleased.

Had he not known the origin of the film — trapped on a glacier in Argentina for decades — LaBossiere “would have assumed it was on a shelf somewhere,” he said.

After more machines and more solutions, LaBossiere unspooled the film and held a strip to the light.

“Yeah,” he said. “Mountains and people.”

The color film was first processed in black and white, a safer way to get results. After determining the contrasts were sharp enough, they were processed in color.

Max Whittaker for The New York Times

Johnson was a good photographer. The photos are beautiful, haunting, marred only by streaks of moisture that color the frames, some more than others. They turn ordinary landscapes into something closer to art.

One of the rolls was unused. Johnson had carried it toward the summit with the apparent expectation that she would need it.

Another, found in a canister, had 36 exposures. The first frame was shot from a valley just short of base camp, an ethereal image of snow-covered mountains. Then came lots of penitentes and snow-covered peaks. They chronicle the expedition’s up-and-down method of moving from one camp to another, acclimatizing and hauling gear.

There is one photo of Johnson, having handed her camera to someone else. She is smiling, wearing a floppy hat and heavy-duty aluminum-framed glacier glasses. She has an ice ax in her right hand and an overstuffed pack on her back.

The roll found inside the camera had 24 photographs.

The seventh photo was taken near camp at the foot of the Polish Glacier. Only Johnson, Cooper, Zeller and McMillen went higher than that. Johnson snapped pictures from the glacier. Footprints dent the soft snow.

Around midday, the sun high and the shadows short, Johnson took a photo of one of the other climbers, who was downhill and sitting on the glacier.

Afternoon shadows got longer with each photograph. Soon the four climbers would dig a cave to sleep in. Cooper would head downhill the next morning while the other three continued up.

Frame 24, the last photo that Johnson took.

Johnson took more photos after Cooper was gone. The 21st photograph showed either Zeller or McMillen climbing ahead of her, into the afternoon sun, each step making deep holes in the snow.

Published in the Mazamas annual later that year is the opposite photograph, taken by Zeller — downhill, of Johnson hiking up on the summit ridge, at about 22,000 feet.

Johnson wore her floppy hat. Her coat was unzipped and her mittens dangled from strings at her sleeves. She held her ice ax in her right hand.

Before dark, Johnson snapped three more photographs of the surrounding Andes. If she was oxygen-deprived or delirious, she still knew how to focus the lens, compose the frame and hold the camera steady to take clear photographs.

That is where the film ends. That is where the legend begins.

The film does not solve the mystery. It adds to it. It tells you what Johnson saw in her final hours, but not how she felt. Not how she died.

Not every discovery leads to revelation. Some just make you want to know more.

THE MYSTERY

IF JANET JOHNSON and John Cooper were still alive, they would be in their late 80s.

All of the Americans from the expedition to Aconcagua are gone. Dafoe, the leader, died in a car crash on a rural Montana highway in 1975. Zeller died in 2003, McMillen in 2011. Shelton died in November, leaving behind a collection of old photos, Mazamas memos and newspaper files.

“It remains the greatest mystery of Aconcagua,” said Morán, the Argentine journalist who covered the expedition and its aftermath. He is 80 now. “This story had nearly faded from popular memory, but there are enough reasons for doubts and arguments to make the mystery persist.”

Folklore happens when facts are short and time is long. After all these years, this story is not about long-gone Americans on the mountain, but the unknown that lives in those who remain. It is less about certainty than memory and imagination.

play2:24“The story will keep being written.”*With no clear answers, the story has taken on a life of its own.*

Emily Rhyne and Noah Throop

A question arises again and again among those familiar with the story: Just what are the possibilities? An “accident” is a tidy catchall, a useful way to move on. What if it was something else?

Corvalán, a dean of Aconcagua guides, with 59 successful summits, first heard the stories from old-timers when he began climbing the mountain 35 years ago.

There were theories and embellishments, dots connected with fuzzy lines.

A love triangle gone wrong. A stash of money that was never found. Cooper as a government agent. Assassins who crossed the nearby Chilean border. Is that why Loren McIntyre, an American, had shown up, as if from thin air, to find the bodies? Why was he taking so many photographs?

Corvalán studied Johnson’s photos from 1973. He noted the shallow slope and the uncharacteristically soft snow on the Polish Glacier that year. A long fall and a deadly slide down the ice were improbable, maybe impossible, he said.

But something else bothered Corvalán. He has seen bodies ravaged by even short falls. Bones are broken. Clothing and equipment are shredded.

