

[RECON]

THE WHITNEY MASSIF

CLASSIC ROUTES, HOT NEW LINES, AND
A BLANK CANVAS FOR THE FUTURE

DOUG ROBINSON, AMY NESS & MYLES MOSER

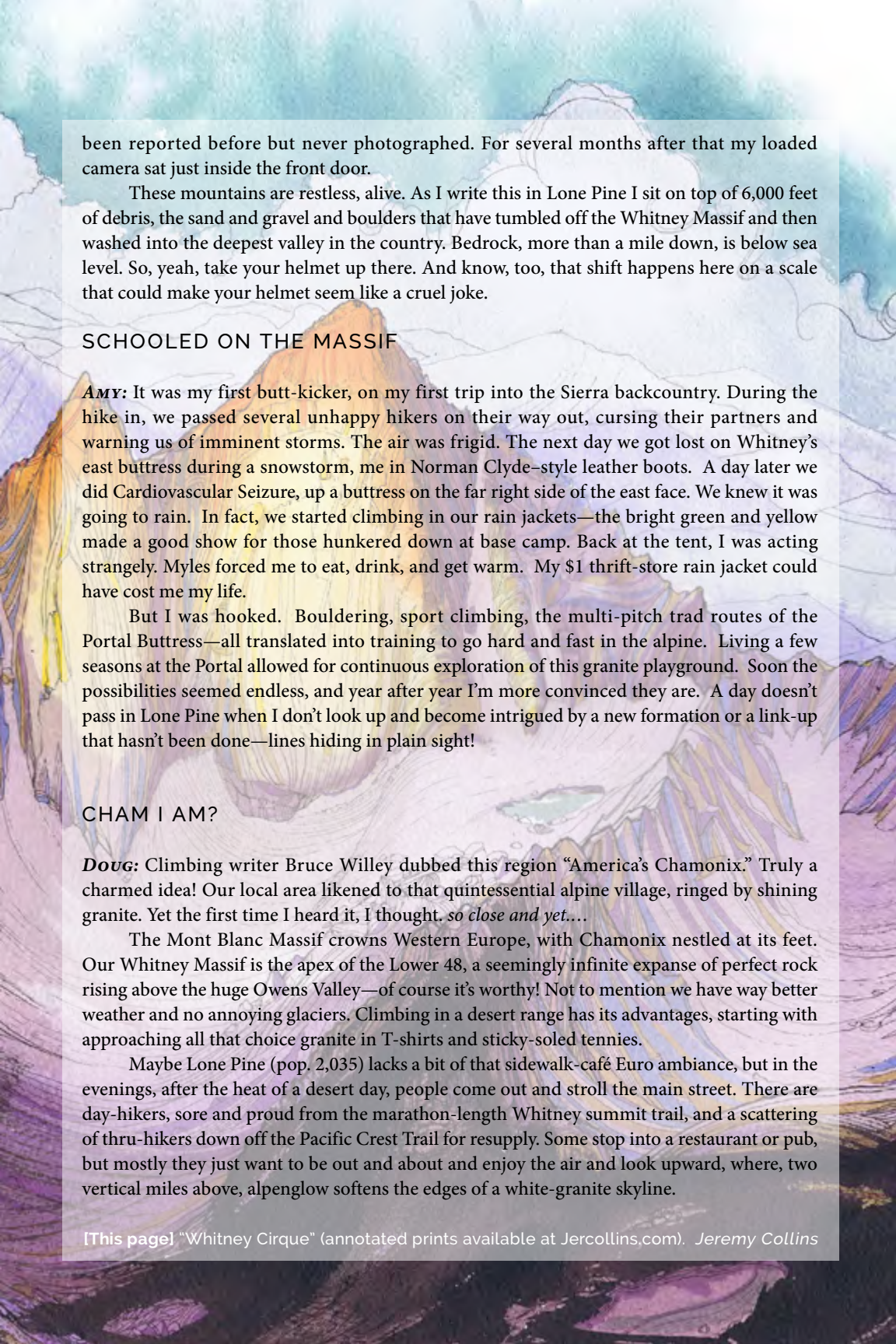
This is a story of people meeting terrain. It's a love story—this terrain is hot. The adventures are wild and timeless. The red lines are still being drawn. Many have fallen for this massif, seduced by the pleasure of dancing with its peaks.

From the barely 10,000-foot summits ringing Lake Tahoe, the Sierra Crest builds as it marches southward. Opposite Yosemite it climbs over 13,000 feet, and coming by Bishop it nearly grazes 14,000 with the distinctive chisel of Mt. Humphreys. Soon the Palisades Traverse links six peaks that top 14,000 feet. Farther south, massive Mt. Williamson soars as high over the Owens Valley as K2 rises above base camp.

Finally we arrive at the crescendo of the greatest granite range in the Lower 48, the Whitney Massif. Its heart stretches just two miles south to Mt. Muir, yet it is littered with buttresses, spires, ridges, and walls seemingly made for climbing. To the east, Lone Pine Peak stands guardian to walls that tear through the sky: Day Needle, Keeler Needle, the elegant spires of Mt. Russell, and Whitney itself, at 14,508 feet (4,422m) the highest summit in the continental United States.

