

MOUNTAIN PROFILE

THE PALISADES | DOUG ROBINSON

Wringing Light out of Stone

So this kid walks into the Palisades....

I was twenty, twenty-one—don't remember. It was the mid-1960s, for sure. I'd been hanging in the Valley for a few seasons, wide-eyed and feeling lucky to be soaking up wisdom by holding the rope for Chuck Pratt, the finest crack climber of the Golden Age. Yeah, cracks: those stark highways up Yosemite's smooth granite that only open up gradually to effort and humility. Later they begin to reveal another facet: shadowed, interior, drawing us toward hidden dimensions of our ascending passion. ¶ The Palisades, though, are alpine, which means they are even more fractured. It would take me a little longer to cut through to the true dimensions of even the obvious features. To my young imagination, they looked like the gleaming, angular granite in the too-perfect romantic pictures that I devoured out of Gaston Rébuffat's mountaineering books. My earliest climbing partner, John Fischer, had already been there—crampons lashed to his tan canvas-and-leather pack—and he'd returned, wide-eyed, with the tale of having survived a starlit bivy on North Palisade.

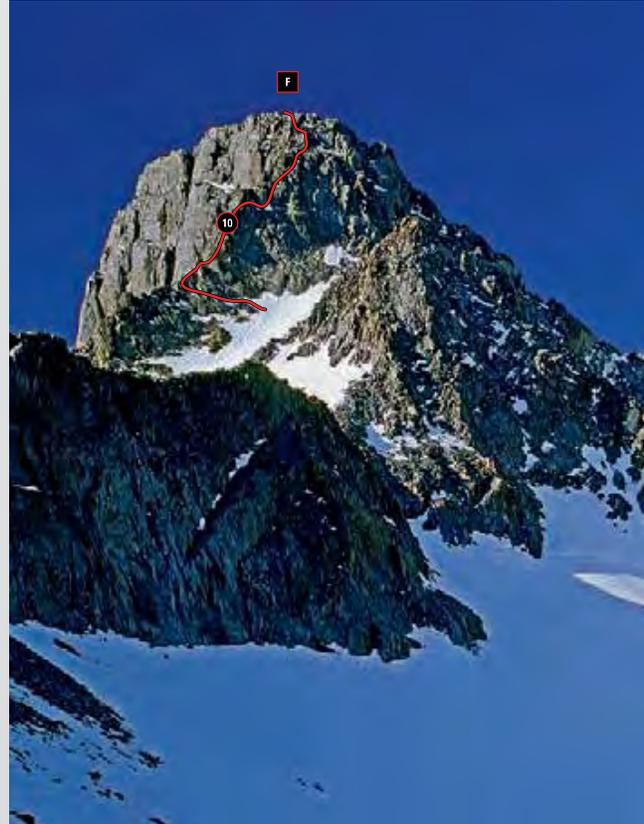
[Facing Page] Don Jensen climbing in the Palisades, Sierra Nevada, California, during the 1960s—captured in a photo that reflects the atmosphere of the French alpinist Gaston Rébuffat's iconic images of the Alps. Many consider the Palisades to be the most alpine region of the High Sierra, although climate change has begun to affect the classic ice and snow climbs. Courtesy American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming



NORMAN CLYDE GLACIER FROM THE NORTHEAST,

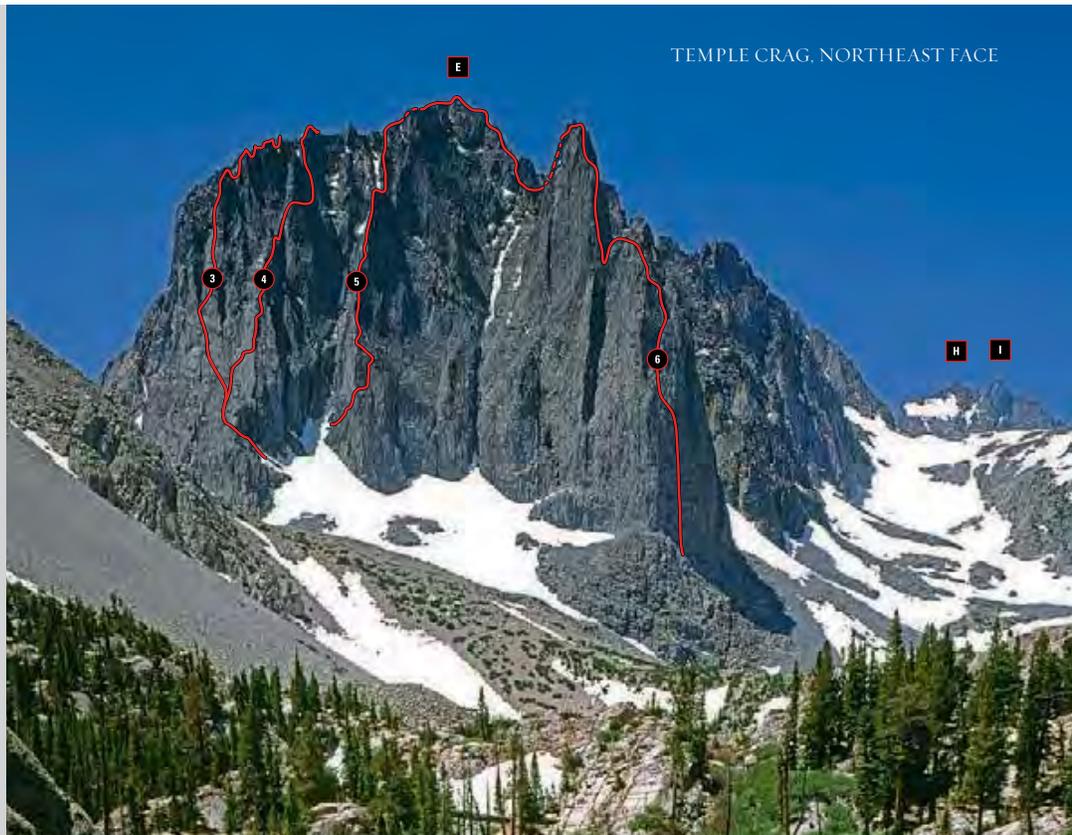


PALISADE BASIN FROM THE SOUTHWEST



THE PALISADES *A Selection of Routes*

A Middle Palisade (14,040'). **B** Norman Clyde Peak (13,920'). **C** Mt. Williams (13,659'). **D** Palisade Crest (ca. 13,520'). **E** Temple Crag (12,999'). **F** Mt. Sill (14,162'). **G** Polemonium Peak (14,000'+). **H** North Palisade (14,242'). **I** Starlight Peak (14,200'). **J** Thunderbolt Peak (ca. 14,000'). [Not shown] Palisades Traverse (VI 5.9, ca. 160 pitches; FCA: Adams-Fischer, 1979). **1** Northeast Face (3rd-4th Class, Clyde 1930). **2** Twilight Pillar (III 5.8+, Jensen-Sarnquist, 1966). **3** Venusian Blind Arête (IV 5.7, Jensen-Petroff-Walker, 1969). **4** Moon Goddess Arête (IV 5.8; Lower: Connors-Jensen, July 1969; Upper: Armstrong-Dreisbach, Sept. 1969). **5** Sun Ribbon Arête (IV 5.10a [optional A0]; Lower: Jensen-Miller-Schwartz, July 1969;



TEMPLE CRAG, NORTHEAST FACE



PALISADE GLACIER FROM THE NORTHEAST

Upper: Fischer-Jensen, Sept. 1969). 6 Dark Star (V 5.9 A0 [5.10c]; Lower: Fischer-Jensen, 1970; Upper: Brueckner-Jensen, 1971; FCFA: Fischer-Jensen-Robinson-Wiltsie, 1975.)
 7 West Buttress (IV 5.10c, Burns-Porcella, 1990). 8 Rowell-Wilson West Face (IV 5.10, Rowell-Wilson, 1981). 9 Southwest Buttress (IV 5.11c, Burns-Porcella, 1990). 10 Swiss Arête (III 5.7, Austin-Dyar-Ingwersen-Jones-Momyer, 1938). 11 V-Notch (III WI3; First ice ascent: Chouinard-Robinson, 1969). 12 U-Notch (II WI2, Clyde, 1928). 13 Doors of Perception (III 5.8, Robinson-Steck, 1970). 14 Clyde Couloir (WI3 5th Class, Clyde, 1929). 15 Starlight Buttress (III 5.4, Clyde, 1930). Clockwise from top left: Jonathan Byers, Ed Cooper, Ed Cooper, Steve Porcella

and fledgling guides. There were no official wilderness rangers to point out our error yet, so the hut lasted until it was challenged by the wildness of the Sierra itself, and a howling gale blew it over in the fierce winter of 1969, scattering pieces of aluminum roofing a mile down the Third Lake Gully.

But first, Don offered me a job at the Mountaineering Guide Service. I moved right into its base camp in Sam Mack Meadow. I've spent three collective years up here, barefoot camping in sandy nooks nestled into the bedrock, lounging with guide comrades in "safety meeting" circles, ever alert for new lines that emerged into desire as the light shifted on Temple Crag. Half a century later, I'm still hanging around. I feel a little like the old wrangler in a favorite poem by Gary Snyder, the one that carries a bit of that lingering old West feel that I got from pushing my clunky mountain boots up the sandy trail, "Hay for Horses":

He had driven half the night
 From far down San Joaquin
 Through Mariposa, up the
 Dangerous mountain roads,
 And pulled in at eight a.m.
 With his big truckload of hay
 behind the barn.
 With winch and ropes and hooks
 We stacked the bales up clean
 To splintery redwood rafters
 High in the dark, flecks of alfalfa
 Whirling through shingle-cracks of light,
 Itch of haydust in the
 sweaty shirt and shoes.
 At lunchtime under Black oak
 Out in the hot corral,
 —The old mare nosing lunchpails,
 Grasshoppers crackling in the weeds—
 "I'm sixty-eight" he said,
 "I first bucked hay when I was seventeen.
 I thought, that day I started,
 I sure would hate to do this all my life.
 And dammit, that's just what
 I've gone and done."

[Credit: Copyright © 2010 by Gary Snyder from *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems*. Reprinted by permission of Counterpoint.]

[Facing Page] Don Jensen's hand-drawn map of the Palisades. | [This Page] A portrait of Jensen. David Roberts, who climbed with Jensen in Alaska, wrote in the 1974 *American Alpine Journal* obituary: "The style of Don's climbs, the special stamp he left on them, came from a blend of daring scheme and methodical preparation. He would choose the



Sense of Place

HOW TO CHARACTERIZE THIS PLACE? After a lifetime up here, I have to draw back a bit to search for perspective.

The Palisades are big. This seven-mile stretch of Sierra Crest is so big that you have to strain for a vantage point that takes it all in. Tall, too, with five 14,000-foot peaks in a row at the head of the North Fork of Big Pine Creek. Around their highest summit, North Palisade, they form a broad cirque that cradles the mile-wide Palisade Glacier, the largest in the Sierra. Many people think that's it: that the North Fork is the Palisades. But peek over Glacier Notch to see that there's more.

For every ten climbers carrying their ice axes up the North Fork, maybe just one wanders up the

South. At its head sits Middle Palisade, where one of the range's best third-class climbs weaves steeply up intricate ledge systems. This is old-school *third class*: people have died slipping on black ice there. It's hard enough to traverse the meandering knife-edge from its summit, half a mile along ridgeline so sharp, with such teetering passages and overhanging gendarmes, that you almost hope it has suspenders to the sky.

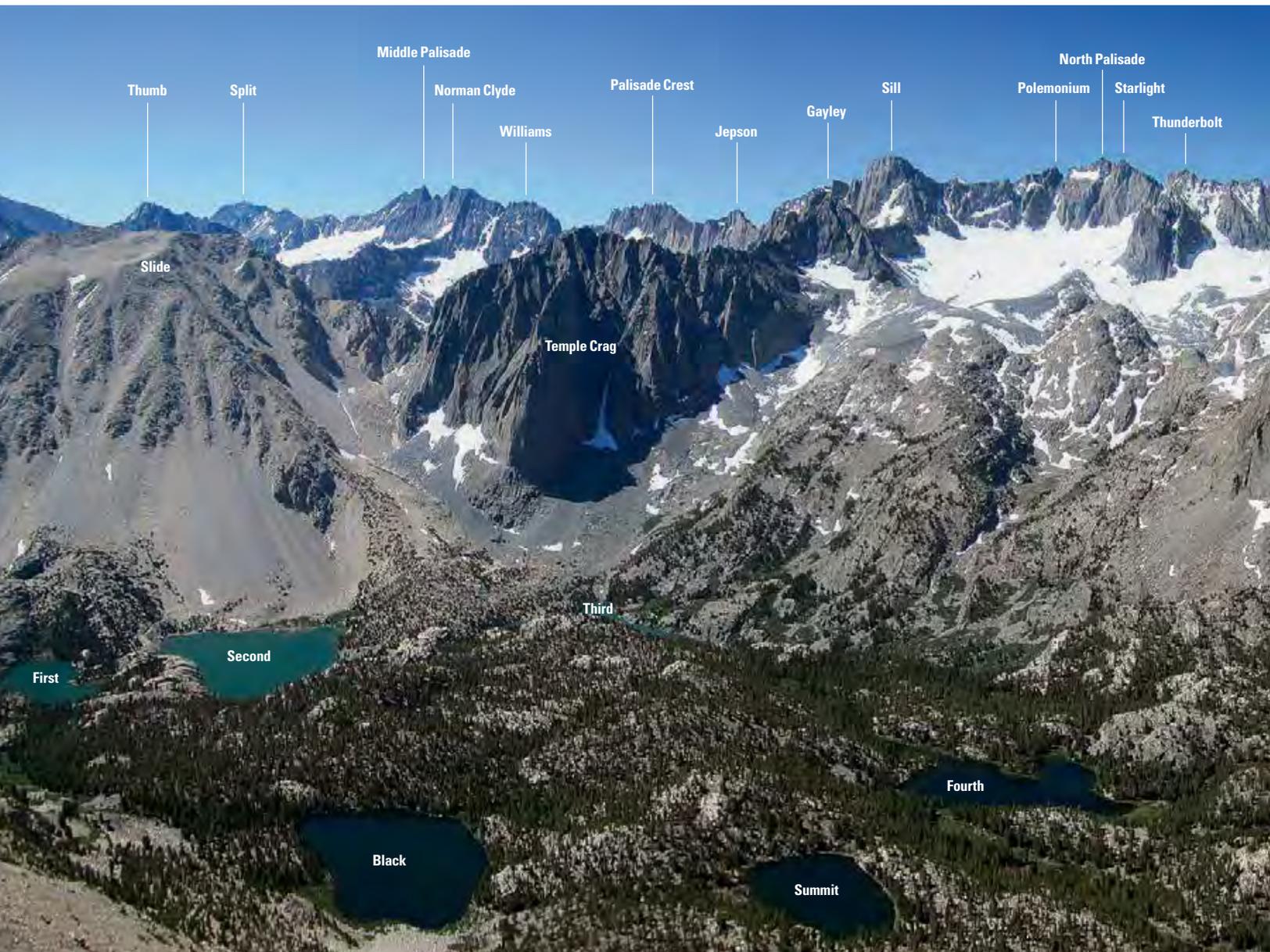
Ever hear of Southeast Palisade? Probably not, though it, too, is over 14,000 feet. By 1895, its name shifted to Split Mountain. The peak is so seldom visited that layers of old lore have built up around its 2,000-foot eastern arête and ice gullies—such as the story that Fred Beckey bailed here in 1976, muttering about loose rock and leaving Galen Rowell to solo the meandering east arête of the north summit in under two hours.

