



THE CURIOUS TALE OF SMOKE BLANCHARD AND HIS BUTTERMILK ROCK COURSE

By Doug Robinson
Photos by Jan Tiura

Classic Smoke, on his Rock Course.

MILK MOUNTAINEERING

It's a long, committing step across the chasm, but I can just reach big holds on the summit block. I start to yard up but the block moves, rocking toward me. Is this an Aron Ralston moment, where thousands of pounds of stone grind me into the chimney, my only hope of survival to amputate an arm using the peanut butter spoon from lunch? But the next second I'm grinning. I've found Rolling Rock Summit!

The memory comes surging back from 45 years ago when I followed Smoke Blanchard into the bedrock of the Buttermilk, climbing toward Bishop from the famous boulders. Half a mile in every direction pinnacles rise a hundred feet high, but are sliced off from each other by a maze of sandy corridors that darken into chimneys. Intricate and mysterious.

Back in the mid-60s Smoke Blanchard led me onto his Rock Course. I followed him up a long-ago chimney, a fit old guy in mountain boots, dressed like a trucker and carrying nothing but a 50-foot chunk of very skinny rope he called his "string." We passed moves that were definitely fifth class, yet he hardly seemed to notice, telling a story about when lightning set the bat guano on fire way below us.

"It burned for weeks and that's why we called it Charcoal Chimney," Smoke said.

Soon we were up into desert sunshine, making careful moves over rounded granite as the exposure increased. Smoke knew exactly where he was going and climbed with authority. "I call this pinnacle the Skin Diver," he said, glancing back to be sure I could handle the climbing, "because I found a skin diver's knife on top." On the airy summit it became clear that Smoke loved to tell that story because it deflated his initial pride from thinking he'd been the first to summit the spire himself.

The Skin Diver is the second of a dozen summits on Smoke's Rock Course. As he descended toward the Owl, his moves flowed like water over the terrain, and it was easy to see the quarter century of practice that had gone into discovering and then polishing this intricate route. Harder to imagine was Smoke's move to Bishop in 1941, all alone, with no other climbers in sight.

Smoke is long gone now. His pickup crashed in the Mojave in 1989, and a ragged group of us here on Rolling Rock Summit are searching to rediscover his Rock Course, to rescue it from obscurity. Without Smoke's example we had forgotten the Course a little and strayed back into the cult of climbing that emphasized mere difficulty. Now, we need to rediscover not only the way of his Rock Course, but Smoke's old lesson that movement itself is at the heart of climbing. The cast of characters on this journey says volumes about who Smoke was.

Allen Steck came out. Old enough to have partnered with John Salathe on the first wall climbs in Yosemite—the *Steck-Salathe*, right?—yet young enough to still climb a hundred days a year. And of course he founded *Ascent*, and along with Steve Roper built it into the original artistic journal of American climbing.

Jaybro Anderson showed up. Just "Jay" and a handshake, but he drove clear across California and over Tioga Pass to be here. Twice. It took me several hours to figure out that this was the guy who put up *Lucille*, one of the world's hardest offwidths at 5.13a out in Vedauwoo, Wyoming. Jaybro's showing up was a tribute to

an old dead guy who once pattered around this pile of low rocks.

Jaybro was drawn in by Em Holland. They knew each other from an obscure group that calls itself the Bay Area Wide Club. Em had slipped into the Buttermilk on an earlier Rock Course outing (we've been at this rediscovery for over a year), introducing herself with a brimming tub of wild gooseberries for a breakfast offering as we shuffled in the parking lot. A few hours later I glanced down to notice she was doing a sophisticated hand stack where most of us had just thrashed.

Marty Hornick turned up. He had spent years working out big Sierra projects, like piecing together the Lone Ranger Traverse which takes in the full crescent of peaks along the Mount Whitney skyline, or whittling down his time to ski from Rock Creek to Mammoth to just 7 hours 58 minutes. It took me six days to guide that stretch.

Who else? Leonie Beddinfield is the most devoted backcountry Rambler I know, who has arranged a simple life to spend five months a year beyond Sierra roadheads, off trails and on skis. And Leonie brought her friend Josh, who like Smoke was an accomplished mountaineer in the Cascades before migrating south to the sunny Sierra.