The Sierra is a young range, and it's still having growth spurts. Take the night of March 26, 1872. It was a full moon. Mt. Whitney hadn't even seen its first ascent. At one in the morning, a slumbering fault ripped right under the tiny settlement of Lone Pine. Whitney lurched upward 20 feet. Twenty-seven of Lone Pine's inhabitants died as their adobe shacks collapsed on top of them. You can still see the scar from that night's slip fault right on the north edge of town.

And still it rises. Mt. Whitney is now 11 feet taller than when I began climbing it in the 1960s. After a series of quakes measuring 6.0 and more in the spring of 1980, it jumped seven feet. Living a mile from the epicenter on the East Side, I had a front-row seat. I was sitting on the ground in my front yard in Round Valley, watching rockfall tumble off the Wheeler Crest. A minute later a groundswell rolled toward me. It was a wave in the solid earth, maybe eight inches high. This land-wave rippled along at 20 miles an hour, bumped right under me, and disappeared beneath my house. Geologists told me such ripples had



been reported before but never photographed. For several months after that my loaded camera sat just inside the front door.

These mountains are restless, alive. As I write this in Lone Pine I sit on top of 6,000 feet of debris, the sand and gravel and boulders that have tumbled off the Whitney Massif and then washed into the deepest valley in the country. Bedrock, more than a mile down, is below sea level. So, yeah, take your helmet up there. And know, too, that shift happens here on a scale that could make your helmet seem like a cruel joke.

SCHOOLED ON THE MASSIF

AMY: It was my first butt-kicker, on my first trip into the Sierra backcountry. During the hike in, we passed several unhappy hikers on their way out, cursing their partners and warning us of imminent storms. The air was frigid. The next day we got lost on Whitney's east buttress during a snowstorm, me in Norman Clyde-style leather boots. A day later we did Cardiovascular Seizure, up a buttress on the far right side of the east face. We knew it was going to rain. In fact, we started climbing in our rain jackets—the bright green and yellow made a good show for those hunkered down at base camp. Back at the tent, I was acting strangely. Myles forced me to eat, drink, and get warm. My \$1 thrift-store rain jacket could have cost me my life.

But I was hooked. Boulderering, sport climbing, the multi-pitch trad routes of the Portal Buttress—all translated into training to go hard and fast in the alpine. Living a few seasons at the Portal allowed for continuous exploration of this granite playground. Soon the possibilities seemed endless, and year after year I'm more convinced they are. A day doesn't pass in Lone Pine when I don't look up and become intrigued by a new formation or a link-up that hasn't been done—lines hiding in plain sight!

CHAM I AM?

DOUG: Climbing writer Bruce Willey dubbed this region "America's Chamonix." Truly a charmed idea! Our local area likened to that quintessential alpine village, ringed by shining granite. Yet the first time I heard it, I thought, *so close and yet...*

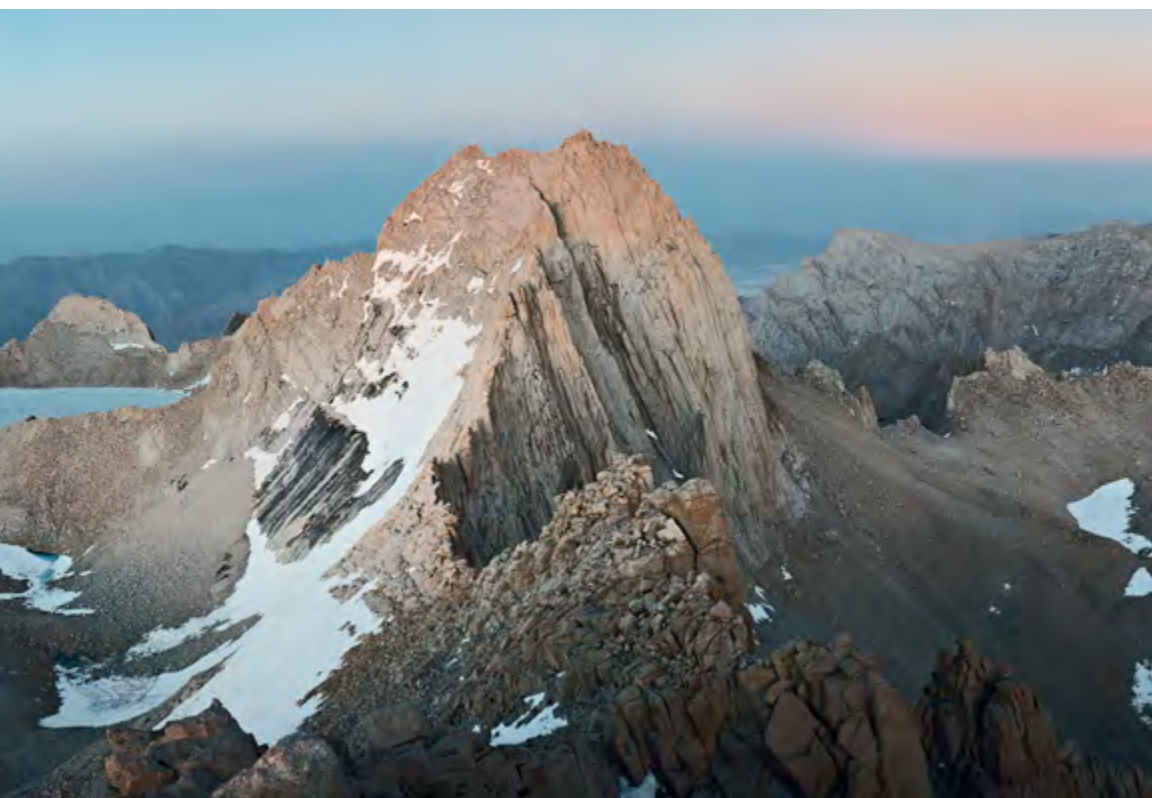
The Mont Blanc Massif crowns Western Europe, with Chamonix nestled at its feet. Our Whitney Massif is the apex of the Lower 48, a seemingly infinite expanse of perfect rock rising above the huge Owens Valley—of course it's worthy! Not to mention we have way better weather and no annoying glaciers. Climbing in a desert range has its advantages, starting with approaching all that choice granite in T-shirts and sticky-soled tennies.

