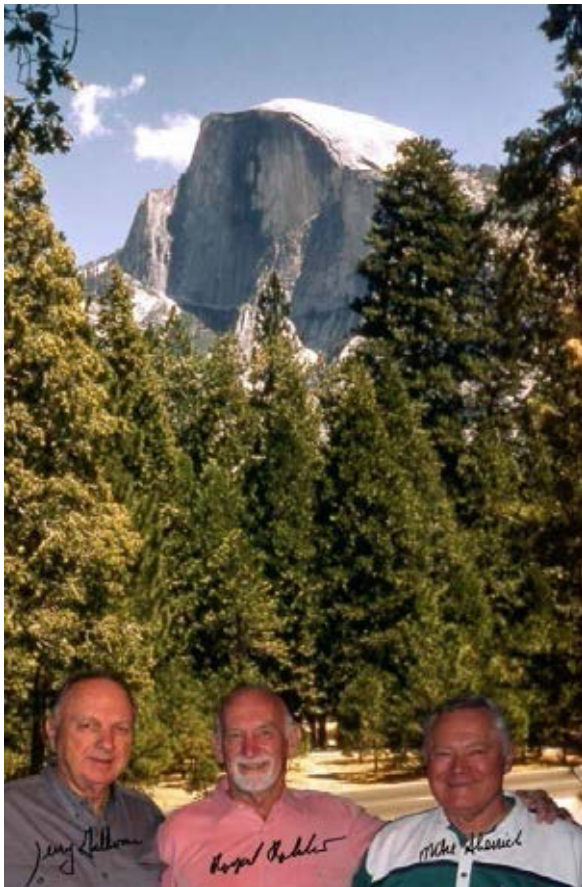


Excerpted from this article on the American Alpine Club's site, p. 63

[http://explore.americanalpineclub.org/media/AAC\\_CollectiveAccess\\_System/images/3/0/49681\\_ca\\_object\\_representations\\_media\\_3069\\_original.pdf](http://explore.americanalpineclub.org/media/AAC_CollectiveAccess_System/images/3/0/49681_ca_object_representations_media_3069_original.pdf)