Why, Corvalán wondered, did so little of that appear to have happened to Johnson and Cooper? Why was the damage confined mostly to their faces?

Corvalán thought about it. He is a mountaineer. He has been atop the Seven Summits. He knows what experience and common sense tell him: an accident. But more than before, Corvalán believes that — maybe — there was foul play.

Foul play. It is a persistent, vague euphemism in this story. Negligence? Manslaughter? Worse? How? Why? Is it even possible at such an altitude, with such fatigue?

Corvalán shrugged.

Roberto Bustos, the base camp manager, is now 76. He has a file of yellowed clippings and photos at home. He has a rope that belonged to Shelton that he holds as a treasured memento.

Johnson's newly developed pictures stir memories but do not change his mind.

He sees what happened to Johnson and Cooper as "a mountain accident," he said, but he does not dismiss the possibility of something violent. Norms shift at high altitudes, he said. Desperation toys with right and wrong.

One thing that has not changed in 50 years, on mountains from Aconcagua to Everest, is the notion of ethics and responsibility. They get squishy at high altitudes, amid the dangers and limits of the moment.

"It's a different world at 6,000 meters, with different laws and rules," Bustos said. "And the behavior — you would go down to 5,000 meters and think these people are crazy."

If their climbing partners did all they reasonably could to help Cooper and Johnson, wasn't that enough? If they abandoned their colleagues to save themselves, or somehow did harm to them, could they be blamed?

Zeller's widow, in her 90s, said through her son that she did not want to talk about the expedition and requested no further contact.

"As a state policeman, he is precise, exacting and careful," the local newspaper wrote of Zeller in 1973. "When he speaks he says only what needs to be said. There are mysteries of the mountain he cannot explain. He is not used to that."

McMillen's family said that he continued to climb mountains for the rest of his life, including Denali twice, even after he was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. He had more than 100 dairy cows, and would give slide presentations of his climbs to friends and family in the barn.

His children recall McMillen talking about how he and others were held and questioned in Argentina because of the deaths. They know little about any speculation of foul play, of the stories spun in Argentina. It seems impossible to them.

Judge Victorio Miguel Calandria Agüero never made a ruling in the case. Shortly before he died in 2022, he was asked about the American expedition by a local journalist, who said that readers had followed the coverage "like a novel" and raised the specter of murder.

"None of that was ever proven," the judge said.

And then, from the ice, came Johnson's camera.

And whatever ghosts had been laid to rest were stirred back up again.

A stack of police logs from the 1970s in the Uspallata police station. The judge never made a ruling in the case.

Max Whittaker for The New York Times

IN OREGON CITY, ORE., Judie Abrahamson had not gone through her sister's belongings for years. They were stashed under the house, ignored if not forgotten.

None of it made a lot of sense — these slides of mountain landscapes and strangers in climbing gear, those yellowing newspaper clippings in Spanish where her mother crossed out every suggestion that her daughter ever wanted to die alone.

To Abrahamson, Janet Johnson was not an accomplished climber in Colorado or the haunting name that echoes in the Andes. She was not a someone else's legend or anybody else's mystery.

She was Janet, a brainy 10-year-old who asked for a little sister and welcomed her to the family with a doll. She was an overachiever who grew into a woman that her mother could not understand.

She was just a big sister, Aunt Janet to Abrahamson's kids, who set out to prove that she could do anything she wanted, even climb the highest mountains.

Abrahamson thinks about her sister and wonders how she might have grown old, might have climbed more mountains, might have come out, might have felt … accepted, even celebrated.

In Kansas, Joy Cooper is nearly 90, the older sister who remembers John Cooper as a little boy with so much wanderlust that their father had to build a fence to keep him in.

She remembers when people filled the church for his funeral, and they buried her little brother in the cemetery right after Christmas. Her parents were never quite the same after that.

In Texas, Randy Cooper, son of a NASA engineer, raised by a widowed mother who has since died, does not remember much of anything about his father. But he has been told that they share some of the same mannerisms, like the way they pop their knuckles.

As Randy got older, he decided to go by his first name: John. And when people asked about his father, he would tell them the only thing he really knew: My dad died mountain climbing.

The Johnson and Cooper families never learned much about what happened on Aconcagua. They just knew that things went wrong, and that Janet and John were gone.

The details — the newspaper stories, the letters, the official documents, all the questions and regrets — were swallowed up by sadness, then by time.