The Palisades are also dark. Some of their rock is a dusky-hued quartz monzonite. Other stone has the poetic name of Inconsolable granodiorite. Over time, you get used to the shards stacked on ledges and the need to give an appraising tap with the heel of your hand before pulling on flakes and blocks. The trade routes are usually more solid, cleaned by the passage of many hands and feet.

And icy. The highest stretch of 400 miles of Sierra Crest casts a north-facing shadow deep enough to encourage the Palisade Glacier to linger. Out of the canyon mouth at dawn, you watch the sun rise over blue Nevada ranges. Gullies shoot up to every dividing notch and turn to flinty ice in autumn. It's a remarkable vision in such an arid place, where, on many summer days, a diffusion of smog pulses overhead, having drifted from Fresno and Silicon Valley.

After pacing the streets of Chamonix and standing atop name-brand summits in New Zealand and Nepal, I'm not just content with the Palisades; I'm eager to stay here, to dig in, to be at home. I finally get it: it's not the distant prospect, the vision beyond the ranges, that's left to

route or the mountain; then began a kind of brooding, full of diagrams and logistical data, during which all his other worldly concerns atrophied. Once on the mountain, he made the place livable, familiar, his own: to be at his best there, he had to endure the mountain with the quirks and echoes and scenic furniture of home." Courtesy Joan Jensen (both)



explore, but the things hidden within, the revealed texture of moments when, as Ron Kauk has said, I “get inside the move.” That’s where I come to grips with the self forever elusively peeking out, the archetypes it unveils, illuminated by that string of selves of older mountaineers, my forebears, who grasped the same holds and leaned into the same bedrock to watch the next generation race upward to its own discovery of these celestial arêtes.

Barefoot Traces

“I’M JUST A HOLDOVER from the Pleistocene,” Norman Clyde liked to say. And since Clyde was the grand old man of Palisades climbing, I liked to listen. His twinkly storytelling echoed with such an expanse of solitary experience up here that his statement seemed less like self-deprecating farce and more like a matter-of-fact reminder that the Pleistocene wasn’t really, in the trajectory of our human story, that far back.

I easily imagined Clyde, during one of his innumerable winters as the caretaker of Glacier Lodge, slogging up the dozen-odd miles from Big Pine on skis, carrying the next fortnight’s supplies—a heavy plentitude

for a famously hungry man—of potatoes and garlic and kerosene for long winter nights of writing. The longest stretch of that snowed-in road, he might have realized, cuts into the side of a monstrous moraine, an out-sized Pleistocene relic that runs eight miles down from the lodge, defining the slot of Big Pine Creek and sometimes reaching more than 500 feet high. Perhaps the moraine conjured up glacial visions for Clyde, as it has for me, of early hunter-gatherers dwelling in brush huts and sewing rabbit-fur robes to explore up the giant river of ice that once licked at the outskirts of their village.

Rock art near the range dates back as far as 10,000 years. The Paiute people have lived in the area for at least 1,000. They named the grandest peak overhead *Ninamishi*, “The Guardian of the Valley” (now known as Mt. Sill). Centuries before Europeans arrived, they harvested pine nuts and chased game, pecked images into volcanic stone and crossed passes to trade with other groups. Much later, in his *History of the Sierra Nevada*, Francis Farquhar described finding relics of their camps in high-alpine country: “Holes in the bedrock for grinding acorns. Little flakes and chips of obsidian scattered about. . . . Trails worn in the soft ground of the forest, trails not made by modern boots or by horses and mules.”



[Photo] **Panorama of the Palisades, from The Thumb (13,388') to Aperture Peak (13,265'). The peaks are surrounded by Kings Canyon National Park (created in 1940) and Inyo National Forest's John Muir Wilderness (made into a wilderness area in 1964)** Leor Pantilat

John Muir Walks on By

NOW, WHEN I PRESS DEEPER on the gas, motoring up Big Pine Creek Road, I can't help noticing how our asphalt ribbon is cut into the side of the old moraine. At first, it's hard to recognize it as the remnants of a Pleistocene glacier. Especially not with summer temperatures hovering in the nineties. The Palisades skyline, not yet glimpsed above, hems in one side of the deepest valleys in the country. North Palisade is higher above Big Pine than Mt. Everest is above its Base Camp.

The influx of European settlers here brought epidemics and war. Traces of the oldest possible Palisades ascents mostly vanished. Guidebook writers Cameron Burns and Steve Porcella, who found a stone circle on nearby Tinemaha Peak, speculate that Paiute or Shoshone people were the first to scramble up Split Mountain, at the south end of the Palisades. In 1887 a group of Basque shepherds, among the earliest non-Native Americans to follow the old trails deep into the range, made a largely forgotten ascent of the peak. The historian Chester Versteeg declared, "The perils [a shepherd] faced alone with his flock in combating early snows; the passes he traveled...years before they were 'discovered' by the mountaineer.... All these

are unwritten pages of Sierra history" (*Sierra Club Bulletin* 11).

In many ways, the written-down part of the climbing history began with what didn't happen. When the great American naturalist John Muir headed to Mt. Whitney, about forty miles downrange from the Palisades, to make the first ascent of the Mountaineers Route in 1873, he didn't follow the itinerary eventually named for him. Instead, he hiked down the Owens Valley, through Bishop. South of there, the sharp eastern escarpment of the Sierra bent instead of shearing with each passing quake, obscuring the Palisades behind foreground hills. There were only peeks of *Ninamishi* far back up Big Pine Canyon. And so Muir, the liveliest climber of his day, walked on by.

William Brewer's party of the Geological Survey of California began pushing farther into the southern Sierra in 1864, a year after government troops forced a thousand Paiute people onto a reservation near Fort Tejon. To the surveyors, the landscape seemed like an emptied wilderness of stone towers—raw, mapless and desolate. At the head of the Middle Fork of the Kings River, they encountered a line of rocky summits, "unlike the rest of the [Sierra] crest in outline and color," which they called the "Palisades" because the peaks resembled the sharpened wooden stakes used to fortify towns. In 1875 the Wheeler Survey triangulated measurements of its highest mountains. A handful of adventurers wandered the basins in their wake. Some began reaching the summits of other Sierra peaks, but the Palisades remained too remote and intimidating. In an 1896 edition of *Overland Monthly*, Theodore Solomons extolled the skyline as "the acme of sublimity on the American continent...the most formidable of conquest of any part of the Californian Alps."

Years passed before anyone made a publicized ascent on this most rugged barricade of the Sierra Crest. The majority of new Californians had little interest in backcountry recreation. City dwellers remembered the "wilderness" they crossed during the Gold Rush of 1849 as a vast and sometimes terrifying obstacle to the coast. "Once they were there," the historian Earl Pomeroy explains in *The Pacific Slope*, "they seemed too busy getting rich or poor to return to nature." The first railroad from San Francisco to Yosemite wasn't completed until 1907. Even after automobiles appeared, only a few rough roads led to the edges of the Sierra. Travelers faced a roundabout journey to get to the Palisades from the west, the only direction they considered. Tehipite Valley, on the North Fork of the Kings River, might have afforded a direct approach. Today, the few who traverse its narrow entrance must swim from pool to pool, towing their rock shoes in dry bags. And that's coming downstream. Forging upstream has likely never been accomplished.

A Forbidding Array of Jagged Spires

GRADUALLY, as the development of the West continued, more Americans felt curious to explore the dwindling wild spaces. In the late nineteenth century, adventurer-intellectuals from California's new universities left the coast on horseback for summer vacations in the Sierra. Riding through Yosemite Valley, Berkeley professor Joseph LeConte delighted in sleeping under the stars and experiencing "the roughest style of camp life." In *A Journal of Ramblings through the High Sierra*, he described encountering a solitary man clad "in rough miller's garb" with an "intelligent face and earnest, clear blue eyes." It was John Muir, whose musings

1921 & 2006

Middle Palisade DANIEL ARNOLD

A TENSE CONVERSATION high on the steep west face of Middle Palisade: Ansel Hall had just escaped a rotten chimney, a vertical gizzard full of big, grinding stones. After climbing out right to avoid the flying rocks that Hall knocked loose, Francis Farquhar had joined him by way of a fingertip traverse above vanishing footholds and empty air. They conferred on a ledge and agreed to bail. But some strange mental judo surprised them both. “We had had about enough,” Farquhar wrote, “and definitely decided to go down.... Then...we both began to climb up.”

The year was 1921. The two men had no ropes or other gear, just their fingers and boots, and some food in their pockets. Farquhar was an accountant, and Hall was Yosemite’s park naturalist—happy guys, not flint-eyed desperadoes bent on heady soloing. But *all* California climbers of the era were soloists, apart from a few who used the rare lasso or hand-line. Those newfangled Alpine roped techniques—belaying and rappelling—didn’t make it to California until 1930. For seventy years prior (and longer, if you include Native Americans, who left hints but no written records), men and women had been climbing ropeless in the Sierra. The mountains were just too bewitching, the stone too perfect in the hand. The razor summits and pretty faces and infinite ridges hypnotized the early climbers, calling them back to spend a week or a month or the rest of their lives. By the time Robert Underhill taught the body belay to the Sierra Club in 1931, most of the major Sierra peaks had been climbed.

I caught up with Farquhar and Hall on Middle Palisade in 2006. I’d been following the original Sierra climbers for three years, from John Muir’s

tale of fear and deliverance on the north face of Mt. Ritter to Norman Clyde’s first ascents on the couloirs and spires of the Palisades. I retraced their routes without ropes or modern gear, at times bivying in a wool blanket. The mountains became my time machine to an age when sunrises were miracles of light and heat, when letting go wasn’t an option and storms went right through to the skin. I came to think that by carrying nothing, climbers like Farquhar and Hall heard more of what the mountains have to say.



Ansel Hall—lucky kid—was born into the Muir era. Between summers spent running from peak to peak with a notebook and a pocketful of bread crusts, Muir filled the mountains with poetry and possibility in his books, most of which hit print during Hall’s first twenty years. When Muir wrote, “We little know until tried how much of the uncontrollable there is in us, urging across glaciers and torrents, and up dangerous heights,” he could have been speaking directly to Hall about climbing Middle Palisade. From early on, Hall was “inoculated,” as he told Farquhar, “with the Sierra Nevada fever.” Hall grew up making boyhood pilgrimages

to Yosemite. In 1917, at age twenty-three, he hired on as one of two park rangers for Sequoia National Park and its 250 square miles of mountain wilderness. That summer, he was turned loose with a horse, a mule, a rifle and some tools. He called this time “one of the most glamorous” of his life.

Farquhar had roots in the East and a Harvard degree, but one look at Yosemite was enough to settle him in California. At his house in Berkeley, he escaped to the Sierra through his basement library, where he’d compiled an immense collection of books, letters, documents and maps, which together narrated the natural and human history of California’s mountains. He and his wife, Marjory—an ace mountaineer herself, and a better pure rock climber than Farquhar—hosted parties there. In 1975, in Farquhar’s *American Alpine Journal* obituary, one of his friends wrote: “Probably more expeditions, first ascents, and other escapades were hatched in the Farquhar library than in any other incubator of American mountaineering. When two climbers met in some remote mountain area...

the password often was, ‘Remember me? I met you at the Farquhars.’”

In 1921 Middle Palisade dominated Farquhar’s mental horizon. “A magnet seemed to draw me...,” he wrote, “and I confess that I willingly submitted to its influence.” He’d spent the previous summer studying the mountain, first broadside on, across Palisade Creek; then down the axis of the range from atop North Palisade. Farquhar knew that another Sierra climber, James Hutchinson, had his eye on Middle Palisade, too. Across the range, few of California’s tallest mountains remained unclimbed, and few mountains of any kind

[This Page, Left] **Daniel Arnold**, author of *Early Days in the Range of Light* (2009), has re-enacted many early first ascents in the High Sierra, using the original gear. In this photo, he says, he was retracing a climb by Clarence King (1842–1901), “using a wool blanket as

both my backpack and my bed.” Daniel Arnold | [This Page, Right] **Francis Farquhar**, who made the first ascent of Middle Palisade with Ansel Hall in 1921. Glen Dawson/Courtesy Michael Rettie | [Facing Page] **Middle Palisade and Norman Clyde Peak**. Mark Thomas



had Middle Palisade's wild geometry. The mountain was a blade of rock jabbed at the sky, one sharp ridgeline running north and south, and two steep, fluted faces to the east and west. Farquhar couldn't keep his eyes off it.