# *Half Dome*

## **First Ascent of the North West Face**



*Jerry Gallwas*  
*Royal Robbins*  
*Mike Sherrick*

1955 Attempt

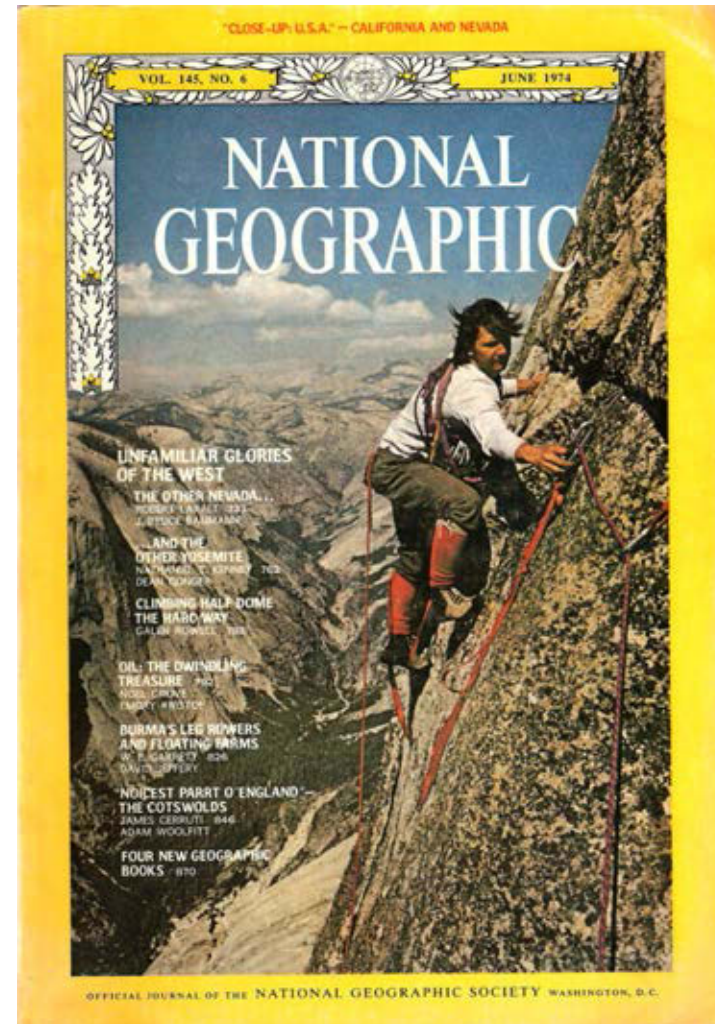
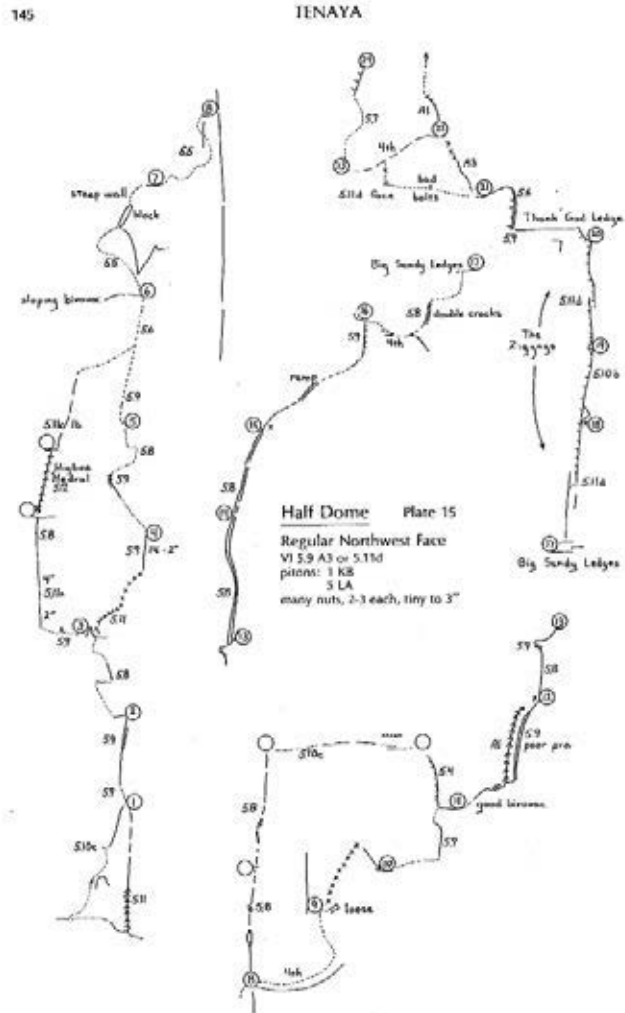
1957 1<sup>st</sup> Ascent

2007 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Reunion

Selected Readings and Photos

**Meyers, Yosemite Climbs,  
A Rock Climbing Guide to  
Yosemite Valley, p. 145**

**National Geographic Magazine,  
Vol. 145, No. 6, pp. 782-791, June 1974,  
*Climbing Half Dome the Hard Way,*  
Galen Rowell**