Leonie also introduced us to Bill Pilling, another understated local who turned out to be a seasoned Alaskan climber. Bill had worked on icy first ascents with Andy Selters, in attendance as well, himself the author of a FA on the Great Trango Tower, as well as of an innovative history of mountaineering, *Ways to the Sky*. This was the first time they had climbed together since a plane crash that killed their glacier pilot and demanded their injured and agonizing efforts to extricate themselves first from the twisted-metal wreckage and then the crevasse that swallowed it. Upside down, bleeding and disoriented, Andy said

Man of many hats. Smoke Blanchard in the Palisades, California.



that climbing out of the plane was “like the hardest offwidth moves I’ve ever done.” Sweet to see them quietly renewing their friendship on these miniature desert summits where Bill said that he’s “never made this many mountaineering decisions so close to the ground.”

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I approach the counter at Wilson’s Eastside Sports in Bishop and Tai Devore starts raving excitedly about learning intricate passageways of the Rock Course passed down from retired guide John Fischer. John also got the moves from Smoke and knew the course better than anyone. Pick up Eastside Magazine, a bright light among throwaway local rags, and it falls open to a story about John leading the Rock Course. The photo shows John in a familiar Smoke pose, also carrying a string. “I promised my kids I’d use it,” he said. Clearly this quirky ghost is enjoying a revival.

Suddenly last June, John is dead. My teenage best friend and earliest climbing partner, my fellow Armadillo from the Haight-Ashbury who moved to the Eastside when I did in 1969, who I guided alongside for decades in the Palisades, my partner on the First Ascent of *Dark Star*—John Fischer is taken out by a deer lurching down a roadcut. John’s motorcycle kept going; he careened into a boulder. Never knew what hit him.

Rest easy, John.

So I’m one of a dwindling few who knew Smoke Blanchard and one of the fewer still who followed him, chuckling and storytelling, into this maze of chimneys and huecos and lumpy summits. It’s like a Western movie set where most of the box

canyons narrow to slots. You turn sideways, and pretty soon you’re chimneying. Then it squeezes tighter, you watch the sky dwindle to a slice, and recall Smoke’s coaching “to rise up the narrowest of chimneys as if by capillary action.”

Now, 45 years later, I’m pushing once again into these passageways and over the small summits trying to remember, trying to piece together the rock puzzle that my self-deprecating mentor had hosted me through a lifetime ago.

Searching for Smoke’s old line, I’ve led five groups onto the Rock Course over the last year. Sometimes a dozen at once—it seems like everybody wants to learn where it goes. Following me around is kind of a joke, with my memory holy as Swiss cheese. Right away, though, on one of our early outings, this “shaggy” (Smoke’s term) Buttermilk rock itself comes to my rescue. It’s grainy desert granite. Roundy big crystal rocks reminiscent of Joshua Tree, and sometimes a bit rotten on its surface. So launching onto The Porcupine I wasn’t at all sure of finding even the start. But there it was, a faint white trail winding onto the rock where the looser surface crystals had spalled off from footfall. And it continued to guide me whenever there was a potential fork in the track—often enough every 20 feet.

And it’s all Smoke Blanchard’s fault. Traipsing up the Porcupine, chatting, we rediscovered one of his trademark moves, The Flying Squirrel, a leap across a gap just high enough off the sand to get your attention, and far enough across to rivet it. Committing to the leap is only the beginning. The landing is a scant pair of friction holds. If you can stick them with both feet, you still have to rock forward and palm the edge of a rounded arête to stay there.

I admired all over again the way Smoke sprinkled in these fifth class moves, yet he managed to keep that “string” coiled over his shoulder. If the Rock Course is like bouldering for the mountaineer, then some of it is distinctly highball. “Please don’t call it practice climbing,” he once said, aware perhaps that he had given the impression that the Rock Course was easy. “This is the real thing.”

Real, and sometimes technical, too, like Smoke’s Rubber Tester, a deceptively slippery friction slab. When I first met Smoke in 1966—can you believe that Sheridan Anderson introduced

us? Sheridan’s brilliant cartoons were all over the early years of *Ascent*—I was full of Valley-Dude sophistication and offered him a pair of PA rock shoes to try. Secretly I just knew that he would not be able to resist modern footwear. But after a lap on the Rubber Tester he politely returned them, saying that his worn old mountain boots were more comfortable, thank you. I was appropriately deflated; maybe it wasn’t about the gear.