Maybe Lone Pine (pop. 2,035) lacks a bit of that sidewalk-café Euro ambiance, but in the evenings, after the heat of a desert day, people come out and stroll the main street. There are day-hikers, sore and proud from the marathon-length Whitney summit trail, and a scattering of thru-hikers down off the Pacific Crest Trail for resupply. Some stop into a restaurant or pub, but mostly they just want to be out and about and enjoy the air and look upward, where, two vertical miles above, alpenglow softens the edges of a white-granite skyline.

[This page] "Whitney Cirque" (annotated prints available at Jercollins.com). *Jeremy Collins*



[This page, top] The glorious east faces of the massif, with Mt. Whitney in center, Day and Keeler needles at left, and Mt. Russell far right. These two images were first published in *Above All* (2008), a photographic celebration of California's 14ers. *David Stark Wilson*





[This page, bottom] A striking view of Mt. Russell (left) and Mt. Whitney from the northwest. The southwest and south faces of Russell, on the right side of the peak, hold some of the finest climbs in the Sierra. *David Stark Wilson*



A rowdy group pours out of Elevation, the local climbing shop: a knot of sport climbers, yipping and clowning as they head back to a campfire in the Alabama Hills, a few minutes away. The 'Bamas have good bouldering, hundreds of sport climbs, and un-trafficked cracks. Those young climbers don't know it yet, but in all likelihood, during the next couple of years, most of them will be treated to a casual invitation that will sweep them up onto the Whitney Portal Buttrresses. That day of multi-pitch cragging will forever expand their vision of climbing.

Above, along the skyline, are the airy arêtes and broad, white walls of the alpine zone: blockier granite with square-cut edges and well-defined cracks, a more raw and angular world, brightened by piercing light, with its shapes sculpted by the relentless forces of weather. Yes, we have had weather too! Just not as much of it.

In Chamonix, the téléphérique station is the focus of the village as surely as cathedrals were in medieval times, offering a stairway to heaven. Riding to the 12,605-foot Aiguille du Midi, you not only risk instant altitude sickness but also can be treated to the odd moment of summiting a route by manteling onto the terrace of a bar, to the bemused glances of tourists sipping an apéritif. Thank goodness, you realize in a rush, for our particularly American concept of Wilderness, which guards our gleaming massif through the honest toil of uphill sweat. Our wilderness ideal keeps the huts away too—in return we get to sleep under the stars.

THE ALLURE OF SHINING GRANITE

Doug: John Muir was the first real climber to explore Whitney, even though it was hundreds of miles from his home base in Yosemite. He was Muir, after all, the ultimate mountain Rambler and scrambler, and his first ascent of Cathedral Peak in Tuolumne a couple of years earlier had been solid 5.4—surely the hardest climb in the country in 1869. Just try to keep him away from

[This page] Key peaks of the Whitney region. *Anna Riling*





[This page, top] The airy east face of Mt. Whitney, first climbed in 1931. **[This page, right]** Star Trekkin' (5.10) on Mt. Russell's southwest face. *Both: PatitucciPhoto.com*

the apex of the Sierra. Besides, there was the small matter of a personal vendetta.

Back in 1864 a state geological survey team was roaming the southern Sierra, and during the first ascent of Mt. Tyndall they glimpsed the state's highest peak and named it for their boss and benefactor, Josiah Whitney, the state geologist. Whitney would later poo-poo John Muir's discovery of glacial polish in Tuolumne Meadows and his theory that rivers of ice had carved out Yosemite Valley. Whitney was sure the bottom somehow had dropped out of the Valley. He went so far as to call John Muir an ignorant shepherd. What might have been just a scientific disagreement over geological forces turned personal. Muir decided he would climb Mt. Whitney—a mountain his nemesis had never even laid eyes upon—and bag the first ascent.

Muir got to the mountain a little late. Local yokels—the Fishermen, as they have come to be known—had gone slip-sliding



up a scree slope on the western flank of the peak in August 1873. But when Muir got to Lone Pine in October of that same year, it was overwhelmingly obvious to him that the shining eastern escarpment of Whitney was still untouched. The line he climbed, the Mountaineer's Route, is still by far the most popular of the actual climbing routes on the peak, and way worth doing. His line, which goes up the obvious gully just right of the sweeping east face, defines third class in a way that might be intimidating to many.