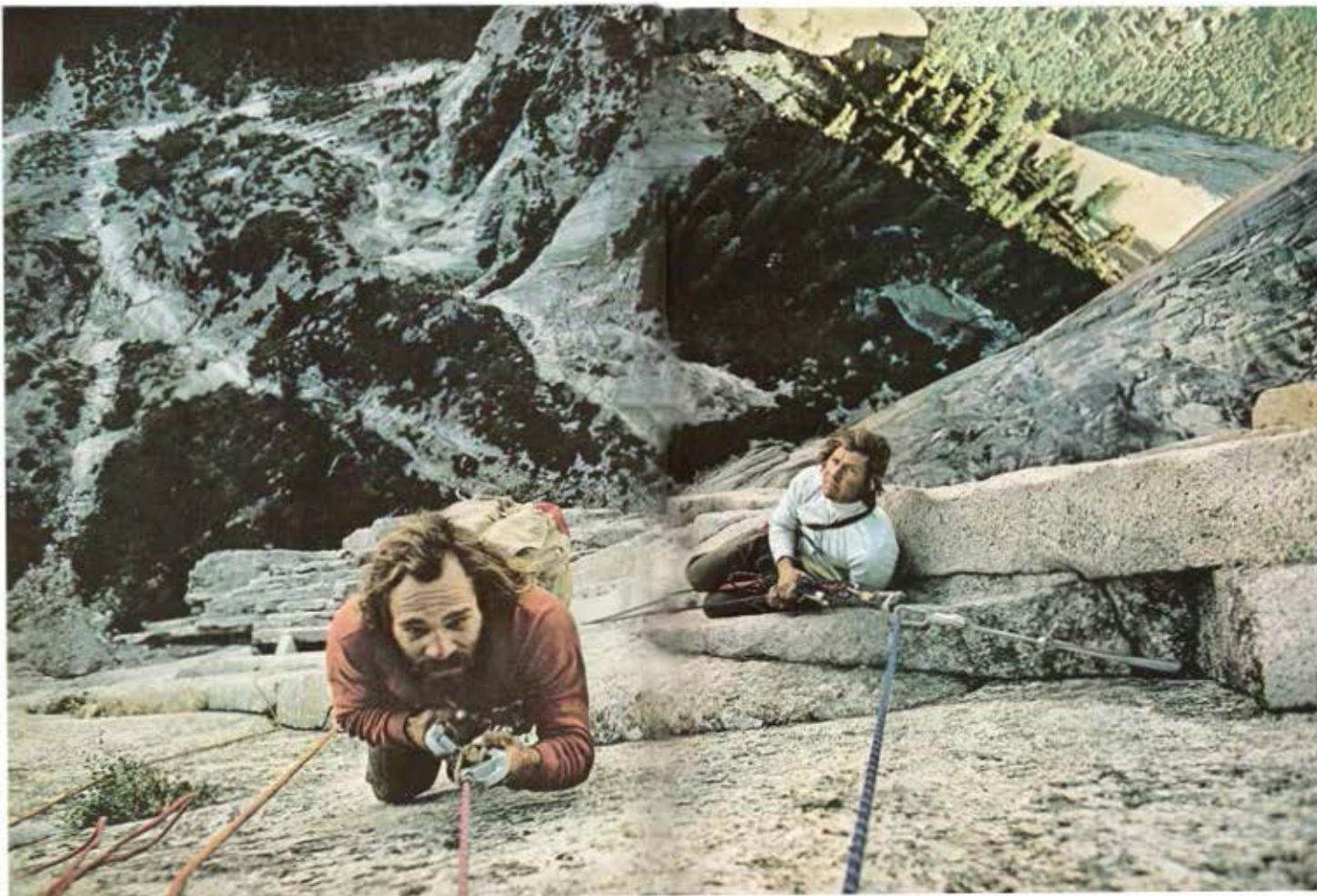


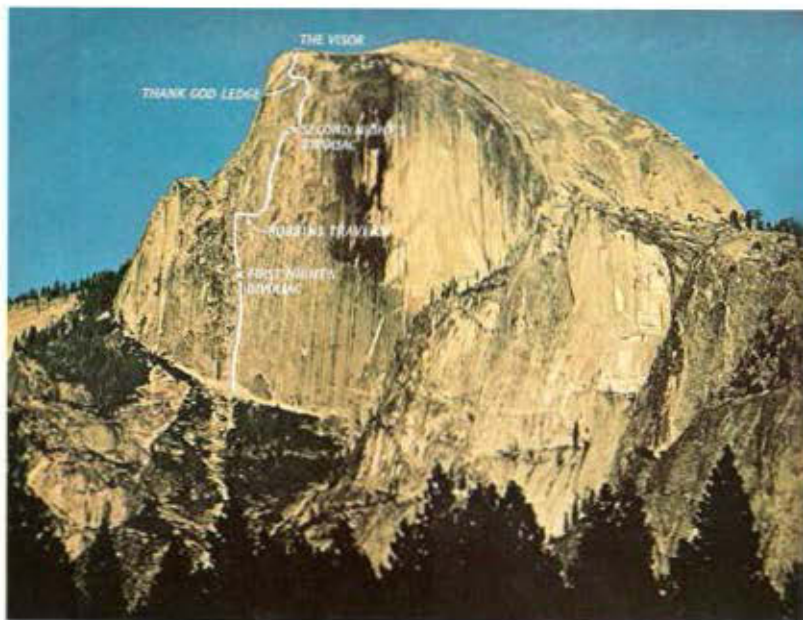
# Climbing Half Dome the Hard Way

ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY GALEN ROWELL

**Straight below us**—1,600 feet of empty air. **Above us**—400 feet of perpendicular granite. This is our third day on Yosemite's famed Half Dome, whose sheer northwest face has never before been "climbed clear"—that is, without driving steel pitons into the rock. For anchors and fall-stoppers we use only aluminum wedges and nuts, also called chocks. These can be popped into and out of cracks with our fingers and do not scar the rock permanently, as pitons do. On such anchors, some no larger than a child's thumbnail, we stake our climb, our hopes, and our lives.

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I HATED TO LEAVE the security of a good foothold. A rope ran slack from my waist diagonally down the cliff, ending in the hands of Dennis Hennek, who stood securely anchored on a two-foot-wide ledge.

Between us a series of carabiners gleamed like oversize safety pins, attaching the rope to various anchors in the rock. The nearest was ten feet below me. From there it was another fifty feet to Dennis, and then a thousand feet straight down to the bottom of the northwest face of Half Dome, the massive rock wall in Yosemite that John Muir called "sublime."

Viewed from its base, this sheer cliff hangs from clouds to earth, like a vast granite tapestry spread over 160 vertical acres. No one can fail to marvel at the colossal forces that carved it through the ages—massive uplift, stream cutting, and glacial bulldozing along a fracture zone. To everyone the soaring, 7,000-foot wall is beautiful. To a rock climber it is irresistible. We were into the second day of our ascent.