About that time Smoke’s son Bob cut me down another notch. I had just discovered the boulders west over a low ridge. With my posse of Armadillos freshly imported from the Haight-Ashbury, we were busy developing the place, putting up routes that were destined in the fullness of time to become the descents for people like Jason Kehl and Lisa Rands. Tim Harrison named the boulders The Peabodies. That name didn’t stick too well, and neither did my try at matriarchy in naming the two largest ones the “Big Motha Boulder” and the “Split Pea.” No, the place is now generically The Buttermilk, headlined by Grandpa and Grandma Peabody.

The biggest of all the boulders—Grandpa if you must—overhangs most of the way around and is too massive for all but the boldest highballers. But there is one weakness. I stepped off an adjoining boulder and waltzed rightward, above the overhanging lip, to an easier arete. A few Stoppers protected the edge, and I added a bolt to the 5.8 traverse after my then-girlfriend Heidi took a whippers and sailed out of sight under the lip, screaming.

I was proud of sending the biggest boulder, until Bob Blanchard mentioned that he had already soloed it. So much for my “discovery.” But that’s OK, Smoke had already schooled me on humility, after his “first” ascent of The Skin Diver where he had found that knife on the summit.

Smoke Blanchard was Bishop’s first rock climber. Came down from Portland in 1941 and lingered, driving a propane truck (its diesel smoke led to his nickname), and poking around in the lumpy bedrock off of Buttermilk Road. Nobody cared or, really, even much noticed. It was a redneck town, a bit set in its ways but mostly just a sleepy ranching center. That was back before the county grader had to blade that old dusty track more than once in a blue moon, and way before you started meeting bouldering chefs from Manhattan who were putting noticeable pressure on the real estate market.

You could say that the lumpy little hundred-foot pinnacles stretching off toward a sandy horizon resembled the curdling remains in a buttermilk glass, but the name of the area actually came from a lush mountain meadow a little ways above here toward Mt. Humphreys that was fat pasture for dairy herds.

Smoke started scrambling around out there. “I first climbed the Big Slab Pinnacle by the vertical four-sided chimney at its back, the one I now call the Aboriginal Chimney, in 1942,” he wrote in his underground classic *Walking Up and Down in the World: Memories of a Mountain Rambler*—and over time he began linking one pinnacle to the next. No climbers in town. The closest mountain-



Meeting of the minds. The directors of the Palisade School of Mountaineering. (left to right) Bob Swift, John Fischer and Smoke Blanchard.

eer was Norman Clyde, still snowed-in every winter caretaking Glacier Lodge above Big Pine. Smoke won his company with home cooking and lent a perceptive ear to the yarns that Clyde strung together in fascinating meanders. But Clyde couldn’t be bothered with Smoke’s low rock scrambling. After all, the big ice routes up the northern cirques of the Palisades were his to bag. His recourse to the Buttermilk country came after losing traction with his hobnailed boots one day soloing the icy U-Notch. “Here I go to Hell” was his quick assessment of his chances, but by deliberately not self-arresting he picked up enough speed to shoot out over the bergschrund and land on the glacier. Clyde got away with just a sprained ankle, and took it to the Buttermilk Country, where he

knew a grassy spot by a stream to hole up and heal. No one alive knows the location of Clyde’s “Hospital,” though I got to listen to his yarns one day alongside that little creek right across from the Rock Course.

Like so many climbers since, Smoke soon became captivated by the Buttermilk rocks. So much that he made them a verb, as in “Hey Smoke, got time to go Buttermilking?”

For decades Smoke would take almost anyone who asked out on his Rock Course, but to do the whole thing took from six to eight hours. “Few people have the stamina and hand skin to complete the course in any amount of time,” he said. “Fewer yet can do it

in record time. Climbing for records is stupid, anyway. It means no leisurely discussions on a sun-loved ledge, no time for trying a pitch over and over to smooth a technique, no chance to watch an owl mother’s flight lesson, no ear for coyote music.”

Climbing partners were a bit of a problem for Smoke, which he solved by buttonholing people right off Main Street. Not that Smoke needed help so much, really—his “string” only came out when a quavering voice behind him asked for it. Smoke just liked company. That was more or less still going on in 1970,

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FAR LEFT: Smoke busting a big move on Little Sheelite Pinnacle, just one of many obstacles on his infamous proving ground.