Now we know that Muir blew the timing in another way: After midsummer it's full of loose rock and sliding scree. It's way better earlier in the season, as a snow climb, with ice axe in hand, kicking steps in firm snow. At the notch a short, steep wall (a rope may be desirable) takes you onto the north face for 400 feet of easy scrambling, cutting a huge switchback off to the west across this broad face. But stay with me here for a fun alternative.

To the east of the scrambling route a shallow ridge shoots directly toward the summit. It only stands proud of the terrain by about 50 feet, but it's solid fourth class, so again you could want a rope. We probably have Norman Clyde to thank for this sportier variation to Muir's route—he did the first winter ascent in 1932. This ridgelet variation was passed on to me by Bob Swift and Smoke Blanchard, who were Clyde's successors as guides in the Sierra. When you consider that Clyde's first summer in the Sierra, 1914, was the year that John Muir died, it's an unbroken chain.

AFTER MUIR, BEFORE CROFT

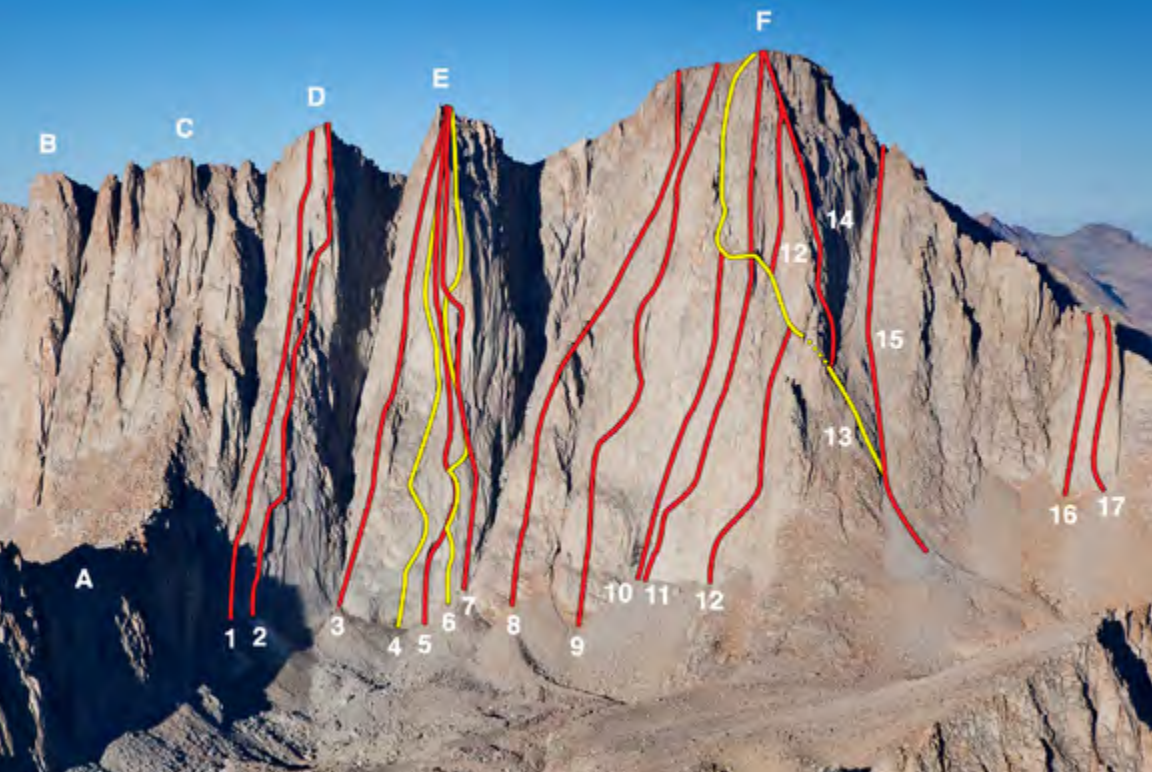
Doug: By 1926 all of California's 14,000-foot peaks had been climbed but two. Near the Whitney Massif, Norman Clyde had already picked off first ascents of Mt. LeConte, Mt. Carillon, and Peak 3,986. (The latter, as Amy and Myles would be quick to tell you, is the proud continuation of the south face of Lone Pine Peak.) Then he bagged the prize: the first ascent of Mt. Russell, by its east ridge. Even though it's "only" third class, Peter Croft considers it the finest third class in the entire Sierra.

Clyde also led the breakthrough climb of the era, Mt. Whitney's east face. It was 1931, the year the rope came to the Sierra, and this five-hour ascent (most climbers today can't repeat it that fast) was the crowning achievement of that summer. The party included Robert Underhill, a Harvard professor who passed on the proper belay techniques he'd learned in the Alps, and the hottest teenage climbers of the '30s, Glen Dawson and Jules Eichorn.