Up high on Middle Pal, alone but in good company, I had two revelations: the mountain was just as steep as it looked—maybe steeper—and the climbing was *technical*. Fingerlocks, jams, arm-bars and chicken wings, I used all the Yosemite tricks. Which means Farquhar and Hall knew how to do those things, too. The Sierra climbers were learning, taking instruction from the mountains and their partners. Lacking climbing gear, they gained pure climbing technique. Their hands on the stone were their belay.

Recovered from their moment of doubt above the chimney and full of rebound courage, Farquhar and Hall raced up the remaining distance. The rock turned into clean mountain bone, dense and solid. I followed behind, switching out of dead-end crack systems, traversing across oversized pleats of white granite. Right below the top, I climbed a near-vertical crystal wall covered in buckets and

rails. I imagined Farquhar and Hall, wide-eyed, cackling into their beards, staring straight down past their boots while the mountain spilled out below them.

On top, Farquhar and Hall found their empty summit, a graceful knife-edge hung on a curve. They shouted at the sky and drank in the view. A few miles up-range, North Palisade and Mt. Sill loomed out of a sea of densely knit peaks. Remnant glaciers and canyons and stone-bound lakes filled the ground below. The two men moved carefully around the summit—the big drop was right there on both sides, and loose gargoyle-blocks looked ready to tip off into space. I joined them, and the first thing I saw was a Clark's Nutcracker perched on the ridgeline, feathers blowing in the wind. It took one look at me and dove off the east face, dropping a thousand feet before spreading its wings and flying away.

It was Farquhar's best climb. In the decades that followed, he became better known as an organizer, mentor and recorder. Through his connection to the Harvard Mountaineering Club, he brought Underhill to the Sierra to teach local

climbers the ropes, the singular event that ushered in the modern era of climbing in California. And as the routes became more vertical and visionary, as Eichorn climbed Higher Cathedral Spire and Robbins climbed Half Dome and Harding climbed the Nose, Farquhar filed away their stories in his library.

Propped atop Middle Palisade, I could all but see those threads of influence stretching from mountain to mountain and climber to climber. Beginning with Muir and Clarence King, the original prophets, the lines branch across the range for seventy years until they merge in Yosemite. And from the walls of Yosemite, the lines radiate around the world. In the Sierra, the mountains look so fresh and pure they could be brand-new, but the stories are all there, written on the stone hold by hold, each generation adding its verses.

[Farquhar wrote about the climb of Middle Palisade in the *Sierra Club Bulletin* vol. 11 no. 3. Nicholas Clinch's obituary for Farquhar is in the 1975 *American Alpine Journal*. Hall told Farquhar about his Sierra inoculation in Farquhar's 1958 oral history held by the Bancroft Library. Muir wrote about the uncontrollable in *The Mountains of California*.—Author.]

on the spiritual value of mountains soon won LeConte's admiration.

In 1890, partly due to Muir's efforts, Yosemite became a national park—preserving the area for tourists, albeit not for the shepherds or for the Native Americans who were eventually forced out. Two years later, LeConte and Muir helped found the Sierra Club, with the goals of bringing more visitors to the mountains and creating a larger constituency of conservationists. Unlike today's image of dirtbag climbers, the early Sierra Clubbers drew their ranks straight out of the professorial hierarchies of Berkeley and Stanford, and the high society of San Francisco. Their "roughest style" included hundred-person camps of gentlemen in sport coats and ladies in white blouses and ankle-length dresses who lumbered through the Sierra trailing massive mule-packed commissaries. Still, it became customary for smaller groups with knapsacks to venture out on their own to far peaks. Among them was LeConte's son, Professor Joseph N. LeConte, who followed his father's path to Berkeley and the mountains. Working on a map of the Sierra, he became obsessed with the Palisades, a region he called "the wildest, most magnificent, and most difficult of access" (*SCB* 5). In 1902 he and his bride, Helen, entered Kings Canyon with Curtis M. Lindley, and after much "rock-rolling and brush-cutting" up creek beds, they began what they thought was the first ascent of Split Mountain. Once they broke into the sweeping Upper Basin, the climb proved to be a rare walk-up.

LeConte considered all five of the 14,000-foot summits along the central crest to be one mountain, with North Pal as its highest point. A year later, he and Helen, along with other friends, returned to spy a route. Through his telescope from the top of Marion Peak, LeConte noted a breach in the wall below a "forbidding array of jagged spires." Abandoning the burros, and carrying packs that included eiderdown quilts and summit-register boxes, his party stumbled into a quiet basin surrounded by high cliffs. An alpine creek flashed silver among barren stones and gnarled trees. Still high above, the summits flared a deep sunset red. Awed by what seemed like an untrammled world, LeConte declared, "[T]he sheepmen who visited the valley must have been few indeed."

At dawn, July 24, they followed the deep U-Notch, the only feasible break in a dizzying confusion of buttresses and spires. At nearly 14,000 feet, above the steep maze of *nieve penitentes*, LeConte saw the summit of North Pal appear. "Boys, we shall make it," he cried out. A few minutes later, he found himself walled in by a 100-foot gash. After whiling away an hour trundling boulders and pondering their options, they turned to scramble up the easier crest of Mt. Sill instead. The itch for North Pal persisted. The next day, "with rather doubting hearts and very sore legs and arms," LeConte went back up the U-Notch, accompanied by James Hutchinson and James Moffit. This time, they scanned the left wall until they spotted a downward-sloping ledge. Most modern climbers use a rope here; LeConte's party scratched at the slabby "catwalk" with only cold fingers and nailed boots, and then pushed against the sides of a dark chimney with elbows and knees. "In some places it was filled with clear ice," LeConte wrote, "and great icicles hung directly in the way from



some lodged boulder above. These had to be avoided by stepping in the narrow space between the rock and ice, or by finding footholds on the walls."

I've guided this route scores of times since the 1960s, and I've occasionally found early season snow here, but the water ice of LeConte's day is gone—one of many sad clues to global warming. Each time I emerge onto the bright crest, I imagine his immense relief. Almost there. Not quite. Twenty feet below the top, they had to balance up and down a row of thin stone blades. They dragged themselves onto the summit. Lakes of jade shone from the eastern side, destined in a few decades to become the standard approach to the peaks. That night, they relaxed into the timeless ritual of climbers everywhere, eating the

remnants of their provisions and "smoking whole and complete stogies."

In 1950, on his deathbed, LeConte listened to Hutchinson retell their story of the hard-won North Palisade one last time. An alpine light seemed to fill the dying man's sharply focused eyes (*SCB* 35).

Off on a Tangent from Civilization

DURING THE FIRST DECADE after World War I, knowledge of how to belay still hadn't reached California. In the *Sierra Club Bulletin*, a young accountant, Francis Farquhar, described mountaineering as "a sort of game in which the climbers' resources are matched against the resistance of the mountain." Simul-soloing during the 1921 first ascent of Middle Palisade, he became separated from his friend Ansel Hall, and he arrived at a dead end: "The more I looked, the more impossible seemed a descent, and presently I became unnerved and thoroughly scared." Finally, he got control of his fear, tiptoed across a ledge to rejoin Hall, and they found some "tolerable" holds that led to the summit.

Although Sierra Club trips tended to be social affairs, the Palisades also attracted restless loners who became, perhaps, even more attuned to (or aligned with) the mountains themselves. That same year, Berkeley student Hermann Ulrichs left his lagging companions behind. For days, he survived off chocolate as he struggled up a steep, complex wall to complete LeConte's original line of attempt on North Palisade. Today, most climbers want a rope for Ulrichs' route; far more never attempt it at all.

Lured to the Sierra by Muir's writings, Norman Clyde slipped naturally into a habit of solitary rambles. He spent his first summer of climbing in the range in 1914, the year that his hero died. After dropping out of Berkeley graduate school, he ambled under a huge pack, ninety pounds or more, with everything he needed to live and climb three seasons in the high country: piles of books, a "little piece of iron" (to repair his hobnailed boots), a long ice axe, ski boots, snug tennis shoes for technical rock, pistols and fishing tackle. When he came into town, this eccentric-looking guy with no visible means of support and a whispered reputation for pulling guns on locals...? Well, yes, Bishop's first dirtbag climber was certainly a handful.

In the course of his long life, Clyde completed some 120 Sierra first ascents, more than anyone has before or since, most of them solo. I met



him initially in the late 1960s couch-surfing at Smoke Blanchard's house, ensconced on a sofa, a few steps from the solid wall of a library, with a stack of fresh reads at his elbow. In person, Clyde was modest and self-deprecating, yet with that twinkle when he paused mid-yarn to see whether you were tracking his subtext. As he braided several stories into a larger tale, his voice turned subtle and mischievous, as if he were testing you. If you passed muster, he became warmly human. His sly humor was in rare form when he got up to speak at his last public appearance, a dinner in 1971 honoring the appearance of his final book, *Norman Clyde of the Sierra Nevada*: "Speaking of mountaineering, I did have a little mania...."

As a writer, however, Clyde shied away from personal revelation. Perhaps the stoic formality of his prose reflected his classical education; his father began schooling him in Latin and Greek as soon as he could talk. Maybe, too, there was a self-sufficiency born of abandonment: his wife, Winnie, succumbed to tuberculosis as he looked helplessly on. For a few years, Clyde was the principal of the Independence High School. But after he fired a shot past some Halloween pranksters from the schoolhouse steps ("If I had meant to hit those kids, they would have been hit," he claimed), he more or less faded into the Sierra for good.

[Facing Page] Norman Clyde worked as a guide, a woodcutter and a winter caretaker, spending all year in the Sierra. As Daniel Arnold writes in *Early Days in the Range of Light*, Clyde had "an uncanny ability to find bodies [of fallen climbers].... Clyde could put himself into the missing man's thoughts, and then deduce what the mountains had done

"I sort of went off on a tangent from civilization," he later told an *LA Times* reporter. During the summers, he guided; in the winter evenings, he labored over climbing articles that he struggled to sell. "The general public consist[s] quite largely of morons and the like," he grouched to Versteeg. I picture Clyde pausing, mid-sentence, to watch the snow banners rise off the mountain framed in the window of his caretaker cabin, remembering how the sun had torched the unclimbed summit on a cold spring day in 1930. Perched alone on its apex, he'd shared his lunch with rosy finches. His admirers eventually named it Norman Clyde Peak.

Clyde had a lover's devotion to North Palisade. In 1928 he made the first ascent of the northeast side up the U-Notch, nearly 800 feet of step kicking in early season, sweeping to an honest fifty degrees and often shifting to ice at its top. Perfectly at ease balancing on his hobnails and blasting steps with his long axe, he also soloed Clyde Couloir, which, when it necks down to a near-vertical crux, before it melts out each summer, is still the most daunting of all ice climbs from the Palisade Glacier. By the late 1920s, he'd started wearing crampons. One day in the U-Notch, he slipped and dropped his axe. Unable to self-arrest, and realizing that he might drop straight into the 'schrund, he flipped over

with them.... [H]e also spoke with a mixture of compassion and matter-of-factness that could be a comfort to devastated parents." Clyde is well-known for locating the body of Pete Starr in the Minarets in 1933. County of Inyo, Eastern California Museum | [This Page] PSOM students on their way to a course. To the left is the V-Notch Couloir. Gordon Wiltsie



to accelerate. “Here I go to Hell!” is how he told the story. He shot off the rim fast enough to clear the gap. Well, nearly. He snagged a crampon, spraining his ankle. Alone and broken, Clyde crawled across the glacier to a bivy he called the “Palace Hotel,” where he holed up for a six-week recovery. It was one of many spots Clyde referred to as his “Hospitals,” and I like to think that he whiled away the weeks re-reading *The Odyssey* and that his *pistola* came in mighty handy providing marmot stew.

I was just up there again recently, and as I sought out the perfect backrest rock, I remembered how he used to say, “The view alone is worth \$50.” It’s difficult for our social selves to reconcile such solitude without defaulting to stereotypes of loners and crazies. His last best friend, Smoke, summed Clyde up as “wild, aloof, dignified, difficult.” Daniel Arnold mused in *Early Days in the Range of Light* that “the pleasure of deep loneliness seems to come with the risk of drowning in it.” Yet Arnold quickly added that Clyde “seems to have been better equipped than anyone to handle solitude and the unrelenting pressure of raw beauty.” Clyde was in constant touch, after all, with the powerful and elemental: rock, trees, wind, sky.

I’ve spent enough summers wandering the Sierra, and snowed-in cabin months of winter, to know the attraction of simple joys and deep self-knowledge, the bounty of solitude. At rare times, too, I’ve caught inklings of how, for some, “that way lies madness.” I’ve come to view Norman Clyde as a man with exceptional strength of mind. A strength that steeped out of the surest of touchstones: intimate contact with the wild. Today, as our civil world, perhaps overly informed, becomes more fragmented, fractured and frenetic—time itself increasingly splintered into shards and the fulsomeness of a single thought likely to be

interrupted—it’s difficult to wrap our heads around the spaciousness of a cumulus unfurling into the yawn of an afternoon. More than ever, we need the counterexample of a Clyde, who enjoyed reading Greek because the language slowed him down enough to entertain the insights that only a long view can take in.

Smoke noted that Clyde liked to describe himself as “900 years old,” a timeline in which you could notice, unperturbed, the growth spurts of a bristlecone pine. Maybe in one of Smoke’s books, Clyde came across the poems of Han Shan, that legendary Zen hermit of T’ang Dynasty China, who likewise entertained rumors of immortality. I like to think of Clyde smiling at the lines from so similar a “mountain madman” with the quiet, oh-so-contented experience of “mind steady and sharp / head resting on a stone.”