NEAR LEFT: Even Alan Steck, here at his 80th birthday, showed up to participate in the recreation of Smoke’s Course. Photo: Andy Selters

the year that Bob Thayer was the Wilderness Ranger up in the Palisades where we Armadillos guided for Smoke at the Palisade School of Mountaineering. Bob was definitely not a climber—pretty afraid of heights—but Smoke somehow charmed him out to the Buttermilk and right up a gorgeous boulder off of Picnic Valley. On it's smooth, rounded summit Bob wondered out loud how they would ever get down. Smoke toyed with the moment. Bob was growing more apprehensive, so Smoke pressed him to promise his new Mercedes if Smoke got him down. OK, fine, Bob agreed, but then balked at throwing his beautiful wife into the deal. Smoke then became a human rap anchor, and that's how the Mercedes Boulder got its name.

"Mild Mountaineering" as he called what he loved to do, is pretty typical of Smoke's self-effacing style. He was a devoted Buddhist, and it was perfect form to downplay any accomplishments and remind us instead of all-too-human vulnerability. Fortunately, there's no need to take my word for it. Right at the beginning of Smoke's book, he goes for it: "For half a century I have tried to promote the idea that mountaineering is best approached as a combination of picnic and pilgrimage. Mountain picnic-pilgrimage is short on aggression and long on satisfaction. I hope that I can show that mild mountaineering can be happily pursued through a long lifetime without posting records. Can a love affair be catalogued?"

Even to call someone a mountaineer now feels slightly old fashioned, but one look at Smoke's legs, propping up a stocky frame, confirmed it. Burly. They had carried him up Denali in 1958, the fourth ascent of Mount Logan and climbing St. Elias starting clear down at the lapping edge of the Pacific. And that's before he started in on the other side of that pond. He was invited along on the American expedition to Everest in 1963, the one where Jim Whittaker made his name, but Smoke couldn't afford it on his truck-driver's wages.

You'd climb the stairs at the house for tea with Smoke, who like Thoreau had "one chair for solitude, two for company," and under the glass top of his little table were hundreds of kanji characters waiting to be memorized. Speaking Japanese fluently wasn't good enough for Smoke; he needed to read its poetry too. Rise to go and you'd pass his stand-up writing table under a window framing the best view in his tiny aerie, a reminder to hit the Buttermilk, right there.

But increasingly Smoke wasn't home. Every year he got deeper into Asia, bicycling in the footsteps of the Buddha, guiding for Mountain Travel on the milk runs to Everest base camp and scouting new trips in the port hills of Hong Kong or the Japan Alps. The freak accident that spelled the death of his wife Su in 1976 while descending from Telescope Peak above Death Valley probably soured him on the Eastern Sierra. And by then his old friend Norman Clyde was gone too. But Smoke always had the wanderlust. He'd caught malaria in Kenya in 1973, and

done long walks crisscrossing the Pacific states, including "the best trip I ever made" across California in 1967, where he nessed a sailboat crossing of San Francisco Bay so as not to taint the journey with motors. By the mid-1980s we barely saw Smoke. He had a strikingly-younger Japanese girlfriend and had taken up residence near Tokyo.

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There was a nothing-special tone to Smoke that, in the right light, cast a Zen Master aura. He nurtured that image, the truck driver in Frisco Jeans and flat hat, leaning toward you slightly as if underscoring some point borrowed from a bookcase stuffed with Chinese poetry, and he broadcast it with an ironic tone that fed into his names like the Fool's Needle and his thousand-foot Little Pinnacle. But following him up those alpine routes, hidden in plain sight up nearby canyons, there was no doubt that his downplayed climbs are the real deal. Why not mock this silly thing we do, jousting with rock? Why not take up the passion of elders—I mean the really old guys off the shelves of Smoke's bookcase, who came millennia before us? Guys like Han Shan and Tu Fu, who became legendary as poets living in cliffside caves where they too were drawn—not so much athletically but by its sheer esthetic grace—to live enfolded in stone?

How mild is this mountaineering, really? It's built to the standards of its time, with miles of fourth class—which, with modern grade inflation means anywhere up to 5.5. There are odd bits of 5.7. Well, there is a 5.8 offwidth on the third pinnacle, The Owl.