Then came the Mendenhalls, John and Ruth, who got engaged shortly after a cold night's bivy on Mt. Ritter. In 1941 they put up the second route on Whitney's east face. Ruth was a pioneering Sierra climber when it was shocking to see a woman roping up. (To read Ruth's story in her own words, see *Woman on the Rocks: The Mountaineering Letters of Ruth Dyar*

[This page] (A) Pinnacle Ridge. (B) Aiguille Extra. (C) Third Needle. (D) Crooks Peak (Day Needle). (1) Beckey Route. (2) BCB on the Prow. (E) Keeler Needle. (3) Harding Route. (4) Crimson Wall. (5) Australopithecus. (6) Blood of the Monkey. (7) Lowe Route. (G). Mt. Whitney. (8) Strassman Route. (9) Left Wing Extremist. (10) Direct East Face. (11) Hairline. (12) Great Book. (13) East Face. (14) Sunshine-Peewee (East Buttress). (16) Mountaineer's Route. (17) Rotten Chimney. (18) Cardiovascular Seizure. Approximate lines; some routes not shown. *John Scurlock*





Mendenhall, edited by her daughter, the Sierra watercolorist Valerie Mendenhall Cohen.) Dawson, who had an eye for a great line, returned six years after his east face climb to do Whitney's east buttress, naming it the Sunshine-Peewee. It's got to be the best 5.7 in the massif.

Fast-forward past a couple of decades, during which remarkably little happened in the massif. When new development began again, it focused not on the skyline but down in the Portal. No one tells the story better than Peter Croft, in *Bishop Area Rock Climbs*: "The history of climbing in the Portal can pretty much be divided into Before Fred Beckey (B.F.) and after Fred (A.F.).... In the mid-'60s to the early '70s, Fred came and simply took what he wanted." Beckey roamed up the North Fork, too, climbing some smaller alpine towers and, in 1971, the northeast slabs of Mt. Russell. Hot on Fred's heels, as he so often was, came Galen Rowell, climbing Russell's west face a few days later.

In 1959, the direct east face of Mt. Whitney was climbed by Denis Rutovitz and Andrzel Ehrenfeucht. And then, in 1960, arguably the grand prize of the massif, Keeler Needle, got climbed by Warren Harding. In the 1970s, spiry Mt. Russell's walls exploded with activity, beginning with the elegant Fishhook Arête and Mithral Dihedral.

Tracking the climbs that have come hot and heavy ever since would take pages, but surely would include routes by such greats as Errett Allen, Alan Bartlett, Bob Bolton, Bill Cramer, Peter Croft, John Fischer, Bob Harrington, Darrell Hensel, Marty Lewis, Robs Muir, SP Parker, Allan Pietrasanta, Steve Plunkett, Kevin Powell, Galen Rowell, Steve Schneider, Gary Slate, Mike Waugh, and Jonny Woodward. Not to mention Myles Moser and Amy Ness.

THE PORTAL

MYLES: Let's head up the mountain, sampling the climbing along the way. Turn at the one stoplight in Lone Pine to go west on Whitney Portal Road, which dead-ends at 8,365 feet.

There are rules here, so listen up. A permit is required to go past the first lake; the only exception is hiking up to the Portal buttresses. Permits can be surprisingly hard to get. Start at the Interagency Visitor Center, one mile south of town, or by visiting www.recreation.gov. There is also a lottery held every day at 11 a.m. for permits. Make sure to allow an extra day for your trip if you're counting on your lucky number to be drawn.

Stop into the Whitney Portal Store for whatever you forgot. Peter Croft highly recommends the burgers and fries, and the cooler is well-stocked with beer. Don't miss your personal opportunity to be heckled by the one and only "Sandbag Senior," Doug Thompson, a wealth of backcountry info.

Just downhill from the store is the main trail to Whitney, which switchbacks right below the Whitney Portal Buttress. Many don't even notice as they trudge by, but the buttress has some of the best climbing any of us have ever experienced. Nearly 2,000 feet high, the wall hosts about 13 routes, ranging from eight to twelve pitches. Only two routes are regularly done: Ghost Rider and No Country for Old Men. Both go at 5.10c.

There are far more adventures to be had. For instance, the Womack Route (established in 1989, now 5.11 A0), had likely never seen a second ascent until Amy and I did it five years ago. This route climbs fingertip seams to reach a 13-foot, dead-horizontal roof. Trivial Pursuit (5.12) also sees very few ascents. Put up by the slab masters Darrell Hensel, Kevin Powell, and Jonny Woodward, it will test any aficionado. Gangway (5.12 or 5.11 A0), put up by Croft, has one of the best liebacks in the Sierra. Or take the 20-minute walk to the Never Ending Story

[This page, left] Endless granite west of Whitney Portal, as seen from the Candlelight Wall. The Cleaver is in upper left. Many of the other formations have no known climbs. *Jeff Mahoney* **[This page, right]** The Altisimo Arena, high over Whitney Portal. (1) Tycho, 5.10c. (2) Moon Walker, 5.12 A0. (3) Corpus Christi Buttress, 5.9 (4) Apollo 13, 5.10d. (5) Sombra de la Luna, 5.11. (6) Pillar Altisimo, 5.11. (7) Altisimo Arête, 5.10c. (8) El Segundo, Beckey Route, 5.9 (9) Premier Buttress, The Premier Route, 5.8 A0. Routes 5 through 7 are new (AAJ 2013). Some shorter routes not shown. *John Svenson*





[This page] Myles Moser leads the fifth pitch of Never Ending Story (V 5.12), a new route on Whitney Portal Buttress. *Amy Ness*

(V 5.12), which Amy and I established just a couple of years ago. Although several strong climbers have gone up to pitch five, no one has repeated all 12 pitches of this burly route. What about trying to free the Beckey-Callis route? A crumbly roof appears to be the crux, and the spinning, quarter-inch button heads don't instill much confidence—but what an adventure!

