

**Program:** 1953 Summit of Mt. Everest and the 2003 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration in Nepal

**Speaker:** Jeff Rasley

**Introduced by:** John Prentice

**Attendance:** 122

**Guests:** James Stohler, David Williams Russell

**Scribe:** Benny Ko

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At 29,029 ft, Mt. Everest is the world's tallest mountain. It is located in Nepal, a small Himalayan nation but the mountain's north face also extends into Tibet.

Relegating the local names, the mountain was named Everest, after Sir George Everest, an early British surveyor. However, it was left to an Indian mathematician, Radhanath Sikdar, to calculate its height.

In the 20th century, the first serious attempt at summiting took place between 1921 and 1924 and was undertaken by a British team of mostly WWI veterans, including the acclaimed mountaineer of his generation, George Mallory. After a 1921 reconnaissance expedition through Tibet, the following year saw the team climb to less than 2000 ft below the summit, a record set by team member George Finch who pioneered the use of tank oxygen. 1923 was a year of preparation for yet another attempt. The 1924 expedition saw the setting of a new altitude record but this was overshadowed by the tragic disappearance of George Mallory and his young climbing partner, Sandy Irvine. They were last seen close to the summit but whether they did reach the summit may never be known. In May 1999, Mallory's body was found. Irvine's body remained missing but his ice ax was located about 1000 ft above Mallory's body.

The mountain remained unconquered until 1953 when New Zealand mountaineer Edmund Hillary and his Sherpa guide, Tensing Norgay, successfully summited Everest by taking a southern route through the Khumbu Valley of Nepal. The event was greatly celebrated throughout the world but particularly in the United Kingdom and Commonwealth countries. In subsequent decades, more climbing parties have successfully done so and the endeavor has become progressively popular and commercialized. This trend has profoundly changed the Nepali society. Tourism has become the second largest national income after agriculture. Among the many different ethnic groups that make up this tiny nation, the Sherpa people, highly regarded as Everest guides and porters, have become well-off with the increased trekking and climbing activities. However, with economic betterment comes a trade-off in losing some of their traditional ways and values.

In 2003, Rasley, by now a veteran of the Himalayas (he will eventually go on more than a dozen trips), was in Nepal for the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the first Everest summit. It was attended by an elderly Sir Hillary and his family, all of whom had done much in the interim half-century for the Sherpa people in the Khumbu Valley schools and clinics that have been built. Rasley and his friends would eventually do the same for the Rai people of Basa, a more remote and poorer region not on the tourist track. They also have built a school, a hydroelectric dam, a clinic, and public toilets, but all were done in a respectful and sensitive way to the indigenous values with attention to sustainability. Perhaps this could serve as a model for future international humanitarian projects.



Jeff Rasley