1931, The Hinge of History

AND BOY, DID CLYDE LOVE STARLIGHT, North Pal’s twin tower, which rises like a giant sundial to the heavens—though in 1930 its first ascent nearly killed him. High above the glacier, when a heavy block shifted under his weight, he let go and fell a few feet until he hit a ledge. “After scrambling back up to the rock again, I shoved it down,” he expounded in the 1931 *American Alpine Journal*, “thereby making a much desired hold.” He looped a cord over the summit, attached it to his waist for a makeshift top rope and scabbled over the last glassy bulge. When I recall that stark, narrow spire, and the delicate friction over break-a-leg talus, I cringe: his cord could have all too easily slipped off.

As the *Sierra Club Bulletin* editor, Farquhar kept current on the deaths

[This Page, Left] **The Underhill Camp atop North Palisade. From left to right: Robert Underhill, Norman Clyde, Francis Farquhar, Glen Dawson, Jules Eichorn, Neil Wilson, Lewis Clark, Bestor Robinson and Elmer Collett.** | [This Page, Right] **Eichorn and Underhill on the “Milk Bottle,” the summit monolith of Starlight.** Lewis Clark/Courtesy Michael Rettie

collection (both) | [Facing Page] **Published in a 1958 issue of *Summit*, the photo shows Ruth Dyar Mendenhall with her husband, John, in the Palisades; the two put a number of new routes together in the Sierra and other ranges; her own first first ascent, the Swiss Arête of Mt. Sill remains classic today.** George Harr collection/Sierra Club Angeles Chapter Archives

of less-fortunate soloists, and in the summer of 1931, he invited Harvard professor Robert Underhill, who'd learned the most current climbing techniques in the Alps, to teach ropework to Californians. The students included two teenagers, Jules Eichorn and Glen Dawson, who dominated local climbing for the rest of the decade. They called it the Underhill Camp when it convened in the Minarets; by the time they got to the Palisades, participants began referring to it as the Palisades Climbing School.

In graceful cursive on Glacier Lodge stationary, Dawson wrote home, "I may not have such a chance again for a long time." After Underhill showed the students how to brace the rope over a block or spring it over their shoulders to cushion a top-rope fall, Clyde took them from North Pal to Starlight—the beginnings of a long tradition of Palisades traverses. Next, he led them up the tantalizing 2,500-foot north face of Temple Crag. Rain pelted the climbers, and both rope and ice axes proved crucial in long snow gullies. It was the first technical route on the peak.

Two days later, Clyde steered them toward the cragginess of California's last unclimbed 14,000-foot mountain and into its twin snow-ice prongs, which they named "the Underhill Couloirs." Darkness boiled in the south—which in August often means monsoon cloudbursts. They stepped around a delicate corner onto a fine fourth-class slab that shot toward the top. Sparks fizzled off the rock in crackling static. Ahead rose a 5.8 boulder problem, challenging even with their special innovation: basketball shoes, bought tight with the insoles ripped out for better feel. One climber leaned against the summit monolith, creating a *courte échelle*, while the others stood on his back to reach the mantel. Eichorn went last. As he scurried down, the sky exploded into violent light and noise. He later said it went "just past my right ear!"

Doubtless, you've guessed what they named the peak that day.

Their troubles weren't over. Fleeing the lightning through a sudden blizzard, they took refuge under an overhang; then they climbed back over the summit of Thunderbolt in search of a descent, chose a risky tack down an unknown side, found half of a dropped axe just in time to cut steps...the epic went on and on. When Burns and Porcella interviewed the survivors in 1989, many of them declared, "If it had not been for Norman Clyde's mastery of and expertise in the mountains, [we] would not have made it back safely." They'd come to study ropework, but it was old-fashioned mountain sense that pulled them through.

Of course, having a rope wasn't everything: the natural-fiber cords of the day were still notoriously fragile. A few years later, Californian climber Richard Leonard developed the "dynamic belay": by passing the rope behind the hips and letting it slide a little whenever a leader fell, belayers could mitigate some of the risk of a snapped cord. I remember being subjected to this terrifying—and no longer relevant—rite of passage during a 1958 Sierra Club class. Tied to the bumper of a VW, gloved and fitted with a thick leather waist guard, I tried to stop a 150-pound cement weight after a thoughtful loop of slack had been added. I was jerked sideways off the ground, with the leather smoking.



Women on the Rocks

IN 1939 RUTH DYAR helped found a commune. At the height of the Depression, when it was still scandalous for unmarried men and women to live together, she and her sister rented a brown stucco house in Los Angeles, with a band of "chums," all under the age of thirty. In a posthumously published essay, "Women on the Rocks, Way Back Then," she recalled, "We hungered for fun, adventure and companionship. These were all available in the skiing and climbing set, and at the time had the added advantage of not costing much." Dubbed "Base Camp," the house served as the nucleus of Southern California

Sierra Club activity. (And of its social life: "Several marriages came out of Base Camp," Dawson remembered.)

Today, we know a lot about the tone of those times because Dyar began to write. She'd graduated with a journalism degree, only to find that the few available jobs were quickly taken by men. After resigning herself to secretarial work, she sought an outlet for her literary drive by composing vivid letters to her family (which Dyar's daughter Valerie Mendenhall Cohen much later edited and published in a collection entitled *Woman on the Rocks*). Then Dyar became the editor of *Mugelnoos*, the club's first Section newsletter, full of colorful accounts of the long night-drives across the Mojave, of young people pooling their gas money weekend after weekend to climb and ski among the high peaks of the Sierra. And pooling their energy for long evenings back home of writing it down and cranking the handle of the mimeograph machine.

Since the turn of the century, female climbers had played significant, often little-heralded, roles in Californian mountaineering. Helen LeConte and Marjory Farquhar made first ascents alongside their husbands. In 1927 Aurelia Harwood became the first female president of the Sierra Club. As the historian Joseph E. Taylor points out in *Pilgrims of the Vertical* (2010), the club's big group outings were fun-loving, and many women were included. Yet Dyar noted, "A few fellows, usually young gymnasts, seemed to feel diminished if a girl made a pitch they couldn't." So she made a point of taking the lead when an onlooker doubted her ability. In 1938 she'd been climbing only a few months before Dick Jones invited her to the Palisades. Jones had his eye on Mt. Sill, where a crisp ridge etched a giant swoop against the sky. The ridge turned out to be blocky, smoothly angular and exceptionally solid, soaring to an abrupt end on the flat summit. The other beginners in their party, overwhelmed by the difficulty and the cold, quit climbing the next day. But Dyar loved the steep cracks that opened onto spacious belays, the blue light that shimmered across the basins. "I don't know how people get along without climbing mountains," she later wrote to her sisters. "What do they *do* for beauty?"

Over time, the Swiss Arête became known as the finest moderate rock climb in the Palisades. Guiding the route in the 1960s, I found a couple of Jones's fixed pins in place at a memorably airy step-around. The sky was just as luminous as Dyar had recalled.



1966–1973

The Nature of Memory

JOAN JENSEN

THERE ARE THINGS I REMEMBER and things I have forgotten; some memories come together as I look through the boxes of photographs and notes unearthed from the storage loft. The cobwebs and dimness there echo my frame of mind. Do I really want to remember those times forty-five years ago when Don Jensen and I were together in the Palisades?

After Don died while biking to work in Aberdeen, Scotland, I tried to dissociate myself from moments that would have been painful to recall. Apparently, I was successful, as I now find those ancient memories almost nonexistent. But searching through the old boxes to enable someone other

than myself to write about those times has helped release me from sorrow.

If he had survived beyond his thirtieth year, what would have been his life's path? Mathematician/logician, equipment designer, photographer/artist, teacher and inspirer of others? Whatever it was, it would have been accomplished with enthusiasm, a sense of humor and eagerness for exploration and discovery.

Don didn't dwell on the past: I rarely heard him mention the Alaska climbs he undertook prior to our meeting. But he did try to envision the future. In November 1970, after we'd been together for four years, he wrote:

"Now we should begin... to encourage our real excitement about life. It is over five years since my last (Huntington) really expensive expedition to Alaska, and our own Alaska exploration/escape [from LA] is one of my first promises to Joan—the time is overdue."

Instead of his planning another expedition

with his climbing buddies, Don and I wanted to try living in a remote area of Alaska. He wrote: "I felt I could have become the greatest of mountaineers—but chose to integrate the joy of the mountains into my life—instead of making it control my life." In life, as in climbing, I went wherever his joy for the mountains took us. He was the kind of man you could trust with your health and safety, and I did. In the years after his death, I never found anyone else about whom I felt this way, and so I never climbed again.

Still, a few memories stand out from the haze of forty-five years. There is my first summit in the Palisades, a peak whose name I can't recall, with Don: 360 degrees of rock, snow and glacier below us on a glorious, sunny summer morning. And there is the moment of waking up on a narrow ledge thousands of feet above the Palisade Glacier, watching the sun rise over the Owens Valley, with us—or at least our sleeping bags—anchored to the rock behind.

That might also have been on the trip I wasn't supposed to be on: The guides at PSOM wanted to go to Palisade Basin and were strongly against having me along, not because I couldn't climb, but because they thought I might raise a fuss. Finally,

[Photo] Don and Joan Jensen on the Palisade Crest, June 1968. On the back of the photo, Joan says, "is the notation in the Gothic script that Don sometimes used..." to EmBeth &

Howard [friends of the couple], as a token of your honoring us at our wedding." Don and Joan were married in the Palisades, a region they loved. Bob Swift/Courtesy Joan Jensen

Skis to the Winter Wilderness

THAT PHRASE COMES FROM DAVID BROWER. We think of him now as the brilliant conservationist who began—as so many of them did in those days—as a mountaineer. Less well remembered, today, is how much Brower loved to ski down the peaks he climbed. "Before skiing had made its relentless surge toward universal popularity," he wrote in the *Sierra Club Bulletin*, "there were still persons to whom the inherent beauty in snow-clad hills was in itself sufficient cause for winter mountain trips." The solid hickory skis were long and stiff, with six-inch segments of metal edge screwed down. An athletic windup of the upper body was a good start toward corkscrewing their hard-to-turn boardiness down steep gullies. Nonetheless, many 1930s Sierra climbers were avid ski mountaineers. "Skiers cherish the beauty of their tracks like artists or poets," Dyar explained in a letter to her sisters, "and making them was sublime."

In January 1938 Brower joined forces with Norman Clyde and Morgan Harris to attempt a winter ascent of North Pal. But when they stopped at the bergschrund to switch from skis to hobnailed boots, they realized they'd probably get frostbite in the icy shadows. After a day's recovery, they left their skis at 12,900 feet and began up the east ridge of Mt. Winchell instead. "The entire upper arête was well exposed to sun," Brower recalled. "It was also fully exposed to wind, which seemed inordinately cold."

On the summit, the water in his tin cup almost instantly froze. But the snows of the high peaks dazzled against the desert background, and on the way down, Brower grasped pure joy: "When we were not fighting breakable crust or lowering skis with rope and ice axe—that is, during those moments when we glided swiftly and almost noiselessly down perfect slopes of powder—we became aware of the great improvement skis are making in mountaineering. Not very long ago, the attainment of a summit was the climax of the climber's day. Now there are two climaxes. Hail to the schuss!"

after some pressure from Don, I was allowed to join, but I was expressly told to keep my mouth shut and not complain. On the ascent to the pass, Bob Swift's long stride leading through the ice and snow was too wide for me, but I never said a word. Don noticed the problem and cut additional, shorter steps that I could use.

On another occasion, Don and I went to Palisade Basin to leave a cache of equipment for the guiding season. The most reasonable container was a 40-gallon metal garbage can, which Don strapped on to his pack. Off we went, up and over the crest into the basin. Presumably the cache is still there, hidden in the depressed area next to a huge boulder.

The pack he used, or at least the sack, was of his own design. Don made most of his own equipment: either he didn't like the available designs or he didn't have the money. His motto was "go light"—I would count pieces of toilet paper so as not to have to pack the whole roll.

Don also calculated the number of calories needed. For winter excursions, breakfast was instant oatmeal and dried buttermilk powder mixed with hot water. Lunch under the crisp blue winter sky was cheese, crackers and hard salami, shared with the Steller's jays perched in the scrubby trees. Dinner we called "glop": instant rice, dried soup mix, canned meat or tuna. A splurge was an onion, which livened up the one-pot brew. A dram of apricot brandy was our reward before calling it a night.

Although we spent most of our time in the Palisades during summer climbing-school season, my sharpest memories are from the winter. We would drive from LA in Don's VW Bug to camp near the trailhead. The owners of Glacier Lodge lived there year-round, and thus the road along Big Pine Creek was plowed (most of the time), eliminating a long trudge.

I had first met Don when he was giving a talk on Mt. Huntington to the Fresno Sierra Club during the autumn of, probably, 1966. He wanted to show me his beloved Palisades, and he planned a ski-mountaineering trip during term break. It was to be my first overnight experience in winter. We strapped on our skins over wide, heavy mountaineering skis and headed up the trail. I loved the serenity and purity of our snow-blanketed surroundings.

Late that afternoon, after we'd settled into our camp, he began preparing our glop. Then the stove malfunctioned, and the tent caught fire. We managed to get out (not difficult, because the thin ripstop nylon melted easily), but the tent was ruined and one of Don's boots was damaged. Because of the severe cold, we had no choice except to make our way down to the lodge, following our ski tracks back through the moonlit forest. We stayed the remainder of the night in one of the empty cabins, thankful for a roof over our heads. A few years afterward, we were married, so obviously the scare didn't diminish my opinion of him.

In fact, it might have improved his chances with me, as I saw how calmly he executed our emergency descent (though I can't imagine the names he was calling himself while doing this).

Of a later experience, Don wrote:

"On Thanksgiving afternoon we walked from Sage Flats in new snow. There were perhaps a dozen 'winter hikers'—some years ago we would have been alone. The next day we had passed all and waded to the overlook beyond the Black Lake Trail—we had abandoned our minimal hardware selection and skis near the roadhead, seeing their inutility (and ill repair respectively). Due to the big work push this fall [on Don's PhD], we have not been able to escape the traffitional field of LA prior to this, and we needed desperately what we got—to see plumes of snow blow off Temple Crag, and to be alone—but as dusk was deepening, our grateful solitude was interrupted by two persistent followers. I guess we were not as cordial as they had expected—but we were both honestly angry. As Joan said later, they were new and enthusiastic to the winter mountain scene and could in no way understand the extent to which we needed to be alone there...."