The northwest face of Half Dome was first climbed in 1957 and had often been scaled

since, but never as we were doing it now.

I looked in front of me at a crack in the rock: an eighth of an inch wide and deeper than I could see. From the equipment hanging from my shoulder I picked out a tiny aluminum wedge, smaller than a thumbnail, barely an eighth of an inch thick. From it hung a steel loop thinner than a shoelace.

Gently I threaded the wedge into a narrow spot in the crack and tugged hard on that cable loop. It would have to hold my full weight, even if I should fall.

#### Where a Walk Becomes an Act of Faith

I clipped my rope into the cable loop and yelled to Dennis, "Lower me!"

The rope tightened. I left my foothold and walked diagonally down the wall to a tiny ledge, higher than Dennis but far to his right. I breathed a sigh of relief. The first part of the Robbins Traverse, midway up the sheer face of Half Dome, was over.

The traverse name honors Royal Robbins, leader of a three-man party that made the first ascent of the face 16 years before our

attempt. At that time it was the longest, most difficult rock climb ever accomplished in North America. Of the five days and four nights on the wall, Robbins said, "We were really scared because we hadn't done anything like it before."

I knew how he felt. Fear is normal for anyone attempting the unknown, and we too were trying something never attempted before: a climb of such length and duration, carrying no pitons.

A piton is a steel support to be hammered into a crack until it rings like a railroad spike. Big climbs had been considered impossible without such aids as pitons and expansion bolts. At the least, a climber would take them along just in case; an Austrian mountaineer has described a climber who takes that sort of precaution: "He carries his courage in his rucksack."

