

San Francisco Examiner

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**Jim Wood on
the Blue Fox's
great desserts**

IMAGE

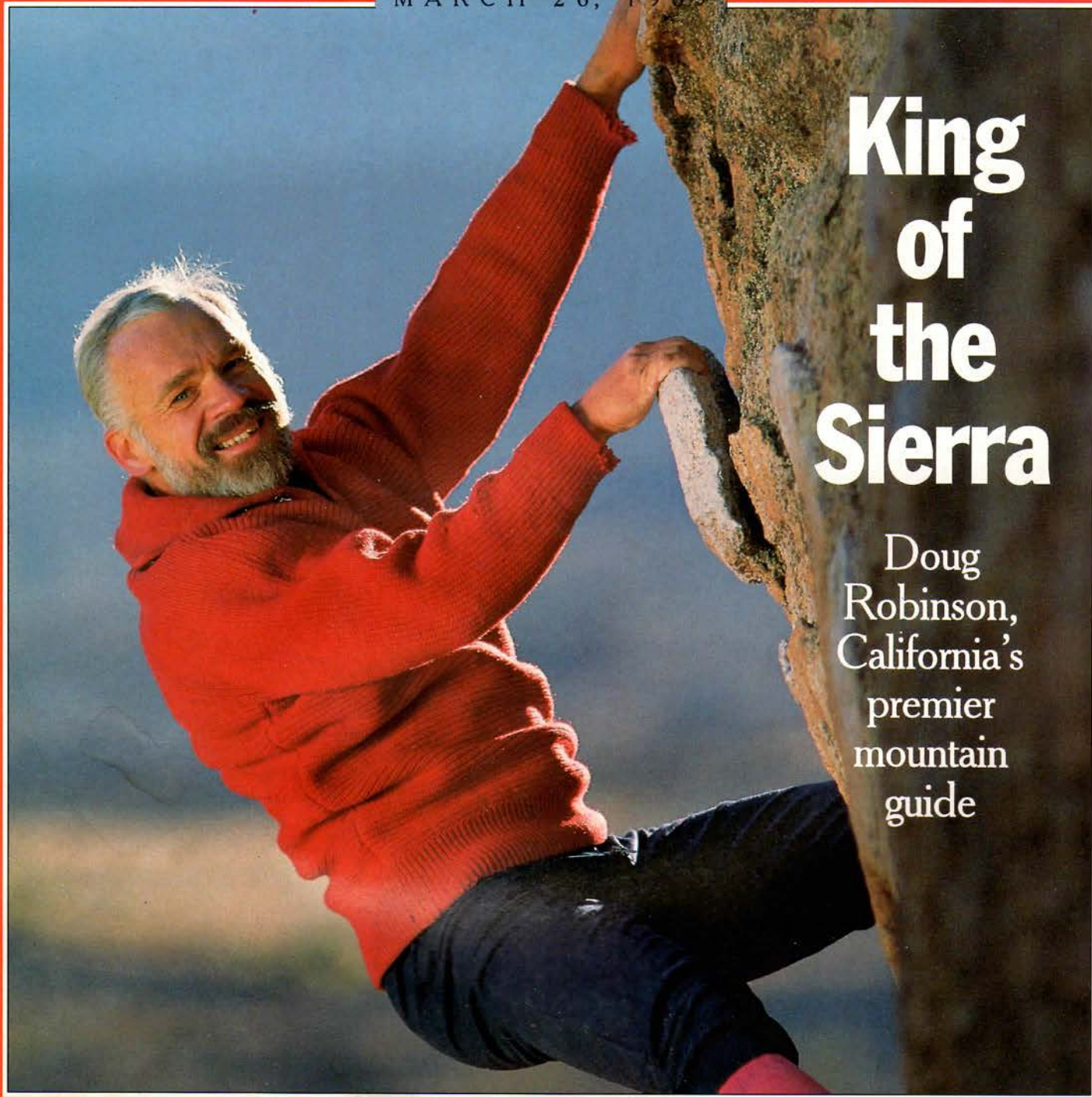


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MARCH 26, 1989

King of the Sierra

Doug
Robinson,
California's
premier
mountain
guide





THE
CUTTING
EDGE

Mountain man

Doug Robinson, molded by John Muir, Thoreau and Nietzsche, finds a home in the "Range of Light."

