In 1971 a photo of a snow-covered chorten near a Buddhist Monastery inspired me to spend three months making a documentary of village life in the world's highest mountains.

You can see the film on youtube [here](https://www.youtube.com).
I was 21 at the time, idealistic, somewhat fearless, and a film student at UCLA. My friends Ward Sellers and Alan Wald were traveling toward India, so I proposed to meet them there and go north to shoot the film. My UCLA advisor, Lou Stoumen, helped with approvals and 16mm film equipment.

To prepare, I worked three jobs and alternated between daily jogging and swimming. Loaded with 66 lbs of gear, I set out alone, counting on snail mail to find my friends. The war between India and Pakistan was on, which led to missing flights and a scary air raid experience, but I managed to connect with Ward and Alan in New Delhi. Tibet was closed to all travelers, so we limited our plans to Nepal. When we arrived the Nepali people were warm and welcoming.

A few days later we flew from noisy Katmandu 80 miles west to Pokhara, a sleepy agricultural village. Asking around, we located an ex-pat English author whom we had contacted by letter. He helped us find two porters and a young Tibetan, Tom Ting, to translate. With gear loaded, the five of us trekked for a month in the western mountains of Nepal. I immediately got a bad GI bug for two days; this was in the middle of a drenching storm with leeches appearing everywhere. Our tent weathered it better than I did. When the clouds cleared we could see
around us the incredibly green, verdant village of Biratante. We started filming at once.

Any time I did anything technical with the equipment, I was instantly overwhelmed by noisy, curious children. Adults were more reticent, and held a deep calm. While poor by Western standards, the villagers were cheerful and seemed generally healthy. They practiced subsistence farming in the midst of stunning beauty, pristine air and rushing water. I saw none of stress and angst so common in the West.

We trekked on an old pilgrimage route to Mustang. The people along that route were used to honoring spiritual travelers. I had a necklace of coral and turquoise beads; they were valuable, a form of money in the region. One day I napped at a tiny home in Ghorepani, tired from making a 5,000 ft. climb through forests of Rhododendrons. The necklace string broke and fell on the bed. We left without noticing. Twenty minutes later, the home owner came running up to return my necklace with a smile. After another week on the trail, washing my hair got to be a priority. I found a rare spout of ice cold water and washed up. The experience left me euphoric. Then fleas decided my sleeping bag was their new home. Soon I was covered with red, itchy bites. It felt like a miracle when we located some flea powder in the next village. It was probably
poisonous, but for me it was a real blessing.

We got hungry, trekking all day at high elevation. The locals generally ate the same dinner every night, and joining them was our only option. Everyone ate dal bhat and tarkari; dal is a spicy lentil sauce, bhat is rice, and tarkari, an extremely spicy vegetable dish - one time I almost couldn't eat it, despite intense hunger. Even with our young translator, there were communication barriers. Once we asked about buying some breakfast, since our supply of dried eggs had run out. He translated this as a request for "food." With surprised expressions, our hosts prepared us another dinner just like the previous night. Later we found we could ask for "tsampa" and get roasted barley flour with hot water and sour yak butter; nourishing, though not delicious.

In the village of Marpha, there was a small Tibetan temple with monks chanting; we obtained permission to film them after making an offering of 18 butter lamps, and the lamps gave us just enough light to shoot by. Later a thunderstorm washed over town and a landslide collapsed our host's barn, killing the goat inside. We woke up and were greeted by the bloody sight of men skinning and dressing the poor beast. As Buddhists, they wouldn't kill an animal; but they were
quite cheerful about having the storm provide them with meat.

We skirted the spectacular Annapurna mountain to go to Jomsom, in the Mustang region, for their Fall festival of renewal. This featured the music of drums, bells, cymbals, chanting, and huge Tibetan horns. Masked monks danced all day in the interior courtyard of the monastery, pausing only to change costumes. The masks of demons, animals, and skeletons were bright and elaborate. At the end they donned monkey costumes, and jumped around sitting on each other; we learned they were making fun of some local officials. Finally the monks seemed to be honoring an odd carved figure in a wooden cage at the center of the yard - as a woman, I was specifically told not to film it; however they did allow Ward to. The colorful temple there appeared to be influenced by the ancient Tibetan Bon-po practice. Bon is pantheistic, animistic, shamanistic, and much more oriented to nature spirits than Buddhism.
After extending our visas again, Ward and I flew through the clouds to Lukla. We had taken a Short Take Off & Landing plane — required for the tiny airstrip, which had a cliff at one end and a rock wall at the other. Lukla is next to Namche Bazaar, a last provisioning point for Everest Base Camp. Asking around at the shop stalls, we found a Sherpa couple, Mingma and Namduk, to be our guides and porters. Since so many Europeans have come to attempt Mt. Everest, Mingma spoke some English. Everest is known as Sagarmatha to the Nepalis, or Chomolungma to Tibetans, meaning Goddess Mother of the Mountains.
In the morning, the two Sherpas compared our loads of gear, and gave the heavier one to the woman. We were surprised, but they explained it was because the women have more endurance.

Mingma and Namduk guided us to Tengboche Monastery, where we bought "khata" scarves and presented them to the head lama. He was gracious, but seemed bored with the task of greeting so many travelers. The next morning, we trekked past the same chorten which had inspired the whole trip; just that once, the 2 degree Fahrenheit weather froze my camera shutter so I couldn’t take a photo next to it. We trudged upwards to Pongboche, where we filmed bits of a Buddhist initiation ceremony, then to the thin air of Dingboche (14,469 ft. elevation). From there, Ward and the Sherpas went off for a week to climb Kala Patthar, a relatively small mountain at only 18,514 ft. I stayed at Dingboche to film village life. I was living with Mingma’s father’s family, and got by with my minimal Nepali. Like most, they had just one room where everyone slept and ate. This is where I shot the potato-eating, hair washing, and barley threshing parts of life at one of the world’s highest villages. Some of the images will stay with me forever. From the yard we looked across to the dramatic 23,349 ft snowy peak of Ama Dablam. I’ll never forget walking alone by starlight near the cliff-edge of the Dudh Knosi River. And even now, in my mind I can hear the old man, Da Nam Gya, repeating “Om mani padme hum” as everyone peeled and ate steaming potatoes.
All this was decades before Western technology took hold in the mountains. There were no package tours of Nepal in 1971. Beyond Kathmandu, Pokhara and Lukla, there were no cars, roads, hotels, cafes, or airports. Only twice on the entire western part of our trip did we ever meet other trekkers. Despite the leeches, fleas, and GI upset, I felt so privileged to experience the beauty of intact village culture. I was especially impressed with how the people spent so much of their time singing; basically, if they were working, they were singing.

Himalayan Pilgrimage has unusual visual textures; I was not interested in linear narrative at the time. I was inspired by experimental film makers of the era to make this film with a lot of "stop-motion" shooting techniques. Later I used optical printing to stretch out the more poetic shots. I wanted to present the awesome mountains and reveal many facets of this vibrant culture. It was important to me to do this without an authoritative white male voice-over, which was, at the time, the absolute norm for documentaries. The video copy shown here has been transferred many times; some day I hope to salvage the original film and get a new, high resolution transfer. When I premiered the 16mm film at UCLA's huge Melnitz Hall with its xenon-arc projector, the experience was breathtaking. Himalayan Pilgrimage was selected for one of the early film festivals, LA FILMEX, and won several awards at other festivals in the next few years. © 1972 Jo L Carson