Instead, we relied for protection on little pieces of aluminum alloy that can be inserted into narrow places in cracks and lifted out again with one's fingers.

Called chocks or nuts, these remarkable little aluminum devices come in the form of narrow wedges (page 786) and in multifaceted shapes. The use of nuts developed more than a decade ago in the English Lake District and in Wales. Some of the first nuts were picked up along the Snowdon railway by climbers on their way to scale Welsh crags. With a small rope looped through its hole, a regular machine nut could be jammed into a crack to serve as a safety anchor.

Today nuts are manufactured specifically for climbers, in various sizes to fit cracks up to six inches wide. In an ideal spot a nut may have even more holding power than a piton. But pitons fit into far more places than nuts.

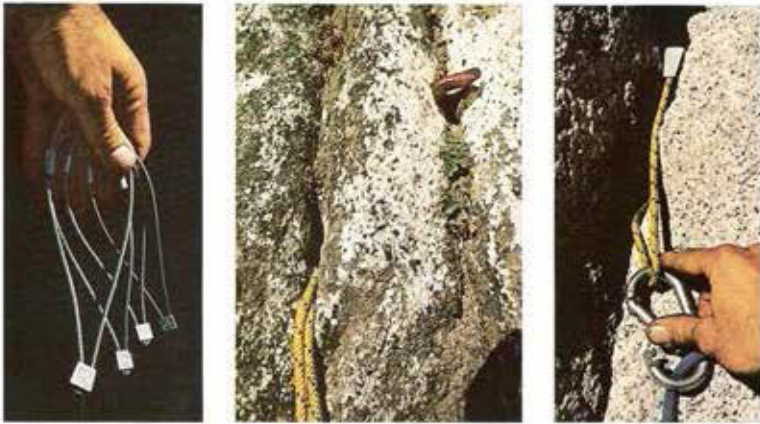
Minor Shock Increases the Suspense

I was unaware of our total dependence on nuts until the first afternoon of our climb, when Dennis yelled up to me: "We've looked in all the bags and can't seem to find the pitons. They must have been left behind."

Dennis Hennek was not a convincing fiber. A veteran of dozens of multiday climbs, from the Arctic to the Andes, he was far too



Considered unclimbable for years, Half Dome's northwest face was first scaled in 1957 by Royal Robbins and two companions. Many have followed—so many, in fact, that Half Dome's cracks bear the unsightly white scars of countless pitons. We hope others will follow our example of using only rock-saving chocks. Here Dennis Hennek (right) has the lead. Doug Robinson and I follow, removing chocks placed by Dennis as we go and leaving the wall unmarred—as if nothing more than another cloud shadow had passed across its ancient face.



Wall-walkers' tools include such indispensable kinds of chocks as stoppers (left), aluminum wedges made to stop you if you fall. These and similar devices are dropped or pushed into cracks and secured with downward jerks of their steel or nylon cables. Upward yanks usually suffice to remove them. One such nut-and-sling has been set into a crack (center) a few inches from a rusty piton left by earlier climbers. A safety-pin-like carabiner (right) clips the anchor to the climber's rope. Doug (opposite) makes a traverse with his armory of carefully racked hardware dangling and clanging

experienced and careful to have left pitons behind—unless he did it purposely. He and our other companion, Doug Robinson, had sorted the climbing equipment together.

I realized what Dennis meant: This time we were not carrying our courage in our rucksacks. We were committed to an adventure.

Now, well into our second day, it was Doug's turn to lead. From my ledge in the middle of Robbins Traverse I watched him struggle. He tried vainly to place a nut ten feet above me in a narrow crack with flaring sides. Was this as far as we could go?

Doug's right leg began to shake like an old-fashioned sewing machine. He came down and rested. This section is usually climbed by pounding in pitons and using direct aid—attaching a nylon ladder to a piton and moving upward to place another.