Smoke's era wasn't about difficulty anyway. Sure, they sought challenge—that's kind of what climbing is—but not in the same way that today's boulderers train to a laser focus on tiny crimpers and open-palm slaps and soaring dynos. Smoke carved out his domain in part by turning away from pebble wrestling and ultimate performance. "Part of the fun is perfecting one's grace and balance," he said, and worked his course to strive for elegance of execution.

These are echoes of a facet of John Gill's art in Smoke's philosophy. The father of American bouldering, Gill drew inspiration (and chalk) from gymnastics. They were contemporaries, yet Gill's path and Smoke's never came within a thousand miles of crossing. They would come to appreciate one another later, but in the 1950s American climbing was insular. Smoke had come out of a tradition of Northwest volcano stompers, then turned his back to live at the foot of a sparsely climbed Sierra where the Berkeley climbers and the Tahquitz climbers rarely mingled, except maybe on the spires of Yosemite Valley, or those giant Sierra Club base-camp trips where Norman Clyde held forth at bonfires. Gill meanwhile was inventing bouldering pretty much out of thin air as he worked his way west from Atlanta toward the Black Hills, the Tetons and finally Colorado. All the more remark-

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able, then, that they sound like blood brothers.

“Stepping outside the mainstream,” says Gill, “and curbing athletic indulgence to a degree will clarify our vision ... If a climber polishes a short route to a significant degree he can begin to feel the artistic quality of his performance.” Few recognize that Gill extended that to “long easy solo climbs done smoothly and continuously.”

Which is what Smoke was all about. It was elegance of form that mattered, not mere difficulty. Ron Kauk is working in the same direction when he urges us to “get inside the move,” to slow down until we feel its elements, then re-assemble them with style.

Mild mountaineering is where they keep the fun. Sure, I like pulling hard moves, but everyday satisfaction lies a couple of grades below there, where the climbing grows fluid and one move blends seamlessly into the next. Loping upward. There you reach to a state of flow, which not only describes the water-running-uphill sense of physical movement, but also the inner state of mind that arises out of moving well, the glow that comes of being a well-oiled machine making its smooth way upward. The psychologist with the unpronounceable name, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who wrote a book called *Flow*, claims that here is the optimum human state, where high functioning leads to being wide awake, acutely aware of our surroundings, and responding to them with a full heart gracefully attuned. Hardly an accident that Csikszentmihalyi studied climbers while developing his ideas of flow. In fact, we became a main example, listen: “Deep play is useless, if not subversive ... the artificial, sheltered universe of climbing can assume a reality of its own more meaningful to the actors than the reality of everyday life. In this sense, the analysis of rock climbing shows how flow activities

can serve as models for societal transformation and provide experiences that motivate people to implement change.” Good job, Mihaly, ripping the abnormal right out of psychology and turning its attention instead toward the kind of vibrant *joie de vie* that sees climbing as deep play, clarified by risk.

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Our dozen acolytes of Smoke dropped into Picnic Valley to share lunch in the shade. Definitely a hedonist, Smoke loved this part of the Buttermilk day. “Picnic Valley ... is as spectacular as any site in cragdom,” he once said. “It is not really a valley, just a picnic-wide, sagebrush-and-boulder-strewn space between the frowning brow of the bold Big Owl Pinnacle, the overhanging brow of South Mount Kleiforth, and the sheer cliffs of Big Slab Pinnacle ... The haul from the car is short enough that non-climbing types can be persuaded to pack in the food and water and wine ... ”

After the wine with lunch we groan and move on. The Big Slab looms huge and complex. Our choices to this summit included the offwidth Robbins Crack (oops, no wide pro), an esthetic 5.9 slab option (no draws either), and the usual selection of chimneys. These led up under the Big Slab itself tilting against the upper wall and hiding one of the most awkward (among many) of the Rock Course’s horizontal grovel-and-squeeze moves.

The preferred option from there, left from the top of the Big Slab itself, is Sharp’s Scenic Stroll. With our heels hanging out over a hundred-foot drop, we broke out the string once more, remembering that was the spot where Chuck Pratt, the boldest free climber of the Sixties, once accepted a belay from Smoke.