It was these opportunities to be alone together and away from the crowds of LA, and even of Bishop, that interwove and cemented our relationship. They are what I remember most vividly of the years I was fortunate to share with my soulmate, Don Jensen.

A Technical Age

THE 1930S HAD BEEN A FESTIVE DECADE in Sierra alpinism. World War II brought that up short, but several leading mountaineers took their experience to the Tenth Mountain Division, teaching thousands of soldiers to climb and ski, and outfitting them with newly designed outdoor equipment for battle in northern Italy. Back home, the *Mugelnoos* reported news of members killed overseas. By the war's end, Brower and Leonard, horrified by the heavy infrastructure they'd seen crisscrossing the Alps, returned more committed than ever to preserving wildness in the US. Under their leadership, the Sierra Club started to turn away from mountaineering to focus more closely on conservation.

Meanwhile, in the postwar economy, recreation surged. More highways and more cars brought us such innovations as the suburb, but also shortened travel time to the mountains. All that Army surplus climbing gear poured into the civilian market. Nylon ropes made the dictum that

"the leader must not fall" obsolete. In the 1951 *Sierra Club Bulletin*, Allen Steck defended the start of the Yosemite big-wall era: "Many have questioned the quality of this sort of achievement, deploring the use of pitons, tension traverses, and expansion bolts, but the record speaks for itself. This is a technical age."

In 1958, the year that Warren Harding's team climbed the Nose of El Capitan, I showed up as a beginner at the Sierra Club practice climbs on the sandstone outcrops near what was not-quite-yet Silicon Valley. The engineering nerds who mentored me were jaunty in Bavarian hats and Army surplus finery, including baggy pants and square-toed ski mountaineering boots, set off, perhaps, with a leather rappel patch sewn onto a cotton parka, mail-ordered from a faraway Seattle co-op. To them, the Palisades—big, alpine and remote—were like a fabled country. Happenings in Yosemite were headline news, but the few Eastside climbers like Clyde and Smoke were so quiet, almost stealthy (and actively disdained the Valley), that we didn't meet.

Few significant climbs took place in the Palisades during the 1950s. Clyde was slowing down, spending more of his time as the camp woodcutter and official fireside yarn-master of the last Sierra Club base-camp trips—themselves a dying breed. But then there was Tom Condon and Fred Kipfelsberger's first ascent of the East Chimney of Mt. Sill in 1960—what a bold line! Rising over 1,000 feet, undercut by glacial plucking, its first pitch overhung for the whole width of its wall. The only way to free climb onto it was a chimney system right up the middle. Everyone was later surprised that the steep, compact wall went free at only 5.8. And maybe more surprised when the pair didn't continue on to other new Palisades climbs.

In 1958 Larry Williams, a science teacher looking for summer employment, had put up a canvas tent cabin across Big Pine Creek from Glacier Lodge, and began using a burro, Jingles, to stock that platform on the edge of the Palisade Glacier. If only I'd come across the Mountaineering Guide Service brochure earlier.... Williams died in a plane crash, just weeks before I dropped my pack there and blinked at the solitude. Without the leadership of Bob Swift and Don Jensen, what soon became PSOM, the Palisades School of Mountaineering, might have simply vanished into the wreckage of the crash.

Are PSOMs and Armadillos Friends?

IT WAS A COYOTE QUESTION, mock foolish, posed by Smoke at PSOM, after I started work there. By then, he was already over fifty. For decades—like the Palisades themselves—he'd been mostly out of touch with the larger climbing world. During the Depression, he'd found his first vocation as a poetry-reciting Zen truck driver, spending his winters hauling propane cross-country and taking the summers off to climb. He seemed bemused, but not displeased, to share the mountains with new partners, especially now that Clyde was getting old.

Although Smoke was used to climbing alone, he'd offer his younger companions a belay with his "string," a forty-foot piece of old 5/16-inch nylon cord. He also took us "buttermilking," which turned out to be his own invention, an utterly unique kind of scrambling and chimneying course that wound through and over a dozen bedrock summits. At first, my Armadillo friends and I thought we were humoring a quaint guy in mountain boots, who politely refused to try our latest slick rock shoes. But we struggled to keep up as he soloed ahead, chuckling by himself at the odd tales he told.

Half the Palisades guides were Armadillos, emigrants from raucous Haight-Ashbury by way of the Valley. There's a weird story to that name, involving a flat with a stuffed armadillo on the mantelpiece and dismantled bike parts strewn around a living room. Bit by bit, John Fischer and I drew the obsession of this group away from road-racing motorcycles to climbing. The other half were Yosemite legends like Chuck Pratt, Kim Schmitz, Chris Fredericks, Chuck Kroger and Steve Roper. In the Valley, those guys were masters of the big walls; here, they enjoyed luxuriating on easier alpine terrain garnished with snow. Except "I-hate-snow" Pratt, who soon moved on to teach rock-only courses in the Tetons. The Armadillos lingered, and they ended up running the school. PSOMs and Armadillos: they were the work and play sides of each of us, the

guide and the climber.

It can also be hard to believe, now, that there was no previously organized guide service in California. Our school became the first in the West not to be built around a name-brand summit, and right away the weeklong backcountry courses were excellent. Some of the quality arose from the students, who had to backpack strenuously to our base camp near timberline, gaining unconscious knowledge of rock through the soles of their feet. A few of them later returned, aglow, to become enthusiastic guides, deciding they preferred the Palisades to any other peaks in the world.

Although Swift had been on the 1958 first ascent of Gasherbrum I in the Himalaya, he also loved it here, puffing deep contentment from his pipe into the twilight. After all the turmoil of dropping out of Harvard, Jensen finally found a haven from his roiling uncertainties. Both men kept rather quiet about the place. We Armadillos made noise. Young and brash, we sensed that having apprenticed in the Valley, we were emigrating from the center of the climbing universe, where we'd only been bit players. Here, we could expand into more of a vacuum. Day in, day out, we towed novices who were way above their comfort zone and full of wonder. We stumbled down to camp to party with clients who'd become comrades in arms. And it wasn't all guiding. In 1966 we watched Don set off with Frank Sarnquist to complete the standout line of the South Fork, the brilliant Twilight Pillar, which meanders through cracks and blocks, back and forth up the crest of Clyde Peak.

Somewhere in those early years, I began to see myself as a writer, with the Palisades as both subject and tutor, and the rhythm of alpine days began permeating my sentences. In 1967 Steve Roper and Allen Steck published some of my musings in their exciting new journal, *Ascent*, so I did not, as I once joked, "throw away my pencil." A notebook lodged itself into a corner of my pack, and a surprised client might pop onto a ledge to find me belaying with one hand and scribbling with the other. During snowbound days in the hut, I wrote embarrassing imitations of Gary Snyder or of old Han Shan, who penned deceptively simple lines urging us to "linger, watching things themselves." The works of Carl Jung nudged me toward seeing how stretches of mountain solitude can evoke universal archetypes right out of the unconscious, its barrier becoming permeable as "Ego dissolves in Darkness / Soluble in starlight."



[Photo] Temple Crag, from Third Lake, former site of the PSOM base camp. In an interview with Brad Rassler, former PSOM student and guide Mike Graber said, "If you embrace the atmosphere there, the Alpine life force that you get in that canyon, you will forever be

seeking that type of experience, because that is really what feeds your spirit.... Whether it's hearing the wind through the gendarmes along the ridges, or rappelling down icy cool waters...it's like heaven. You feel like that's where you belong." Galen Rowell



The Celestial Arêtes

IN 1969 DON MOVED OUR BASE CAMP to Third Lake, maneuvering us into position for Temple Crag. Clyde had long ago nailed this peak's importance, with words since quoted in Claude Fiddler and John Moynier's guide: "It is doubtful that there is a more beautiful and striking 'crag mountain' in the Sierra. Its northern and north-eastern faces are sheer precipices varied by numbers of spirey, turret-like pinnacles." Don was married now, to sweet Joan who shyly approached him after a slideshow in Fresno. She was a formidable climber herself, and they perched their honeymoon camp on a lovely sandy granite bench, a pointed distance from the bachelor quarters strung along a low ridge of bedrock.

As chief guide, Don had his pick of the strongest clients; one after another he took them on the striking unclimbed ridgelines that became

the Celestial Arêtes. Up the lower half of the Moon Goddess, then duck off into a gully. Same with the Sun Ribbon. Carl Dreisbach and Wilderness Ranger Pat Armstrong later completed the Moon Goddess, while Don finished the Sun Ribbon with John Fischer. Pitch after pitch of narrow arête, this route leads to the only natural Tyrolean traverse I've ever seen on a climb. We fretted over the 5.9R crux, with a leg-breaking fall if you blew the slab moves, and then became absurdly grateful when someone found a safer 5.10 bypass. After watching Venus set when he rose for an alpine start, Don led clients up all fourteen elaborate pitches on Venusian Blind. VB is still my favorite Celestial Arête to guide: long, blocky and narrow, with almost bouldery little walls leading to roomy belays. To our Yosemite-bred eyes, the Palisades had finally fulfilled their promise. Decades later, alpine aspirants still smile their way down the descent, which has pretty much become a trail.



Revolutionary Ice

APPROACHED FROM THE EAST, the Sierra forms one edge of the 1,000-mile-long Great Basin Desert, where water dries up in salt pans so white you squint under a merciless sun. Summer snow is special, and alpine ice is rare. So a place like the Palisades—truly the alpine heart of the range—is a treat. Here, we got to be real snow climbers, kicking steps up hundreds of feet, sometimes so steep or so frozen that heavy boots barely made a teetering notch. Coming off summits in the afternoon when the snow softened, we'd yodel our way down some fine glissading. Though in truth most of us never got schooled in real yodeling, so what you heard was war whoops and joy shouts echoing through the cirques.

The progression of ice axes says a lot about each era. There was Clyde with an axe as tall as his high-waisted belt, featuring a straight pick that had, in classic guide-style, cut “a stairway to the stars” for strings of clients, who in his case turned out surprisingly often to be women. Then Don wielded a MacInnes north wall hammer, with a handle short

enough that it resembled a carpentry tool. When it sat in its customary leather holster at his waist, there was no risk of the spike end puncturing a high-stepped calf. Radical for its time and thick as a blunderbuss, the straight pick barely angled downward, with one ineffectual notch on its underbelly, so that even when you'd blasted a hole for it, it seemed a little rickety in the ice.

Don described using his shorty to self-belay in soft snow down the fifty-degree V-Notch gully during one of his spring-training bouts, when for weeks at a time he was so solitary that there was no chance of anyone else being in the Palisades—let alone anywhere else along hundreds of miles of Sierra Crest—who might find him if, say, all that soft snow sighed and slid, flushing itself on its bed of burnished blue ice clear down into a pile running out onto the glacier. Or if he simply teetered and the tool failed to hold him in place. But then he was really that good, and savvy and confident. And anyway, he had inherited Clyde's tradition of roaming the Palisades at all seasons and in all weather, quite alone.

Since we were still in the Iron Age of mountaineering, the hammer had other uses, like pounding pins. And Don would occasionally use it



[Spread] **Mt. Sill and the North Palisade group, from Mt. Agassiz (13,891').**
 David Stark Wilson | [This Page] **Clyde on the North Palisade Glacier. Despite the primitive 1930s gear, Clyde established solo first ascents of ice routes in the Palisades up to WI3.** County of Inyo, Eastern California Museum



full-arm swing so that the axe whispered into the ice instead of shattering it. But then there was the evening in a Sheffield pub in 1997, when a local climber poked his finger into my chest until my pint sloshed. What he wanted so badly to tell me was that the Scots must have gotten there first, drooping their picks by heating them over Primus stoves in wretched bivies below Ben Nevis.

Mild Mountaineering

IN 1970 DON'S SWEEPING COMMAND of the Celestial Arêtes left us, his understudies, just one choice for new rock climbs: the looming, all-too-obvious, front-and-center main north buttress of Temple Crag—Dark Star. Don had ventured close to the main wall with a new route, the 26th of July Arête, that skirted its bulk to the left. He'd chosen the name for Joan, to commemorate their wedding anniversary. I can still see Don at the campfire that night, miming the crux move in the firelight, a high-step over a small roof.

That spring, our excited band set up camp early, eager to jump on the Dark Star buttress. Poverty nipped at us: like Clyde, we carried garlic and potatoes, heavy for backpacking food, but cheap. We loved the light-hearted idea that floated from Europe of John Harlin's "gypsy camp" in a sunny meadow beneath the brooding Eiger, though in truth there were still only local boys at our Crag, hippies with a surfer's lexicon. Tim Harrison showed up, his long golden hair falling to the shoulder straps of a fine-looking frame pack filled with organic grains and topped with an impressive load of weed still drying on its branches. A legendary hitchhiker, he was the first I met of a type of bold city boys gone alpine. He and Chris Fredericks (neither of whom ever got enough credit for their climbs) established one of the hardest lines of our era, a stout Grade IV

to round a crucial notch where the cord passed over too sharp an edge, and the softness of even nylon ropes became their Achilles heel. If you look closely today, you might just spy one of these traces in an otherwise cord-cutter piece of ridge on, say, the Sun Ribbon.

By 1969, the Golden Age of Yosemite was just winding down when Yvon Chouinard's toolmaker mind began fomenting a revolution on ice, a significant part of which played out in the Palisades when I invited him up here. That October, below Polemonium, he hand-delivered one of his early axes to me—a 70 cm, hickory-shafted *piolet*—along with an alpine hammer and a pair of his new rigid crampons. Before us, the V-Notch glittered incandescent blue. The next morning, we made its first ascent under full ice conditions. Here was some of the most difficult, flinty ice imaginable. If the picks of these tools lodged even a quarter inch, I felt solid. Crampons the same. The step-cutting era was gone. Ice screws quickly got better, too. They had to, because slipping out there could lead to catastrophic acceleration.