Take a walk back down the main road to find Premier Buttress and El Segundo, home to the Beckey Routes (5.8 A0/5.10c and 5.9, respectively), which will make any climber beam ear to ear. Look south across the canyon, where the “Eiger of the Portal,” Candlelight Wall, rockets skyward with thousands of feet of unexplored alpine terrain. Green in color, bomber in quality, and riddled with cracks, it awaits dozens of new adventure routes.

From the summit of El Segundo, turn your eyes uphill to the north. The Altísimo Arena, facing hot south, is a jewel all its own. The cracks here are more fractured than those on the rounded walls below and much steeper. This entire region of the Portal—with, it's true, a longish approach—was untouched before Phil Bircheff, Amy, and I began staring up this way with the scope. We soon discovered that Hensel and Woodward had begun work close by—and then found them promptly returning to finish the job after an email notified them of our presence! We put up several routes in the Arena, and along with the now-finished slab routes, there are plenty of second ascents to be had. Altísimo's neighbor, Moonstone Buttress, a sharkfin blade, features the route Tycho, a great 5.10c climb that will have you dancing along a massive swirling dike and ending on one of the most exposed arêtes in the Portal.



To the west of the Portal Buttress are steep, clean cliffs abundant with black knobs and dikes—many of these walls wait to be traveled. Did you know there is an unclimbed dome above the Portal? Did you know there is a 2,500-foot Royal Arches of the Portal, complete with a pendulum? (Ummagumma, IV 5.7 A0; see Climbs and Expeditions.)

UP THE TRAILS

AMY: About 3.5 miles up the main hiking trail toward Mt. Whitney is Thor Peak. With its numerous cracks and serene setting by Mirror Lake, this 12,306-foot peak will make any climber ponder. Myles and I have a slight obsession with one of the routes on Thor: Stemwinder (5.4). We use it as a cardio-training romp before work, with a 4,000-foot gain from the Portal, a few technical cruxes, and mostly easy scrambling to the low shoulder.

Six more miles will bring you to Consultation Lake, or “Trail Camp,” the base for many of those hiking up Whitney. The view from this camp is seldom seen by rock climbers,

who are usually up in the North Fork. Too bad. They might notice the east buttress of Mt. Muir (Mendenhall-Nies, 1935) or the massive expanse of spires rolling out to the north, the Whitney Aiguilles. How many towers are there? R. J. Secor’s encyclopedic and authoritative guidebook, *The High Sierra: Peaks, Passes, and Trails*, lists five between Day Needle and Mt. Muir. But that is an understatement that merely follows what’s been climbed and recorded, mostly by Scott Ayers and Mike Strassman. A long, lingering look will reveal plenty of new-route potential.

The North Fork, splitting off to the right just a mile up the main hiking trail, is your access to Mt. Carillon, Mt. Russell, and the entire 2,500-foot east wall of the Whitney Massif. Good route-finding on this sometimes-rough climber trail is essential—many first-timers find themselves cliffed out. Camping near Upper Boy Scout Lake, at 11,600 feet, allows for acclimatization and offers plenty of distraction. Just last year, Myles and I pulled our friend Phil Bircheff out of retirement, and the three of us hiked to the southeast face of Mt. Russell and put up a straightforward, five-pitch 5.9 in only a few hours. Much of this face and its beautiful ridgelines are seldom seen, much less climbed.

From Upper Boy Scout Lake, the trail continues toward Iceberg Lake. Now the massif’s needles—Keeler, Day, and the Aiguilles—soar above, sporting enough open, unexplored space to keep you busy for years. Besides the venerable Harding Route, Keeler Needle has several lines that haven’t seen a second ascent. Only three routes are known on Day Needle (officially

[This page] Amy Ness explores Tycho (5.10c) on the Moonstone Buttress. Myles Moser



[This page, top] Just a pretty face to hikers intent on Whitney's summit, Thor Peak has about nine routes on its broad south face. *Richard Piotrowski* **[This page, bottom]** The east buttress of 14,015-foot Mt. Muir (center) is a classic Sierra "fourth class" challenge. On the south face is a possible new route that's easily seen from the "99 Switchbacks" section of the Mt. Whitney Trail. Doug Robinson got a third of the way up it one winter, only to discover that his client couldn't climb 5.7 in his ski boots. It remains unfinished. *Richard Piotrowski*

known as Crooks Peak), and we have never heard of any being repeated. Many of the seldom-climbed routes on Whitney's broad east face await free ascents.

Most climbers we meet in the North Fork have the same list of objectives: the east face or east butt of Whitney; Fishhook and Mithral Dihedral, or maybe Western Front, on Russell; perhaps the Harding Route on Keeler. But not many even notice such gems as Cardiovascular Seizure. This route lies just to the north of the Mountaineer's Route and provides eight pitches of steep and sustained 5.10 climbing.