By John Flinn

Photographs by Vern Clevenger and Marc Muench

Young hotshot climbers in day-glo parkas turn and watch as the man with the grey beard steps up to the frozen waterfall and swings his ancient wooden ice axe.

He moves upward with an easy steadiness, each whack of his axe sending out a tiny shower of ice chips. Soon he's 60 feet off the ground on seriously vertical terrain, with only the picks of his two axes and the half-inch front points of his crampons connecting him to the hard ice. A mistake here would be messy. "The ice up here is a little brittle, but it's not too bad," he calls down, with all the tension in his voice of someone cleaning out his rain gutter.

A young climber in blond dreadlocks nudges his friend. "Hey, that's Doug Robinson up there," he says. "he's way rad."

It's just another day at the office for 43-year-old Robinson, the Sierra Nevada's premier mountain guide, adrenaline junkie, wilderness writer and adventure capitalist. Scaling vertical rock faces and carving elegant ski turns down remote mountains is his occupation.

For the last 30 years he's been climbing up and down the world's greatest mountain ranges, from the Himalayas to the Wind Rivers, from New Zealand's Southern Alps to the high-altitude volcanoes of Mexico. He'll even drive all the way to Oklahoma to climb a rock in a wheat field. ("You'd be surprised.

It's really good granite," he says.)

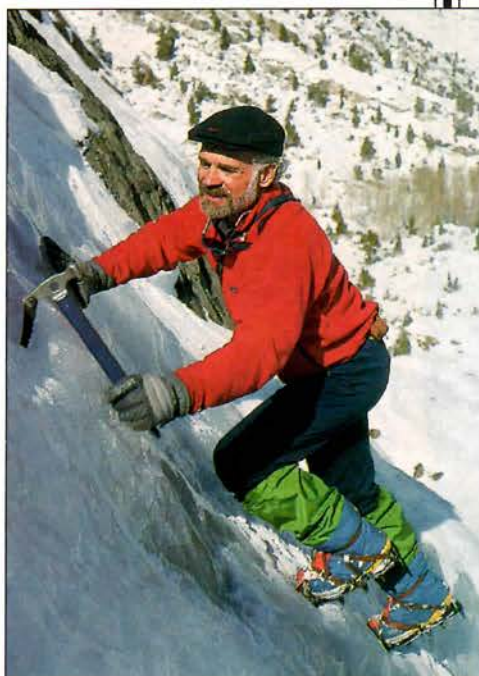
Robinson might flirt with other mountains, but like John Muir before him he keeps returning to his first love, the Sierra Nevada, the mountains Muir called "The Range of Light." If he has any permanent address, it's the rugged eastern side of the range, where the Sierra crest juts up 10,000 feet above the Owens Valley. Winter often finds him amid snowdrifts in a ramshackle cabin up in Rock Creek Canyon, where he can gaze out the window and type on his laptop computer. There is no running water, but the view beats that of any Nob Hill penthouse.

"Doug is looked upon by his peers as the mountaineering guru of the High Sierra," said fellow guide Allan Bard. "In a howling storm, when it's snowing and the wind is blowing, he could get a flatworm up 13 feet of greased twine."

But can he coax us up a frozen waterfall? I'm tagging along as he teaches two clients the subtleties of climbing ice near the Mammoth Mountain ski resort. Terry Weiner is a Himalayan veteran and Chris Malcolm an aspiring guide. Together they're planning an expedition to the Andes this summer, and they've come to the master for advice.

"Another guide was starting to teach me ice climbing a few weeks ago, but when he heard I was going to be taking a lesson from Doug Robinson, he just put his gear back in his pack," Weiner said.

He and Malcolm are good climb-



Tiptoeing up a frozen waterfall. Robinson says dancers make the best climbers.

ers, and they scamper up the waterfall with little trouble. Now the rope comes tight against my waist harness and it's my turn.