Doug could find no nut that the flaring crack would accept, so he tried a different way. As Dennis fed out rope, he traversed downward to a crack only a few inches wide.

Our spirits lifted as we watched Doug "free climb"—using footholds and fingerholds only,

without direct support from rope or anchors. Soon he reached a perfect slot where at last he placed a nut that not even the weight of a car could have budged.

This nut gave Doug the confidence to continue free climbing. Soon he had his hands on a ledge a hundred feet long and half as wide as a city sidewalk. The difficulties of the Robbins Traverse were behind us.

#### Doug's Ideal: the Mountain Goat

Doug fixed several nuts for anchors, and on an extra rope he hauled up our two sacks holding sleeping gear, food, and four gallons of water in plastic bottles. Dennis and I joined him, lifting out the nuts Doug had placed for protection on his lead.

Happy about that morning's progress, we lunched on sausage, cheese, and hard candies. I thought back to the day I'd asked Doug if he would be interested in climbing Half Dome.

He had politely refused, because of his feelings about pitons and "direct-aid climbing." Instead of standing in a nylon ladder while driving a row of pitons ever higher, he





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DENNIS (MIDDLE LEFT) AND THE AUTHOR (BELOW)



There are always strings attached—climbing ropes, haul lines, slings. If you use such lifelines to support your weight, it's called "direct-aid climbing." If you use them only to catch you in case you fall—as an acrobat uses his net—it's called "free climbing."

That's me (far left) using direct aid on a sheer granite face. What's holding me up? Not the climbing rope, but an *étrier*—a nylon loop supported by a nut I've just anchored, into which my right foot fits stirrup-fashion.

Free climbing up a crack system, Dennis (middle left) jams fists and feet into the fissure in a technique called "jamming."

After a day's muscle-numbing labor, we "tie in" to a high-rise ledge (above) and enjoy some food, rest, and the luxury of taking off our shoes.

In this vertical world you have to be prepared for sudden *oops* and downs. Trying a too-risky shortcut near the summit, I "peel," or fall, but only about ten feet (near left). The rope, anchored from above, pulls taut and stops me just above a little ledge. *Amen!*

preferred to climb like a mountain goat, on skill alone, using the rope only as a backup.

Doug moved to the mountains after college to make his living by guiding and writing. Simplicity keynotes his life. He and a friend once set out on skis from the south end of the John Muir Trail, near Mount Whitney, and arrived in Yosemite Valley more than a month later. They went in winter, without stove, thermometer, watch, or compass, to experience the mountains on their own terms, not just on man's way of measuring them.

I knew that Doug was in superb condition and had the skill to climb Half Dome. I told him that some recent ascents had been more than 80 percent free climbing; by using nuts, we would not need many pitons.

After much thought, Doug replied, "I'll go if we climb it clean." Meaning no pitons at all.

I said, "Let's try it clean, but we'll carry some pitons just in case." Doug agreed, we shook hands, and met a week later in Yosemite.

The idea of using nuts instead of pitons implies much more than a wish for simplicity. The last man in a climbing party usually removes the pitons, so they can be used again.

By the late 1960's, thousands of climbers had placed and removed tens of thousands of pitons in Yosemite alone, wearing natural cracks into ugly white scars. Wild and once-remote cliffs were fast becoming worn pegboards in an open-air gymnasium.

One could, of course, avoid crack damage by leaving the pitons in place. But that would rob a climb of much of its adventure. Climbing is essentially a wilderness activity, and a row of pitons snaking up a rock wall detracts greatly from the experience of being part of a natural scene untouched by man.

#### Climbing to Cracks and Chimneys

With lunch finished, we turned our attention back to cracks and climbing.

Crack systems are like rivers in the rock, guiding traffic over vertical terrain, making climbing possible on otherwise blank cliffs.

Above Robbins Traverse we followed a large crack system for 600 feet, mostly in chimneys—cracks wide enough to crawl inside and ascend by pressing against the sides with shoulders, back, arms, or legs. By the second evening we reached a series of ledges only 400 feet below the summit.