At last we arrived at the final pinnacle, beyond the Coyote Singing Summit, from where, on another outing, we actually heard coyotes singing. The excitement was palpable, but so was confusion. The final formation is huge and there are so many ways the route might go, and so many of them blocked by a bouldery stretch underscored with a bad drop. We split up, probing. Off to the left I had to check out a monster orange-wedge flake.

LEFT Jules Eichorn, of Eichorn’s Pinnacle fame, with Sue Blanchard and Smoke, at the School’s 5th Camp in the Palisades.

BELOW: Smoke watches as Johns Fischer and Jay Jensen demonstrate belay technique on Refrigerator Rock, at the 5th Camp.





The Rock Course, approximate location. Photo by TK Robinson.

Fifty feet high, razor sharp on top (unlikely anyone had ever been up there), it is barely balanced, awaiting the earthquake that will topple it. It has formed a chimney, and when that gets too wide, face holds lead upward, only to blank out. I squeezed through the back of it to a ledge. Spread out below was the lush green of Round Valley and the dusky reddish fringe of Volcanic Tablelands beyond the Owens River. Over there are the Happy Boulders, the Sads, the place where I once found a four-inch obsidian spear point, and some remarkable petroglyphs. I crept along the ledge to a knobby face. It would go if you had a few

runners to tie off knobs, but we were equipped Smoke-style without even a carabiner. I reversed through the chimney, and found that Em had gotten up a 5.8 wide crack onto the summit plateau. Others followed. I was drawn around another corner, though, and found myself alone, puzzling out a slabby traverse. If I could only get up these airy approach moves ...

The last word belongs to Smoke: “There is no way that I know of to pass on by paper the feeling that permeates the person who steps out of the shower with epidermis cleaned and tingling from crystal scrapes, muscles pleasantly tired, joints well-oiled, and

GUIDEBOOK

AS THESE EFFORTS TO FIND the Rock Course and write it down started gaining momentum, the usual objections popped up too. There’s a whole range of them. Starting with simple hoarding: my secret place; everyone go away. Well, it is nice to have a swath of pristine wilderness all to yourself sometimes. But there’s scads of that all across the West, really. Most of it not quite as convenient as 10 minutes out of Bishop. But then crowding can get exaggerated: I’ve had the Peabody Boulders all to myself, even in the last six months, both for a fine morning circuit and an enchanted twilight session. The rest of the time I really don’t mind saying hi, sharing some beta, a story and a laugh. Solitude is only valued against the backdrop of company anyway. And there is so much unclimbed—even unexplored—rock in the American West that it’s kind of ridiculous. Just the places I’ve seen personally would fuel lifetimes of exploring.

This course was the creation of a guy I knew. A

fascinating human being, and he left us a unique kind of climbing. Smoke liked to share his creation, to spread the wealth in the very best way—personally. I find myself wanting it to not fade away. Plenty of others seem eager to preserve this corner of Smoke’s legacy. So I’m writing it down. If that offends you, really, then don’t read it. Your choice. The thin red line on the photo is pretty easy to ignore. If your taste runs to a wild Buttermilk, then just turn your back and wander off into the rockpile. Many have and still do.

Smoke’s Rock Course is outlined, but hardly “set in stone.” Other methods were suggested, including video and GPS. But it’s possible to strip away too much of the adventure, and I balked at the thought of people following their screens instead of reading the rocks themselves.

I used to feel more strongly anti-guidebook. I put up FAs and didn’t report them. Held forth the crucial value of the unknown in a debate with Royal Robbins 40 years ago in this magazine. Ed-

ited a hiking guidebook by taking out the cross-country routes. Then a funny thing happened. I caught myself using guidebooks anyway. I wanted to climb the best routes that had come before, and I loved knowing their history. Now I have a five-foot shelf of guidebooks at my elbow. Hypocrisy was gnawing away emphatically at my ideal of the unknown.

The old argument, “my beach, my wave,” is just silly and selfish. I can always step right up to an open climb even at Yosemite’s most crowded crags. And probably end up sharing the day with someone from Boise or Paris or Perth. If you want guaranteed solitude and unclimbed walls, then try the Amphitheater Lakes Basin mentioned above.

Besides, as citizens of a distinctly crowded little planet, we’re going to have to learn to share or the place is gonna be ripped right out of our greedy little mitts. Yeah, that means you.

I’m ranting, again. Smoke would have found a gentler way to make the point.