I kick my front crampon points into something that looks like a refrigerator badly in need of defrosting. It's water ice, the hardest kind. I gingerly stand up on it. So far so good. A couple of swings of my ice tools and I'm a little higher. Sixty feet off the ground comes the dead vertical section and I feel my arms growing weaker. My left leg starts to shake uncontrollably. Climbers call this "sewing machine leg."

The sun vanishes behind a cloud and the cold drains away any residual boldness I might have had. This is called the "Wimp Chill Factor." Logic tells me I'm in no danger of



falling to the ground, because Robinson is holding the rope tightly. But every instinct in me is afraid to find out. "Try lowering your heels a little," he says, his voice full of easy-going reassurance. "It's balance that's important, rather than strength. Dancers make good climbers, but weight lifters don't always."

His advice works. I relax a little and ease myself over the vertical bulge. Soon I'm pulling myself over the top of the waterfall. Robinson grins and shakes my hand. "You looked pretty sharp," he says. The ability to lie convincingly is a key job skill for a mountain guide.

Robinson hardly looks like most people's idea of a mountain man. His hair is thin and greying, his beard more salt than pepper. He stands 5-foot-5, weighs 145 pounds and doesn't look particularly strong. But it would be a serious mistake to bet against him in a pull-up contest or long-distance race.

The son of an aerospace engineer, Robinson grew up far from the mountains in upper-middle-class Los Altos. In school he was a loner and below average student whose classroom daydreams revolved around adventure. A washout at Little League and other team sports, he found solitude and a measure of success in distance running. He discovered something else in the sport, too.

"I found this incredible feeling of euphoria that kicked in after a certain distance," Robinson said. "It tempted me to run to exhaustion." He has been chasing that feeling ever since.

His family went camping each summer in Yosemite National Park, and at age 13 Robinson began scrambling onto the park's granite rock faces. He admits he was not particularly good at first.

"I got a pair of lug sole boots, so I figured I was a real mountaineer. I started up Pywiack Dome, next to Tenaya Lake, and when I was 400 feet off the ground, almost to the top, I froze. I was just paralyzed. I

was stuck there for four hours before the ranger rescued me."

But something kept drawing Robinson back to the rock. It was that same euphoria he had found in running, only more intense. He enrolled at UC-Davis because it was the closest campus to Yosemite Valley, but was asked to leave the school after a year because he spent too much time climbing.

Robinson transferred to San Francisco State and moved to the Haight-Ashbury. But he found the drug scene there couldn't compare to the high he got in the vertical world of Yosemite.

"It was a natural high grounded in the activity of movement," he said. "Climbing intensified my perception of the incredible beauty of the wilderness. It brought things into sharper focus, and it made the wilderness and the state of mind I brought to it more vivid."

After college Robinson became a climbing bum, epitomizing the classic observation made by fellow climber Eric Beck: "At either end of the social spectrum there lies a leisure class."

"In 1965 I lived for the whole summer on \$110 and still had enough money to buy beer whenever I felt like it," Robinson recalled. "I was heavily influenced by Muir and Thoreau and Nietzsche, all of whom advocated life in the mountains. My parents understood it, even though it worried them."

It was a wonderful time to be a climber. This was the so-called "Golden Age" in Yosemite, when rock stars like Royal Robbins, Yvon Chouinard and Warren Harding were knocking off the big walls. Evenings were spent around campfires basking in the day's glories and getting drunk on "Teton Tea" (a potent if barely palatable mixture of cheap red wine, cheap white wine, tea, lemons and sugar).

Like many climbers, Robinson had always gazed up at the sheer vertical northwest face of Half Dome and dreamed of climbing it. But he couldn't bring himself to violate the rock by hammering pi-

tons into it. Granite hardly seems fragile, but by the late 1960s the walls of Yosemite bore ugly scars from the metal spikes of an increasing number of climbers.

No one had ever gotten up one of the valley's big walls without pitons, so when Robinson, Galen Rowell and Dennis Hennek set off to make the first "clean" ascent of Half Dome, they left their iron in their rucksacks as an emergency backup—or so Rowell assumed.