In the setting sun we found simple joy in walking back and forth, dragging our bare toes through the sand deposited on the lofty,

two-foot-wide ledges by centuries of erosion.

Much of a climb is quiet and reflective. So it was now, 1,600 feet above the base of the cliff and 4,500 feet above the dim, hazy valley floor. We spoke little during a supper of sardines, raisins, and water. As we had done the previous evening on a narrow ledge a thousand feet below, we bedded down for the night, roping ourselves to the wall so as not to roll off in our sleep (page 789).

#### When All Else Fails, Try a "Skyhook"

In the clear air of the third morning we looked down into the valley almost a mile below, watching antlike people, seeing them clearly, feeling close to them, and yet so far.

I began the first lead toward the Visor, an overhang of the summit that juts 50 feet into space (diagram, page 784). The steep rock soon became so difficult that I could no longer free climb. Working my way upward with nylon ladders attached to nuts, I came to a spot I couldn't pass. None of the nuts would hold in the slightly overhanging crack.

Dennis yelled up, "Can you get a hook in?"

I spotted a nubbin of rock not much larger than my thumb. It had a flat top on which I managed to hang a "skyhook"—a steel hook you use when you'd like to use your fingernails but know they aren't strong enough. On a nylon ladder attached to the hook, I moved up to where I could place another nut.

Dennis and Doug each led for a section until we reached the beginning of Thank God Ledge, so named by the Robbins party because it enabled them to avoid the Visor. Several climbers have taken the name to mean a shelf big enough for bivouac. The tiny ledge was a severe disappointment to them. It is only 15 inches at its widest.

Doug led across the ledge, crawling past the narrowest part. From its end, he placed a nut for safety as high as he could reach, before free climbing a very difficult crack.

We were now only 150 feet below the summit. Friends who had walked up the cable-secured pathway on the back of the dome (page 779) waved from the top. But our climb was not over. The cracks were narrow and parallel-sided: archenemies of nut placing.

Dennis led off delicately, placing tiny wired wedges. Fortunately the rock face was rough, allowing a combination of free and aid climbing. He supported part of his weight on the rock, the rest on the meager wedges.

Soon he came to a place that would prove

to be the key to the success or failure of the climb. Instead of pursuing one crack at a time, he now had to deal with discontinuous cracks—climbing a foot or two up one crack, and then reaching to a completely different one, two or three feet to the side. His goal was a ledge that looked deceptively close but was in fact 30 feet above him.

Time seemed to stand still as Dennis placed a skyhook. Then a very special nut—the smallest of all, made of chrome-molybdenum steel and only a sixteenth of an inch thick.

Finally another tiny wedge, his most secure anchor in 20 feet. All three of us were so engrossed that to us those moments expanded to contain all reality. The crux of the climb was in Dennis's hands.

Finally he yelled down, "Off belay!"

He had tied his rope to solid anchors on the shelf above. Now only two moderate

leads separated us from our waiting friends.

I led one, Dennis the next, and soon we were hauling the last bag onto the flat summit.

At dusk we walked down along the cables on the back of the dome and set up camp in the forest near a spring. We had not had hot food or drink for three days, and the tea with its flavor of the aluminum pot seemed the finest liquid we could have tasted. Our beds of pine needles were more comfortable than any mattresses we could imagine.

In the morning we watched the sunrise under brewing storm clouds as we hiked the remaining seven miles to the valley floor. At the end of the trail we boarded the public shuttle bus with our heavy packs, dust, and odors. We felt satisfied and yet strangely depressed—because our adventure was finished.

That feeling will disappear only when the next adventure begins. □



"There is no upness comparable to the mountains," wrote Sierra-loving John Muir. His words mirror our feelings as we stand—Doug, Dennis, and I—on Half Dome's summit. We are proud right down to the marrow of our aching bones that we not only achieved this upness on our own, but that we did it without marring the way of those who follow.