But let's face it, the classics are popular for a reason. We recommend the Sunshine-Peewee Route (a.k.a., the east buttress) as a far more interesting alternative to the east face, which meanders and has a lot of third class. It's an appealing line up the sun-shadow arête. Skirt the looming block of the Peewee to its right on incut holds, and then weave your way through more blockiness to the summit. Start early—this climb is longer than it looks.





The Harding Route on Keeler Needle is considered one of the gems of the Sierra for location, aesthetics, and difficulty. It's got up to 16 pitches (although we recommend linking some with a 70-meter rope) and cruxes up to 5.10c—you'd better like offwidths!

The Fishhook Arête (5.9) and Mithral Dihedral (5.10) are justifiably popular routes of about six to eight pitches on Russell's south side. Since they're practically side by side, Myles and I decided to climb them back to back, on a summer day when the wind was so strong it kept blowing the stacked ropes into my face at belays. On the Mithral Dihedral, I took Myles' advice—"you have small feet!"—and kept my approach shoes on. They jammed into the cracks perfectly. Myles said he will never forget watching me bite off my gloves one at a time and shove them into my bra for the 5.10 lieback crux, then immediately put them back on. When we got back to the base, ice had formed on our backpack from a leaking bottle.

LOST AMONG THE RANGES

Doug: The backside of the Whitney Massif, a huge wild playground, is both a problem and an opportunity. The problem is getting permits to do the approaches up those super-popular hiking trails. The opportunity is a virtually unknown realm of pristine camping, no waiting in line for routes, and first ascents to be done everywhere.

Every climber coming down the trail from Whitney's summit has a full view of the north face of Mt. Hitchcock for over an hour. It's hard to miss: a mile wide, with a good dozen major ridges and buttresses, ranging from 800 to 1,200 feet. Yet it wasn't until 2011 before the first route went up. Mt. Chamberlain is a virtually identical story. Climbing there began earlier, but it too has recently seen some fine, hard new lines.

Even the backside of Whitney itself has new routes going begging. Michael Thomas and I climbed the very first line on its southwest quadrant in 2006. It took us two days to approach up the North Fork trail, pop over Whitney-Russell Col, and wander down the pristine Alpine Lakes valley, where only four sets of footprints from that entire summer wandered among gleaming, untouched walls.

We'll skip over the mini-epic of having our tarp shelter blown apart by the sudden blizzard that night and losing a day drying out our sleeping bags. When we finally got onto our ridge it greeted us with classic 5.7 climbing, then off-camber 5.9 to regain the ridge and

[This page] The east buttress Mt. Irvine, said to be the best grade V in the Sierra. Amy Ness



[This page, top] The north face of Mt. Hitchcock near the "backside" of Mt. Whitney. The face has only three known routes, all of which were put up after 2010. *Richard Piotrowski* **[This page, right]** Doug Robinson looking like he knows the way on Lost, a 20-pitch 5.9+ established in 2006 on Mt. Whitney's southwest side. *Michael Thomas*

an inspiring 5.6 arête. Darkness caught us after nine pitches, and we bailed into the gully. But this fine route drew us back the next year, and we completed it with 20 pitches up to 5.9+, not unroping until 2:30 the next morning.

In early September 2012, a neighboring ridge got climbed by SP Parker and Urmaz Franosch. In what Parker called a "classic Sierra four-day excursion," they climbed a possible new route on the Arctic Lakes Wall, a 5.10 direct start to the Left Arête on Russell's southeast face, and a 1,200-foot route to the left of our route Lost. Of course it was named Found. Many other possibilities await.

LONE PINE PEAK

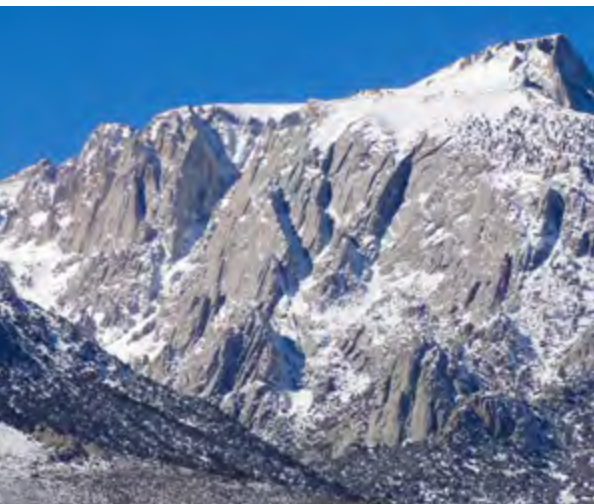
AMY: From below, this labyrinth of a mountain appears so massive that many tourists mistake it for Mt. Whitney, snapping pictures for their scrapbooks. At first glance, you can't help but fixate on the north, northeast, and east ridges, each gaining 7,000 feet from the desert floor, casting their shadows over one another. The ridges vary from 5.5 to 5.7, with lengths up to three miles. Depending on the climber's skill, speed, and preferred season of ascent, these ridge lines can be a quick solo on a summer day or a multi-day ascent of snow and ice, with some of the best bivy views one could ask for.