In California, we all believed that it was Chouinard's ingenious curved-pick design that first accounted for the downward arc of a

I WAS 500 FEET FROM the top of Dark Star when the rain settled in for good. A dizzying vortex of mists sucked through a small notch below, cutting me off from the dark walls and the gloomy gulf. The overhanging crack I was climbing was mostly dry so far, but I knew water rivulets were already guttering down from the arête toward my hand and finger jams. Thunder shook the bedrock itself, and my rucksack—overloaded with a gallon of water and a loaf's worth of peanut-butter sandwiches—tugged me over backwards every time I looked up. I was miserable, my chalk bag a sad sack of white paste.

Just shy of completing the longest technical climb in the High Sierra, I should have been pleased, or jacked up—or something. After all, barring earthquakes or lightning bolts, I'd likely beat the worst of the storm to the summit. But instead I was just dully depressed. I'd wanted to go a whole lot farther.

The Sierra Nevada contain the most ideal traversing terrain in the Lower 48, and there's good reasons for this: one part California weather, one part accessibility and about five parts simply the way these mountains have grown up. More than

anywhere else, this range seems to want to form into long, sharp ridges. Clearly there are technical theories to explain how this genesis occurred, but to the light-footed and itchy-fingered alpinist, these unromantic explanations smack of mere mumbo jumbo, distractions from the alpenglow-ed sawblades of granite that ride high above the pocket glaciers. For the up-and-at-'em climber, such nerdy lingo deserves to stay well hidden in the world of books.

The Palisades, especially, could be considered the local epicenter of sideways mountaineering. It's been going on here for a good eighty years (since Jules Eichorn and Glen Dawson traversed the razor-fanged ridge from Norman Clyde Peak to Middle Pal). More than merely a way to bag additional summits, it is the notion that one route/one mountain was not enough, that the high places are something to hunger for, to grab onto and to stay in as long as possible like a child refusing to come down from a tree. It was this line-in-the-sky romantic ideal that I was trying to follow when the rain set in.

My plan had been to leave my house in Bishop predawn, hoof it up to Temple Crag, climb the

longest route there—and then make it longer. Heading southwest, I'd follow the ragged ridge over Mt. Gayley to the buff white granite on the Swiss Arête of Sill, where I'd hit the main crest and swing northwest over a high handful of peaks, including the Palisades' highest, North Pal, before finishing with the northernmost: Mt. Agassiz. In the course of the day, I'd traverse tottery gendarmes as well as fine-textured bedrock; frost-fractured, lightning-blasted mountaintops along with flint-hard summits bald as a bottle. Along the way, sure, I hoped I'd taste the ecstasy of an eagle in flight. I also knew that I'd experience the despair of a galley slave. But I'd failed almost as soon as I started, and I slunk home soaked to the skin with most of my water and all of my sandwiches.

This dressing down left a mark, deep enough to make me wait a year before trying something like that again. This time I reasoned I needed to start earlier and climb faster in case of storms, so I decided to begin with the shorter and easier Moon Goddess Arête. It seemed like a smarter choice and a sound plan, but I once saw a quote that read, "Courage, not compromise, brings the smile of God's approval." So what was I? Cowardly or

[Photo] Peter Croft on a Palisades Traverse attempt in the 1990s. In *Alpinist* 20, Croft explained how he became drawn to long enchainments in the Palisades and other parts of the Sierra, "Big traverses on its ridges would form the perfect lodestar, defined by their

most mind-expanding element: the first summit is just the beginning.... [Y]ears of nervous alpine starts, high traverses and shining mountain walls have revealed less than half of what the range has to offer." He continues to climb vast linkups there today. Andy Selters

5.9 up the big, sawbladed Northwest Ridge of Mt. Winchell. Harrison also put up significant face climbs in the Valley, but he died there a couple of years too early to become a Stonemaster.

Lester Robertson and I soon freed the low crux of Dark Star, and over the next few years, in sporadic forays, various guides sorted out the riddles of its nearly thirty pitches, which looked so much like the fine-grained, intricate face climbing on Middle Cathedral Rock that was getting so much attention right then in the Valley. Our quirky mentor, Smoke Blanchard, became our PSOM boss. Just in time, it turned out, because the school was now owned by Mountain Travel, destined to become the first example of a whole new genre of "eco"-tourism, and the fitness of the students had dramatically declined. Above a new base camp at Fifth Lake, Smoke spied a low bump on the long ridge of Mt. Robinson (no relation), where he could invent three perfect easy lines for the most helpless clients. He named the point where these little routes converged "The People's Pinnacle of Freedom, Friendship and Fornication."

Whenever possible, the rest of us would grab a fitter client and duck out for the—now longer—hike to Temple Crag, leaving Smoke to amble along with his stragglers, happily chatting away and pointing out the sights with his steel-tipped alpine cane.

We loved Smoke for salvaging our summers, and we loved him more as we matured closer to his perspective: "For half a century," he wrote in his memoir, *Walking Up and Down in the World*, "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?"

Was Smoke our very own Gary Snyder? Or maybe more like the laughing prankster Han Shan, so self-effacing that when an emissary from the emperor approached with an offering of fresh clothing, he disappeared amid the cliffs of Cold Mountain cackling, "Thief, thief!"

clever? Hard to say, but when I ventured into the realm of thunderheads and lightning bolts, I sure didn't want Him mad at me.

Hours before daylight, I strapped on my headlamp and lit out with fresh batteries and sandwiches. Sunup found me halfway up Moon Goddess, and the orange glow took the gloom out of the dark grey granite. The first peak, Temple, with its church-y name, seemed the perfect place for breakfast. I paused there and read my rain-smudged summit entry from the year before.

The knife-edges and summits rolled by—Gayley, Sill, Polemonium, the high witches' hat of North Pal, and by early afternoon, the bare-knuckled thumb of Thunderbolt. So far, no thunderheads in the vicinity, but (as I'd feared) the first storm clouds of altitude sickness were squeezing my head. Anything more than a brief sip brought me to verge of vomiting. My pace and condition spiraled downward until I was circling the drain. Winchell seemed never-ending and Agassiz, the last, actually was—a death march of numbness and throbbing all at the same time. I was reduced to walking on all fours like a bear, stopping now and then to see if I had the strength to puke. I tried to dredge up memories of why I was there, but the clouds in my head were far too heavy and choked, and I just had to trust that there was a reason.

The descent took more ages. Finally, as I

neared Third Lake at around 10,000 feet, the vise grips on my temples eased up, and I was able to take a few swigs of water. As I hiked down into the thicker air, the world I knew should have slowly morphed back to normal. Instead, it swiftly turned weird.

Late-afternoon sun slanted across a flowered meadow as I turned a corner on the trail and stood face to face with a woman.

She was fairy-tale beautiful with flowing strawberry-blond hair, wearing an ankle-length gauzy silk dress. She looked up, surprised, but then smiled shyly. I knew I likely appeared half leprous—all sunburned and scraggly haired—and instinctively I dropped my head in shame. Wretchedness such as mine shouldn't look pure beauty in the eyes. But I had to try.... She'd vanished! I was standing in a large clearing, and I'd only looked away for a second. There was nowhere for her to hide. Everything else looked quite normal—the pine trees, the rocks, the sky. In the midst of my everyday world, a red-haired angel had come and gone in a flash.

The vision staggered me, but I continued on my way down. The image of her face stayed with me even as my hunger finally returned and visions of French fries accompanied her in my mind's eye.



Soon the smell of fresh sliced potatoes in hot oil drowned out all other thoughts. I stopped and scoured the countryside for the deep fryers that just had to be there—only I knew I was still five miles from the nearest road.

Since our oldest ancestors stood up on their hind legs and gained the first semblance of having a clue, we've lifted our eyes to the mountains and seen them as an ultimate, as a place to commune or worship. For some people, the highest summits are singularly important because they are just that much closer to heaven. To me, those are heady thoughts, but I'd like to think that the striving, the beauty and the rapture we experience bring heaven that much closer to home—and that Heaven can be whatever you dream of—like a beautiful girl and a bag of chips.

Climbing Clean

AT THE SAME TIME, the climber population grew across the US, and we began to notice the marks we left. Muir's efforts to create a wilderness-loving constituency had proved to be all-too-successful. Yosemite was crowded with tourists, hikers and climbers, its classic cracks corrugated with piton scars. Outdoor recreation was becoming a big business. In a 1971 edition of *Summit*, Jim McCarthy stated: "Our society and culture are catching up with us just as the wagon trains followed the first mountain men.... The mountain environment, vast and seemingly indestructible, truly stands in a delicate balance."

The way that alpine granite cleaves, fracturing cleanly into cracks, led to an opportunity to mitigate at least some of the environmental harm. In 1966 Royal Robbins returned from England with a new tool: sand-cast aluminum wedges, slung on a shorter piece of cord that could be wedged like chockstones into cracks. In the Valley, he and his wife,

Liz, put up a new route above a dirt road where they liked to camp. He wrote a *Summit* article, "Nuts to You," about climbing hammerless. The Nutcracker became the Valley's favorite moderate climb.

I was intrigued: here was a new game, a subtle art of fitting only what you carried into the natural slots of the rock. I got hardware store brass nuts, filed the threads out and put several sizes on each runner. At first, it felt like a bold challenge to launch up the Swiss Arête without a hammer. But Palisades granite offered great placements. After a summer of climbing clean, we'd go to Yosemite, where the cracks are smoother, more flared and thus harder for nuts to fit. By 1972 I was working occasionally at Chouinard's tin shed in Ventura, and that year I wrote a manifesto, "The Whole Natural Art of Protection," in the first-ever Chouinard Equipment catalog.

Soon the Iron Age of pitons was largely over. When Mike Graber, David Black and the ubiquitous Fred Beckey made the first ascent of the long, ragged crest of Firebird Ridge on Clyde Peak, the 1976 *AAJ* report



proudly noted, “all chocks.” By the late 1970s, the advent of cams lent security and speed to clean climbing, but took away a lot of its original delicate art.

Not Reporting Climbs

MEANWHILE, AN UNEXPECTED SPINOFF DEVELOPED. Once trails of pin scars no longer marked the completion of new climbs, recording a first ascent became a conscious choice. We toyed with not reporting, both as a restraint of that chest-pounding, look-what-I-did ego, and out of respect for the concept of the wild. I edited a Sierra Club hiking guide around then, *Starr’s Guide to the John Muir Trail*. After removing all the cross-country routes, I wrote in the introduction, “Wilderness is not just no bulldozers; it’s lack of information.” Not too popular with hikers, that idea. Other guidebook authors rushed in, detailing minutiae, and my 12th edition became the last.

Climbers were skeptical, too. *Ascent* hosted a debate between me and Royal Robbins, who was firm about wanting his rightful place in history, while my arguments about preserving unknowns sounded more inef-fable. Roper said to me, “You need to be more rabid!” My memory often slips these days, so I can no longer say what I might have omitted from Palisades history. One of my Sierra routes I remember not reporting was an early line up the Incredible Hulk. Somebody since has announced a nearby climb called “Turning Leaf,” and that got me wondering where Mike Farrell and I went. I remember orange rock, good position and fine climbing. Think I’ll go have another look.

A few of the unwritten 1970s climbs resurfaced after first ascensionists changed their minds. In the 1987 *AAJ*, Mike Graber confessed to having climbed the center of Dead Larry’s Pillar (named in honor of Larry Williams) with Mike Farrell in 1978: “At that time it was traditional among Palisade Guides not to report new routes in their alpine *Klettergarten*. I hope a departure from this policy will clear up some of the confusion.”

[This Page] On the top of Dark Star, Temple Crag, 1975. From left to right: John Fischer, Jay Jensen, Doug Robinson. “John is holding a beautiful quartz crystal that the team reverentially left atop a tiny gendarme,” the photographer Gordon Wiltsie says. | [Facing Page] Fischer leads unprotected hard climbing on Dark Star. The Sun Ribbon and Moon God-

Fade to Black

AFTER DON DIED in a bike accident in 1973, some of his stories faded to black in our collective memory. He was so prolific, so far ahead of his time, and he vanished so early, that enigmas abound. “He was obviously someone who wanted to explore the nooks and crannies, get the Palisades in his soul, make it a part of him,” Claude Fiddler recalls. As he explored, Don had gotten stronger and more nimble, edging ever more steeply in his great mountain boots. But he climbed so often alone or with beginners that he underestimated the difficulty and significance of his lines. Many of his known routes have been upgraded from a “Don Jensen 5.8” to a modern 5.9 or .10a. Kinda like Norman Clyde’s “Fourth Class,” come to think of it.

On the desk in the roadhead tent cabin of the Mountaineering Guide Service, there was a little file box intended to hold kitchen recipes on 3x5 cards.

Some questions might be answered if this box could be found. For instance, Don had talked of leading a client up a twenty-pitch route on the especially striking south face of Mt. Winchell. There’s a fine shield of dark granite there, leading to a sharp, steep ridge. A card in the recipe box, in his pointillist handwriting, would confirm the tale, and maybe step down Galen Rowell’s published claim of a later FA hovering nearby.

That’s one mystery I was hoping to check on last spring, if only the snowpack hadn’t been so rotten. The clues of Don’s passage would be subtle if even noticeable at all, lost in that intricate geography of stone. Incontrovertible evidence would be a few discreet roundings of a jagged edge at just the point where our 9mm guides’ ropes might sever in a fall.

Approaching Dark

DON’S LEGACY LEFT AN ARCHITECTURE OF DREAMS for us and for future climbers, to be filled in line by line. In 1975 John Fischer and I came back with Gordon Wiltsie and Jay Jensen for a two-day push that again freed the initial wall of Dark Star, continued over the upper buttress and ran the vast ridge on to the summit. Two years later, Jay and Gordon confronted the twin offwidths on the right-hand side. Gordon’s description of Planaria is gripping:

The crux sections involved bypassing overhangs on the dark, near-vertical walls on either side. At one point, I had to lunge left to a ledge and almost grabbed a loose rock—that turned out to be a magnificent quartz crystal that I pocketed—as my critical hold. Perhaps because it was reported only by word of mouth, it has never been repeated.