Hundreds of feet up the steep rock, things began to get dicey. As Rowell tells it, he inquired about the pitons and was told: "We've looked in all the bags and can't seem to find (them). They must have been left behind." It was no accident. Robinson and Hennek had purposely left them back in camp.

It took the trio three days, but when they hauled themselves onto Half Dome's flat summit they helped usher in a new era of "clean" climbing in the United States.

Eager to experience the changing moods of the Sierra Nevada, Robinson began pushing out into the mountains in mid-winter. He taught himself cross-country skiing, and in 1970 he and a partner traversed the entire 250-mile John Muir Trail along the Sierra crest on cross-country skis. It took 36 days.

He and Chouinard also became leading proponents of ice climbing, and together bagged more serious Sierra ice routes than anyone else. But Robinson says he's just as happy to spend the day strolling through a flower-dotted meadow.

"Just being in the mountains is its own reward," he said. "It doesn't have to be a serious climb. An afternoon hike is lots of fun. It's all about integration, of getting your mental, physical and emotional lives in balance through a combination of activity and contemplation."

Robinson earns his living primarily through guiding and writing. Neither pays well, but they enable him to live like a king in the mountains. When he waxes his skis, he uses a cork from a bottle of Dom Perignon.

Beauty, movement and danger: the Robinson road to a higher state of consciousness.



Guiding clients and carving up backcountry powder: just another day at the office.

Lately he's been branching out a little, becoming what fellow climber Rick Ridgeway calls "an adventure capitalist." He recently produced a rock climbing video, *Moving Over Stone*, which has won critical acclaim.

Robinson is also working on carbon fiber shoe inserts that could help prevent ankle injuries and lead to a new generation of light cross-country ski boots.

But he is probably best known for his writing, which aims well above the usual "right foot, left foot" style of mountaineering literature. Through articles in *Sports Illustrated*, *National Geographic*, *Outside*, *California* and various climbing journals, he explored the spiritual character of the mountains

and the people who climb them.

"Doug's more introspective than most of today's modern climbers," said Chouinard. "He more than anyone else is carrying on Muir's great tradition of mountaineering writing."

For 20 years Robinson has been working on a book he hopes will explain the buzz he gets from the mountains. Its title is *Adrenaline: Or Why Men Climb Mountains*. Robinson believes the combination of physical activity, danger and supreme beauty in the mountains create a state of mind similar to the effects of LSD.

"Psychedelic compounds are created right in the brain of a climber under stress," he said. "I don't mean hallucinations. I mean threshold

doses that enhance the perception of reality instead of distorting it."

To research the book Robinson has spent many long winters at his Rock Creek Canyon cabin reading medical texts on biochemistry and neurophysiology. "At one point I practically had a whole library there," he said.

He's in no particular hurry to finish the book. The ideas come in spurts, often while he is hanging by his fingertips on a vertical wall. "I'm always climbing up onto ledges and whipping out my notebook to jot something down," he said.

There is always a price to pay for such devotion to the mountain life, and for Robinson it has been four divorces. "That's been hard for me," he admits. "As much as I value solitude, I value relationships, too. It's a balance I'm still searching for. And I can't say that it was always mountaineering that got in the way of all those relationships."

For Jodi Hoffman, who was married to Robinson for five years, waiting for spring thaw up in Rock Creek Canyon just got to be too much. "I remember getting up at 6 a.m. to go use the outhouse and falling down and landing on the ice on my bare butt," she said. "I went back in the cabin and cried and thought that this was the worst possible way you could wake up."

Grocery shopping meant skiing five miles out to the road, driving half an hour into Bishop and then pulling a sled with the groceries back up to the cabin.

"What finally got to me was that it took you a full day of working as hard as you can—splitting wood, keeping the fire going, cooking and melting snow for water—just to get through the day. And you had to do it all over again the next day."

Mountaineering can exact tolls more severe than divorce, and three years ago Robinson nearly paid one. He was walking back to the car after a day of rock climbing with a client when he spotted a difficult overhanging crack he had never tried.