Below the ridges are some of the best and biggest "craggs" in the region. The north ridge floats over Bastille Buttress, where the Beckey Route (V 5.11 A0) has 15 pitches of the most



pristine climbing on the mountain. The fifth-pitch bolt ladder, a monument to determination (with Becky relics intact), leads to a crack that must have been split by Zeus himself.

Around to the east, the Three Arrows look a bit small, but they're perched at 10,000 feet with 1,200-foot walls. These climbs are all in sight from the road, yet the long, scree-filled approaches and little access to water keep most climbers from ever joying in their presence.



And finally there is the south face of Lone Pine Peak: thousands of feet high and wide. This terraced, baking granite wall has routes up to 22 pitches shooting up its flanks, with aid climbs and free routes alike to explore in this "Land of Little Rain" (V 5.10c). Recently, the active Pullharder group from San Diego led the way, once again, out of the obvious crack lines and onto the open faces, where they climbed a superb 500-foot dike, the Michael Strassman Memorial Route (6 pitches, 5.11). Repeating it, Doug let fly some of Mike's ashes from the summit.

THE ENCHAINMENTS

Doug: Now the Lone Ranger makes his appearance. And we're not talking about the Western movie sets frequently appearing down in the Alabama Hills. Marty Hornick is a climber's climber, and he can hike too. Between acting as our government-sanctioned safety net up on the Whitney trail, shoveling tourists the official dogma, Marty got strong and stayed acclimatized. On days off he didn't necessarily feel like descending to Lone Pine. A grand scheme began to form—a dream he dubbed the Lone Ranger Traverse. He started up the north ridge of Lone Pine Peak, a long Grade IV. Then over Mallory and Irvine (incidentally, check out the Grade V east buttress on that one!). Next came Mt. Muir and the spiky crest of all the Whitney Aiguilles. Keeler, Day, the Big W, and Russell. And then, for good measure, even Mt. Carillon. Whew!

An equally astounding enchainment began far to the north and way down in the desert at Manzanar, the WWII Japanese internment camp. Peter Mayfield climbed the northeast ridge of Mt. Williamson, longest in the Sierra, then hopped on down the crest past Tyndall, Barnard, and Carl Heller, over Mt. Russell, and clear on down the spiky Aiguilles to Mt. Muir.

Peter Croft once hiked up the North Fork, climbed the east face and east buttress of Whitney, scooted over to Russell to hit Fishhook Arête and Mithral Dihedral, and then ran over to do the east ridge of Carl Heller—in a day! Jason Lackey performed a similar feat a few years ago, but instead of heading to Carl Heller he fired off Keeler Needle. And Myles hit up

[This page] Winter view of the vast south face of Lone Pine Peak, with routes up to 22 pitches. During climbing season, thirst is a bigger issue than snow. *Richard Piotrowski*

two Grade V's consecutively: Fred Becky's Direct South Face of Lone Pine Peak and the East Buttress of Mt. Irvine. With so many route options in close proximity, the ante is always being upped.

WHAT'S OLD IS NEW

AMY: In the last five years, Myles and I have repeated several old lines but in new ways. With a few variations, we freed Windhorse on Lone Pine Peak at 5.11. Our new free route on Keeler Needle, Blood of the Monkey, combined several existing routes to get us to where we needed to start our own variation. Some of the direct lines on Whitney could still see a free ascent, if a motivated party gets the inclination. On Keeler Needle the Jeff Lowe possibly could go free. It's the idea of seeing something in a new light, and not being afraid of what was A2 or A3 in the past.

There's still so much new route potential here it's ridiculous—for 5.6 and 5.14 alike. We each have our secret stash of new lines. Once a possibility becomes a gleam in your eye, it starts to look so obvious that you begin to assume everyone else sees it too. And you get a bit cagey. Over beers, though, sometimes the idea comes spilling out, and suddenly there it hovers in the twilight: challenging, unknown, waiting.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Since the 1960s, Doug Robinson has been one of the foremost climbers, ski mountaineers, guides, and writers of the Sierra Nevada. His cabin is up Rock Creek Canyon, northwest of Bishop.

In a "shameless co-author rave," Robinson writes: "I met Myles Moser six years ago in the Alabama Hills, when he was living in a ratty Volkswagen Bug. Fast-forward to Joshua Tree, where a band of boy boulderers encountered a band of girl boulderers that included Amy Ness, a North Dakota climber fresh out of college. Soon Myles was admiring Amy's 'style' so much that he missed a spot and she broke an ankle. Their first kiss was in the ER. Fast-forward again to Patagonia's Torres del Paine. Now they are 2,000 feet up a new route on the North Tower and marooned in a single-person portaledge through an eight-day blizzard. No big deal—they'd learned perseverance in the Whitney Massif, putting up a 10-day Grade VI 5.12 on Keeler Needle and another Grade VI (5.11 A0), among a slew of other new routes. I am honored to call this badass team my friends."

Moser and Ness live at Tuttle Creek Campground, less than half an hour's drive below Whitney Portal.

Special thanks to Dr. Joel Matta, elite hip surgeon, who flew us on a recon flight over the massif.



[This page] Lone Pine Peak's north ridges gain 7,000 feet from the valley. John Svenson