They called it .10c, but it may be harder. I’ve since heard rumors of a second ascent, confirming the dark reputation. That was the last major Temple Crag route for decades. In the 1990s, Jim Herrington and I snuck in a six-pitch line up a hidden face only visible from the South Fork. Perhaps Backside of Beyond will lure others onto this smaller but finely appointed steep wall. We spent most of the day pacing back and forth,

dess arêtes are etched behind him in the morning sun. “Myriad loose rock made this section especially treacherous,” Wiltsie recalls. Robinson says he named the route after an “especially lyrical and spacey long cut from the Grateful Dead.... I fell asleep many nights with that tune playing and the dark space of the buttress before me.” Gordon Wiltsie (both)



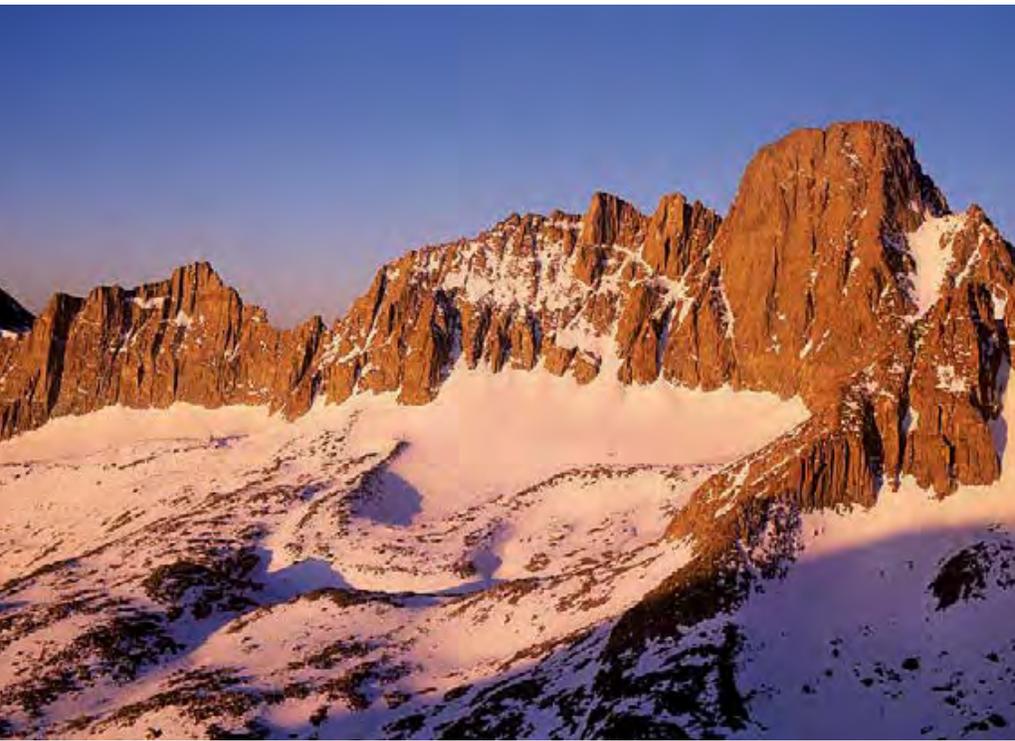
along slabs that cradle some of the most beautiful rockbound tarns, before finding a line that might go. It did, just, after passing through the gates of fear. I thought of the trail of our mentors, all threading those portals, and as twilight deepened to dusk, it began snowing lightly through moonlight to accent our rush to the summit.

Ridge Running

OF ALL THE LATE 1970S PROJECTS, the one that felt the most prescient had its roots in the earliest days of Palisades climbing. From North Pal to Starlight looks like a short hop, hardly a quarter mile, but in 1931 the first guys to bring a rope to the crest found it circuitous and demanding. As you start down climbing, the terrain becomes convoluted enough to force you off the ridge crest, until you end up in north-facing chimneys that are steep, wide and icy. Two years later and five miles downrange, Dawson and Eichorn tackled another deceptively short stretch, from Clyde Peak over to Middle Palisade. Teetering passages and overhanging gendarmes, plus climbing up to 5.8–5.9, slowed them enough to christen Bivouac Peak halfway along.

But oh how tantalizing! Run over strings of 14,000-foot peaks? What about the entire seven miles of the Palisades? Over the next two decades, an all-star cast solved pieces of that puzzle. Norman Clyde, of course. David Brower. Hervey Voge, who pulled together snippets of info in scribbled tobacco-tin notes to make the first Sierra guidebook in 1954. Jack Riegelhuth and Ken Davis, who added a sit-start by beginning the traverse on Mt. Winchell and then running over Thunderbolt, Starlight and North Pal in just thirteen hours. Ruth Dyar and her husband, John Mendenhall, who ventured up the southeastern-most pinnacle of the Palisade Crest, a mile-long sawblade of eleven individual points (not to be confused with the crest of the whole range). Don Jensen, Joan Jensen and Rex Post, who climbed each of those eleven summits, naming them for characters in *The Lord of the Rings*. Somewhere along the base Don installed a cache, now hidden in a wilderness of talus. His hasty sketch called that long, complicated section “5.5.” Today, it’s 5.9.

In 1969 John Fischer and I had made the first attempt on the complete Palisades Traverse. Carrying many days of food on our backs, we found even third class to be a struggle. Slow and heavy wouldn’t cut it. Six years later, John was the PSOM owner and director when



thirty-nine-year-old Jerry Adams showed up for the beginning class. His wife, Sharon, had given him the climbing course for a present. In 1977 Jerry asked John about maybe doing a first ascent. John suggested the Palisades Traverse. This time, he knew that climbing light would be essential, so they post-holed food caches up Thunderbolt, Sill and Clyde Peak. Not fully recovered, they started at Southfork Pass. When a snowstorm caught them on Clyde Peak, they were actually relieved to bail.

Wary of more post-holing, they arrived later in the summer of 1979. On July 27, Jerry soloed the last supplies onto the shoulder of Clyde Peak. The next day, they set out, John leading rapidly with some early cams. Jerry recalls they moved mostly together with “light tension on the rope and only a little swearing”—only to spend three hours searching for the cache he’d just placed “because everything looked different from a new perspective.”

They’d become totally immersed in the experience. In an unpublished manuscript, Jerry wrote:

Each evening we watched the light and shadows progress across the Owens Valley and climb 10,000 feet up the walls of the White and Inyo Ranges on the eastern side of the Valley. One sunset had dramatically projected the pyramid form of Mt. Sill on the thick evening haze above the Valley and we had beautiful clumps of blue polemonium flowers.... John had found some fresh prints in the snow on Norman Clyde Peak that he thought were made by bighorn sheep.

At the Palisade Crest, they lightened down their food and fuel and dumped water to stay nimble. Still, they only made it halfway along the maze of fifth-class pinnacles before bivying. The next day, they stumbled to the top of Mt. Sill and passed out. Their water bottles froze that night.

After scarfing rap slings off Starlight, they continued to Thunderbolt for their sixth bivy. They were elated, Jerry recalled:

My hands were a mass of tape, my clothes were in shreds, my pants were falling down, we looked and smelled like goats, we were stiff, sore, and scratched all over; but, boy, were we energized by the fact that the wind had stopped, there was no sign that the perfect weather was going to change and we were so close to the end.

On their last day, they raced over the tops of Mt. Winchell and Agassiz,

and suddenly after nearly half a century of exploration, the Palisades Traverse was complete. In 2013 Alex Honnold and Cedar Wright waltzed innocently onto the same line. And as they teetered along a rotten knife-edge in their approach shoes, the star soloist looked at Wright and said, “This is hardcore.”

The End of an Era

FACED WITH THE UNCERTAINTIES of a blank future, pundits seem to like to point to winter climbing. The Armadillos—whose spring skiing spanned the entire Sierra and who bragged that their equipment list had to include Hawaiian shirts—would have none of it. In 1982 two outsiders, the redoubtable George Lowe and Brock Wagstaff, faced the Sun Ribbon at its snowed-in and iced-up worst. Claude Fiddler and John Moynier’s guidebook stated tersely: “The ascent took all

of the pair’s extensive alpine experience to survive, and Wagstaff ended up suffering frostbite on both of his feet.” (“Just a little colder than expected when we were coming down from the summit after dark,” Lowe deadpans.) With hugely variable conditions, you never know what you’ll get. When Galen Rowell and David Wilson tackled Twilight Pillar in the winter of 1986, they found “the best of all worlds: clear, dry weather for climbing and fresh powder for the 5,000-foot ski descent” (*AAJ* 1986).

For us, that decade ended in darkness. Allan Bard and I were teaching a guiding seminar when a lead rope dislodged rockfall on the Sun Ribbon. No one saw or heard the rock until it smashed Peter Nemes in the head. Our aspirant guides got more training than they bargained for, lowering Peter down a 200-foot headwall followed by hundreds of feet of steep snow. As a helicopter lifted Peter off the moraine, Allan burst into tears: “Sometimes I hate my job!” Peter spent the night in a Reno hospital, having bits of skull plucked out of his brain. The good news was that he went back to being a chemistry professor. The bad news was that with nerve damage he never climbed or skied again.

I descended from a happier climbing trip in 1989 to stand, numbly, on the main street of Big Pine, blinking at an *Inyo Register* headline: Smoke was dead, thrown out of the back of his little truck. That same year, PSOM folded operations for good. John Fischer later died in a motorcycle accident. The bright days of our base camps were gone forever.

The Wild West

IN ANOTHER PART OF THE RANGE, a Golden Age hasn’t yet begun. As it wends its way southward, the crest of the Sierra takes an occasional zag to the east. Nowhere does it dally longer on that compass point than along the Palisades. When we hike the usual approaches up Big Pine Creek and gesture over to the “west” side, we’re really looking straight south. That direction is still our Wild West, though, underappreciated and barely explored by climbers.

Oh, plenty of the more adventuresome backpackers see it, right up close. In 1977 Steve Roper added one of the most beautiful passages of his “Sierra High Route” here, through rocky, flower-strewn basins under

that great southern wall, truly a “palisade” in crenellated aspect. (The name “Sierra High Route,” though, had already been taken by David Beck’s 1975 ski tour, which crosses the range north of Mt. Whitney.) In high summer, you can meet two or three hiking parties a day wending their way over the 12,000-foot notches between jewel-like valleys.

But not climbers. Although the Palisades were first named and climbed from this side, most modern climbers don’t hike that far. Even some of those who frequent the Palisades are slow to realize the potential of ridge after buttress after wall on this “back side.” The closer you get, the more confusing it becomes, Claude Fiddler explains: “It’s an escarpment with all kinds of gullies.... If you got lost and got into the wrong gully or on the wrong arête, it’s like uh-oh. Fifth class has turned into 5.10, and you can get yourself strung out pretty darn quick.... Its architecture from afar seems straightforward. Oh, there’s North Pal. Oh, there’s Middle. Oh, there’s Sill. But then once you’re in it, it’s complex.”

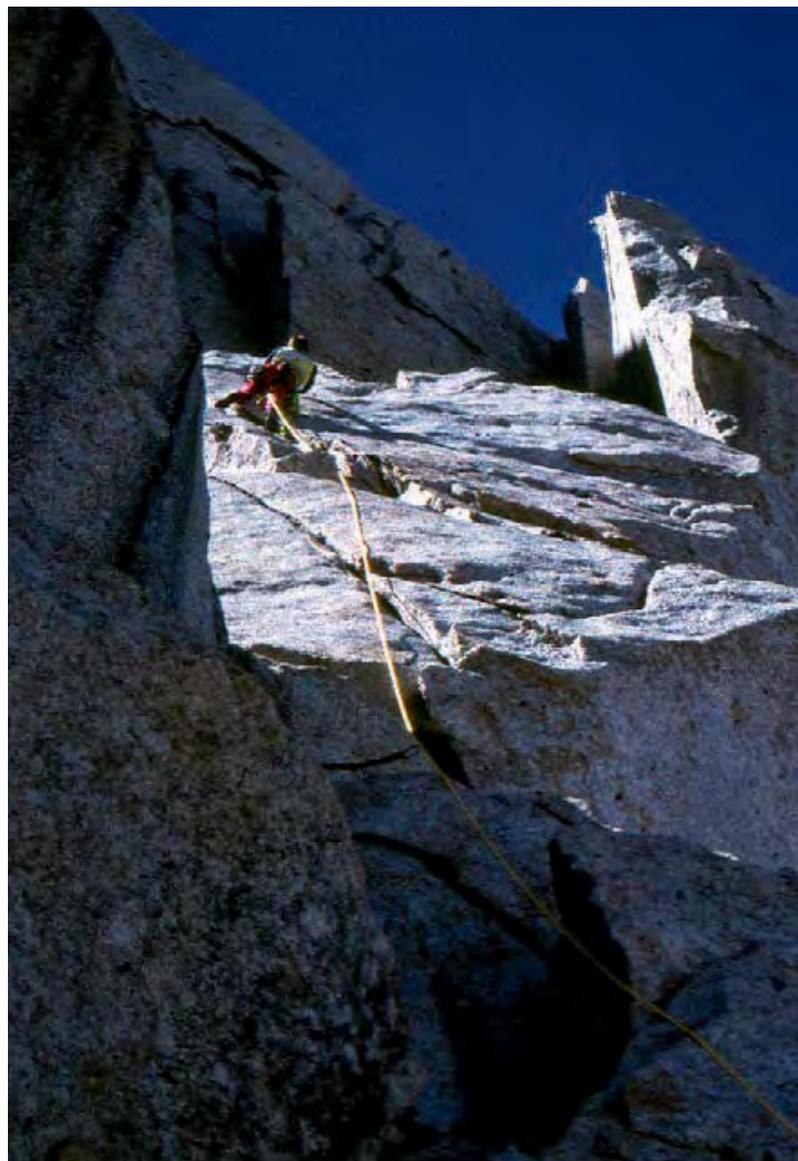
In the 1982 *AAJ*, Galen Rowell began by deconstructing the hoary reputation of the approach: “David Wilson and I found out just how simple this dreaded walk really is after the Fourth of July weekend. It took us exactly two hours with packs loaded for a wall to crest the 12,000-foot Bishop Pass, formidably graded for grandmothers by the Forest Service, and another two of stumbling in the talus while looking in awe at the several miles of two-to-three-thousand-foot buttresses....” Well, before you stroll in Galen’s wake, please recall that this guy was notorious, during a training run in the hills behind Berkeley, for leaving a world-class marathoner in the dust. “Galen’s style in those days,” David remembers, “was always a kind of strategic strike.”