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Mountain man

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Leaving the rope behind, Robinson started up the crack. It went well at first. But 40 feet off the ground he realized he couldn't make the next move. Because the crack was so difficult, he couldn't climb down either. Long minutes passed as he felt the strength drain from his arms and his palms started to sweat. He knew the fall, now inevitable, could kill him. "I don't remember falling. Mercifully, I must have blacked out. I just remember waking up on the ground and being able to move my hands and feet and yelling, 'I'm OK! I'm OK!'"

Robinson was not OK. His back was broken and his blood pressure practically zero when he arrived at the hospital. But he recovered, and within six months of his accident he set a record by skiing 50 miles across the Sierra Nevada's "High Route" in 22 hours.

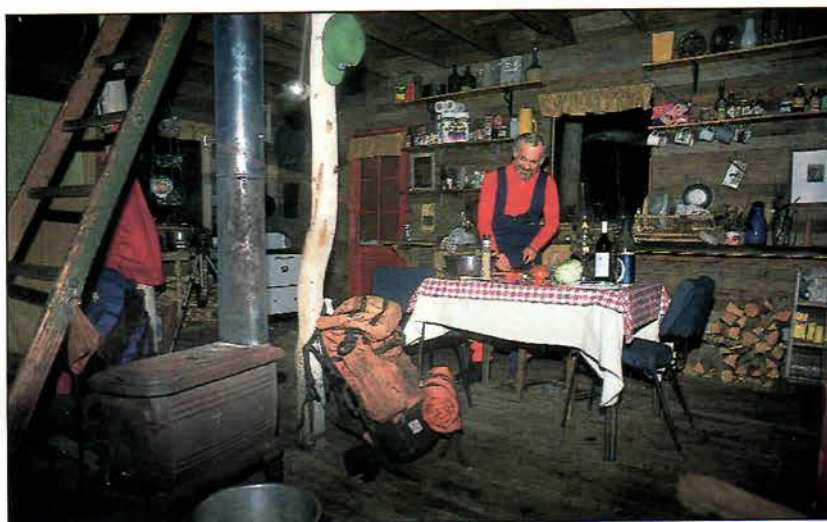
It took him a while to regain his nerve, but he is climbing again. "But now I won't go high off the ground without a rope," he said.

A half moon illuminates the snow as Robinson and I ski up Rock Creek Canyon on a night of teeth-shattering cold. It's a few degrees below zero and my fingers and nose lose feeling. I am pushing myself to ski faster to generate warmth, but find myself gasping for breath in the thin air at 10,000 feet.

Of course, this might have been easier if our packs were lighter. But we are weighted down with lots of Haagen-Dazs ice cream, Fosters Lager and a selection of excellent red wines. Robinson is not your basic grubstake kind of guy.

There are lanterns glowing in the cabin's windows when we arrive. Robinson's friends Vern and Margaret Clevenger have a toasty fire going and lasagna baking in the oven. He's a former climbing bum who made the transition to being a successful nature photographer. She's a legal secretary and a top-notch climber in her own right.

Over dinner the conversation



Robinson's Rock Creek Canyon home: 5 miles on skis plus a half-hour drive for groceries.

turns to serene meadows nestled amid soaring granite peaks, of remote rock walls that need to be climbed, of dodging lightning bolts and falling rocks, and of the friends who failed to dodge them.

The next morning under blue skies, the four of us ski out into Robinson's back yard, through pine forests and over frozen lakes below the soaring north faces of Bear Creek Spire and Mt. Dade.

We're hunting for crisp, dry back-country powder, for virgin slopes we can carve up with knee-dropping telemark turns. Near timberline Robinson tries one possible slope and then another, but all we find is a skier's nightmare:

Breakable Crust From Hell. It's infested with snow alligators, those invisible monsters that snap at your skis and make you fall, often at high velocity. But we rise from our craters and shake snow out of our ears with joy on our faces, because we're in one of the most jaw-dropping spectacular settings on earth—the heart of the "Range of Light." Everyone's a little giddy with Robinson's mountain drug.

The sun dips behind the jagged Sierra crest and reminds us that we are a long way from Robinson's cabin. As we turn and head back, the snow glows pink and orange, and our shadows ski before us. ■

John Flinn is an Examiner staff writer.