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Climber, Tom Frost, El Capitan, September 1961. *Photos provided by Frost – NACHA Archive*

By Will Voelkel

At the Black Bear

Tom Frost: The Story of a Lifetime

> In 1990, director Tom Seawell met Tom Frost, only to learn decades later that he was a legendary climber. In 2010, a small team of flatlanders began documenting Frost's life for the next decade. Trust and friendship grew, and what developed is THE STORY OF A LIFETIME.

So begins the inspiring, yet intimate, historical documentary film, *Frost: The Story of a Lifetime*, about Tom Frost, a pioneer in mountain climbing and a humble American legend. Directed by Tom Seawell of Flatlander Films LLC with partners Jeff Wiant and Craig Flax, the film will be featured at the 26th annual Black Bear Film Festival in Milford, PA, on October 10th.

A flatlander is a regional term used by people in hilly, mountainous, or high-altitude areas to describe an outsider or newcomer who comes from a flat region or a low-altitude city, and in Tom Frost's case, a non-mountain climber. Tom Frost consistently called the producers flatlanders, so naming their company was easy.

"Tom was an amazing and talented man in many different areas," explains Mr. Seawell. At various points in his life, Frost was an engineer who designed and built products that revolutionized not only the climbing world but the filmmaking industry as well; an artist whose iconic photography documented the most notable first ascents in Yosemite; and an environmentalist who, along with Royal Robbins and other renowned mountain climbers, engineered the "Clean Climbing" movement in the 1960s and 70s by encouraging the use and preservation of the natural features of the rock. "It was one of the first environmental movements that succeeded because it was fun!" states Seawell, "and 'fun' could have been Tom Frost's middle name."

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"I first met Tom Frost when we were working together at the Chimera warehouse, where he manufactured lighting equipment for the motion picture world," says Seawell. "He was hardworking and friendly, but also a private person, and never once did he mention his climbing career."

Years later, through a mutual acquaintance to whom he confided that he always wanted to do a documentary about an inspiring person, Tom Seawell connected with Tom Frost. "This friend, Bill Holshevnikoff, insisted that I call Tom Frost. I was pretty humble at the time, so Bill had to push me to make the call. I didn't realize until those first conversations with Tom that there was such rich content to be mined, both personally and professionally." Seawell asked his fellow filmmaker and close friend Jeff Wiant to join him, and Flatlander Films was born.

Tom Seawell started his career at the age of 25 as a still photographer in San Francisco. After a decade of getting his business off the ground, he was invited to team up with his favorite client at Lyon & Associates in San Diego at a separate company to produce commercials. "I enjoyed still photography, but I felt I couldn't say enough with still images, so I began to develop an interest in filmmaking. I was also interested in exploring ways to inspire people with storytelling. From that point on, I wanted to document inspirational stories."

To Mr. Seawell, Tom Frost was the perfect subject for an inspirational story. "He was bigger than life but always humble, which was especially appealing to me. Tom was patient and kind, and he inspired people to work harder, to always do their best and be their best. Yet he was also the most vulnerable person I had ever met."

From the start, the producers decided to edit the film in black and white. "I like black and white when it's used in the right way," explains Seawell, "and Jeff Wiant has always loved black and white. Wiant incorporated over 600 images from Frost's still photography archives from the 1950s and 1960s when he started climbing, and naturally that was in black and white. Also, when you're climbing

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Tom Frost later in his career

Black Cave bivouac, El Capitan, October 1964



on Yosemite granite, you look up and you look down, and almost everything you see is a palette of grays. Emotionally, black and white also seemed like a logical choice because Frost was an engineer, and he believed that less is more. We are discovering from audience reactions that our choice was spot on."

Once they got Frost's agreement to film his story, the producers faced the usual filmmaker financing challenges. They dug into their own pockets as well as those of friends and family and the community of climbers that wanted to bring Frost's story to life. They also found a group of committed sponsors in Mesa Rim Climbing Center, Yosemite Conservancy, Royal Robbins Clothing Company, and Alta Journal, all of whom allowed them to make the film the way they wanted.

"That was an important consideration in accepting funding," states Seawell. "We were determined to tell Tom Frost's inspiring story on a very intimate level in our way."

Research took years. Early research in 2012 and 2013 was conducted by Mark Maynard, and in 2014 Steve Grossman took over. Grossman was an amateur, but passionate, historian to whom Frost gifted his treasured photography archives. In addition, Jeff Wiant was the editor and Flatlander Films partner since day one and proved to be another invaluable resource.

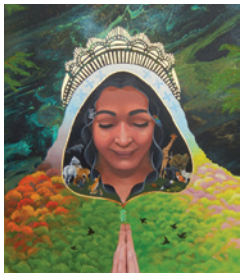
Despite all the research and production work that went into the creation of the film, the filmmakers were not satisfied with the initial product. "We wound up creating a puff piece about a bunch of men who were expert mountain-climbers, but it was nothing more than that—puff."

Frost died in 2018, and Marna Frost, his daughter, granted the filmmakers an interview at the tail end of Covid. "Ten minutes into the interview, I knew we were capturing the story Jeff and I wanted to tell," explains Seawell. They slowly and meticulously got back to work by rewriting 80% of the film. "Marna gave us the pieces we really needed to tell Tom Frost's full story. That interview was a true gift."

Tom Seawell laughs as he recounts how Tom Frost fired him after two days of filming because the interviews with

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Frost were getting too personal. Frost wanted the film to be about the golden age of mountain climbing, not about him. "That was typical of Tom: very private and very humble." Ultimately, in Mr. Seawell's opinion, they were able to make a film that honored the profession and the man. "Over time, we got to know Tom and he got to know us. As audiences experience in the film, Tom began to open up, which brought out his personal side. He was an imperfect but extraordinary man, and that combination of emotional resonance and incredible achievement contributed greatly to the success of the film."

And speaking of success, the film was released on May 1st, 2026, with its world premiere at Mountainfilm in Telluride and has already played at and garnered awards at the Yosemite Film Festival, where it won both the El Capitan Award for best picture and The Camp 4 Audience Choice Award.

In late August, the team screened the film to a full and enthusiastic house for a fundraiser at the Presidio Theater in San Francisco and headed to the Breckenridge Film Festival in September, while putting the final touches on agreements with Mountainfilms in Arequipa, Peru. Clearly, momentum is building!

"As producers, we are also grateful to smaller communities for showcasing the film. Intimate stages build community, and this is what Tom Frost loved," adds Jeff Wiant.

The film was instantly intriguing to the Black Bear Film Festival committee that previewed and selected it. "*Frost: The Story of a Lifetime* is a wonderful story, and the film relates to many things about Milford's location with its access to national parks and recreation," says Darian Rivera, President of the Black Bear Film Festival. "It captures so many things about an amazing person. It's not just about mountain-climbing."

Mr. Seawell and Mr. Wiant will be present on Saturday, October 10th at 5 p.m. at the Black Bear Film Festival's Main Stage to present the film and answer audience questions. "Our goal is that during this 104-minute experience, audiences will be entertained and moved," say the producers. "We hope the Black Bear audience will come out to join us and experience Tom Frost's story for themselves."

Will Voelkel is a former Executive Director and board member at Black Bear Film Festival and a regular contributor to The Journal.