By dusk, the sweat had cleared enough from Galen’s eyes to see a massive sweep of stone glow dark-crimson against the cobalt lakes of Dusy Basin. In the morning they shivered up a smooth, overhanging headwall, cramming numb fingers into shallow, discontinuous cracks, until they exited onto a sunlit ridge, only to find that a series of burnished pinnacles forced them back into a gully. At 3p.m., they tagged the summit of North Pal, and they hiked out through the moonlight to buy a steak.

No Rest Days

IN THE SUMMER OF 1989, after reading Galen’s *AAJ* report, two more climbers entered the high basins south of the Palisades crest. “The first time I met Steve Porcella,” Cameron Burns wrote in *Mountain 135*, “I thought him a bit odd.... Steve didn’t appear to possess any of the moorings of a conventional life: no career, no wife, no mortgage, not even a beer bottle collection.... He wanted to climb things that the average guy in the street has never heard of, things that most climbers have never heard of; things that we could probably never find.” And in the Palisades, for Steve, that meant the back side.

Together these guys were a neon new wave of mountain madmen, sweeping through Bishop like punk-rock descendants of Norman Clyde. Steve took up their narrative in the 1991 *AAJ*: “Cameron walks around downtown...wearing a fluorescent outfit consisting of lime-green tights, shorts, socks, tank tops, shoe laces, watch band and sunglasses, all the



while looking skyward and spouting something about a mother ship coming soon.” Taking the phrase “No Rest Days,” as a motto, they climbed more than seventy Sierra routes in two summers with a light rack of hexes and nuts and an increasingly ragged, taped-together rope. “Poor climbers don’t fall,” the belayer yelled to the leader. The Southwest Buttress, on the back side of North Pal, was the stoutest moment in all their whirlwind through the range. Why do the most memorable routes spin on an axis of offwidth? Above 13,000 feet, grasping for slippery purchase and gasping for air.... They emerged from an .11c nightmare onto the pinnacle of hard Palisades climbing to date.

The back side continues to attract a few wanderers. There may well be routes unreported there, in addition to the Don Jensen climb that I’m certain exists on that aspect of Mt. Winchell. Last spring, I had plans to go over Bishop Pass on skis and glide downrange to take my choice of the fine ridges waiting to be climbed. But my plan ran afoul of the lowest snow year since 1870. Maybe next year....

[Facing Page] Sunrise on the Palisade Crest. Don Jensen named the eleven pinnacles after characters in *The Lord of the Rings*. Andy Selters | [This Page] Cameron Burns on the Southwest Buttress of North Palisade. In recent years, few climbers have visited this “west” (or south) side of the range. Longtime Palisades climber David Wilson described

the area to Rasser thus: “You hear the thunderstorms come over the Black Divide by Muir Pass, and then you’re just waiting and waiting and then they hit that west side of the Palisades and they just go crazy. It feels like it’s going to shake loose, and because that’s such a wall of peaks there, it’s almost got...a Tolkien-type quality to it.” Steve Porcella

1989–1990

Back(side) Pain CAMERON M. BURNS

I BLAME STEVE PORCELLA for the pain:

Sixty-five Sierra routes that first summer; about a dozen the next, a fifth of them first ascents. Brutal-as-hell approaches with seventy-pound packs, decrepit knees and bad footwear.

I blame Steve, but really, he and I were just the syringe plungers, and the Sierra Nevada was the heroin.

I met Steve in the winter of 1989, in Solano Beach, San Diego County. I was twenty-four, living in LA and working in the film industry. I'd just rumbled across the border (*rumble* being both a vehicular and gastrointestinal reference) after a low-budget Mexican volcano-bagging trip. I'd lived for a month on only \$300, dossing in beachside construction sites and sleeping in bus aisles. My friend Paul Fehlau had picked me up at the trolley stop. His housemates were having a party. There were no available cups, so I filled a saucepan with beer.

Starving, I rooted through Paul's barren cabinets and found some falafel mix. As I stirred it in with the beer, a lanky blond bloke drifted by. He took note of the saucepan and the falafel mix, and he laughed. His name was Steve Porcella—he later earned the nickname "Porch Dog," based on our shortening of his Italian surname.

"You a climber?" he asked.

"How could you tell?"

"Your face is sunburned like toast, and I'm guessing you've been on a glacier for a month. And you seem to have no understanding of skin care." Steve had grown up in Modesto in the shadow of the Sierra; his father was Royal Robbins' doctor. One of Steve's first climbs had been a new route on Shepherd Crest with the great man himself. Now Steve was studying biology or something useful, unlike me; I was just trying to climb. Eight years my senior, he later told me he was thinking, "This Padawan has promise. Either

that or he's gonna get light-sabered through the twins.

That night, we swapped climbing stories so intensely that we forgot the mosh pit-style party and the beautiful, eager women surrounding us. We were doomed.

Impressed with each other's ability to bullshit, we hit Mt. Woodson the next day and then planned a summer of Sierra climbing. Many rightfully consider the Sierra the finest mountain range on earth. Galen Rowell always told me so. My mentor Dave Brower knew it. Dave Wilson knows it. White, white granite that is solid and gritty. Nearly always perfect weather. No other climb-



ers, because you have to hike. You can scope a new line and come back twenty years later, and it'll still be untouched. The sky will be pure cobalt blue, and you'll be bleeding at the wrist as soon as you crank that first jam and realize you misapplied your tape.

In late March 1989, I finished a demoralizing, stress-filled job as an electrician on a Hollywood movie. Steve was maneuvering through his graduate career, with seemingly random breaks. We

were both ready to escape the teeming humanity of Southern Calamity (aka: Southern California).

Our first trips included a quick jaunt up Mt. Tyndall, unroped. We launched up the north rib, first done by Clarence King and Richard Cotter in 1864—a simple climb under normal (i.e., good) conditions, but a snowstorm moved in as Steve and I wove along ledges on steep granite. I slipped down a big slab, bouncing for several hundred feet, until my axe pick caught on an edge and jolted me to a stop. The fall hurt like hell, but I was young and resilient. Back at camp, with only my Walmart sleeping bag and a tarpaulin, I became hypothermic and had to be put in a hot bath in a motel room. I didn't own a stitch of proper outdoor clothing other than hand-me-downs and thrift-store finds—all junk.

The next outing, in April, was roughly the same—the iced-up east face of Whitney. We suffered through a summit bivouac and descended John Muir's Mountaineers Route, delirious, the next day. Even then, I could see that Steve was a master climber—and an adult. I was still a kid, raw muscle and zero brain, just trying to follow his lead. One morning that year in a town park in Bishop, I was drinking my usual twenty cups of tea (I'm a Commonwealther) laced with sugar until I became amped and impatient. Steve recognized my angst and turned it into movement. We were on Split Mountain by the afternoon. We made the perfect team.

In early July, Steve and I hiked into Dusy Basin, on the west side of the Palisades, with enough food for ten days. We soon learned that the "back side"—always an inspiration for guys like us—is the "big bith-ness," as one of John Waters' characters in *Desperate Living* said while donning underpants.

We gazed upon massive walls, buttresses and, well, yep, innocuous gullies. Before us

[This Page] Burns and the summit register of North Palisade. Steve Porcella | [Facing Page] Porcella rappelling off the top of Thunderbolt Peak. In the 1991 *AAJ*, Porcella described their two summers of nonstop "No Rest Days" climbing in the Palisades and elsewhere

in the Sierra: "Our greatest achievement is not the new routes, the number of routes, nor even the technical nature of many of the ascents. It is the personal knowledge that, given the time and limited funds we had we climbed to our absolute limits." Cameron Burns

soared 1,800 feet of glorious rock. Sweeping architectures of granite and diorite decorated with delicate doilies of quartz and other stones. Crack systems that leap up, then run out and sometimes—often—leave you stranded, scared and wobbling. Lines that jump into the sky. None of this easy snow-climbing U-Notch and V-Notch semi-alpine crap that makes LA climbers think they're ready for K2.

Glorious big bith-ness.

Several of the routes we did were variations of existing climbs and some just mangled combinations of fourth-class gullies loaded with the usual alpine smorgasbord of water-washed slabs and perched, hanging blocks. The guidebook author R.J. Secor says that we probably made a lot of first ascents of those gullies—but really, who cares? We were covering four to six miles every day for nearly three months, generally 4,000 to 7,000 feet in elevation gain and loss. We pounded out lines on all the Palisades peaks and a few others. It was go-go-go, a climbing-based meth-amphetamine binge. Were we mental? Maybe. Or maybe it was just a shitty society pushing us—because a lot of society is pretty awful. Here, there were no bosses, no crazy girlfriends, no bullshit. Just running around the mountains: pure, perfect freedom, a high-voltage current that drowns out throbbing feet, burning quads and clicking knees.

Looking back at my notes, now, from my house in Colorado, I see that our “rest days” (when we emerged every two weeks or so to buy lentils and rice) were spent climbing things like the East Buttress of Middle Cathedral and the Regular Route of Fairview Dome. I wish I had that kind of energy now. Hell, look at those dirty dishes in the sink and that hole that needs patching in the drywall. I'd rather be back in Dusy Basin. I think every reader would rather be back there. Drywall holes and dishes are not important.

A year later, after exchanging letters with Steve Roper and Galen Rowell, we knew there was more. Galen and Dave Wilson had cut a track up the biggest wall on the west face of North Pal, but human hands had yet to touch the two



massive buttresses to the north and south. Before we climbed the right-hander, I thought about the time Steve had made out his will. In his notebook, he wrote, “I leave all of my crap to....” If memory serves, it wasn't me. Steve didn't have many things. I was just envious of his truck.

We cranked out the two big butts. I'd been dirt-bagging and sport climbing like a madman, doing 300 pull-ups a day. But the start—the crux—of the Southwest Buttress was an overhanging off-width. I wiggled up twenty feet and fell out. Steve wiggled up another twenty feet and fell out. Then I wiggled up some more, pushing our sole no. 4 Friend far back in the crack. Soon I was on a ledge. I think Steve was wondering why I'd picked that line. I'd started asking myself the same thing, but it was one of three awful-looking cracks that appeared about the same—gotta follow a good line, right? Atop that first pitch, the rope fell down behind a flake, and we spent an hour fishing it out. We continued another 1,800 feet, following a tiny crack system with small, incut edges and stances every twenty to thirty feet. It was the hardest free route at the time on a California Fourteener, though, of course, Kevin Steele and his buddies came by a year or so later and blew that all out of the water on Keeler Needle. Thanks, mate.

A few days later we took on the other buttress, on Starlight, a lovely, flying piece of rock that dragged your thoughts and ideas skyward. There were several big, flat ledges, but also moments of “Holy shit, how do I protect this?” I look at photos now, and I'm astonished it hadn't been touched: a wonderful, cracking line, a piece of Sierra rock splitting the firmament. Stone so gentle you could wash your hands with it. No runout scariness; no “Where-are-we-going-next?” Steve and I went up and up and up, digging every moment, every stem, every jam—every *thing*. The sky was azure and the wind was kind all the way to the top.

I've since climbed with a few big names, and while those partners were all great fun, none, ultimately, was more important than Steve. He never asked more of me than I could deliver, and he always delivered more than I could ask. Forget the stone. A good partner, an understanding and wise partner, is everything. That's the ticket. Buy that ticket; it's the best investment you'll make. And of the best routes I've climbed—there must be a mathematical equation there somewhere—nothing, to date, has been as meaningful as those Palisades climbs. And especially those on the back side.

So cherish the back side. It's a special part of the world.



overall experience so great, however, was the accumulation.... It began to seem as though the fatigue, views, challenge and rock would go on forever. We spent many days in that 'zone.'"

And yet, even with their rhythm tuned up to such a high-functioning state of flow, five of those short winter days is still a fast time. Another new game has sprung up. Beginning up Temple Crag by one of the Celestial Arêtes, themselves Grade IV climbs, this traverse runs along the ridge over Gayley to the Swiss Arête of Mt. Sill. Peter Croft became the first to

Stories After Dark

IN THE EARLY 1990s, yet another kid walked into the Palisades—Peter Croft, whose climbing still had a big-grin thread of play. “My adventures...seemed at odds with the decade’s trendy redefinition of climbing as sport,” he recalled in *Alpinist* 20. “I nosed around in guidebooks and alpine journals, catching up on the hobnailed, alpenstocked ascents of a hundred years earlier that began by stagecoach, turned into skin-of-the-teeth epics and finished with a tattered return to town.”

Around campfires, he heard tales of feats far from the spotlight photos of glossy mags. Vern Clevenger and Claude Fiddler, two veterans of the PSOM era, became his heroes. “The two had dropped out of the Valley’s competitive scene and retreated into the backcountry,” Peter noted. “Whereas Yosemite’s routes are measured in hundreds or thousands of feet, their Sierra climbs are measured in miles of skyline.” Peter played along lesser—already notorious but not as daunting—big traverses like the Sawtooth Ridge, the Rock Creek skyline and, best known, the Evolution Traverse, as well as the giant ridgelines of the Palisades.

In 2001 he soloed four Celestial Arêtes in a day, more than seventy pitches. “I didn’t want it to end,” he wrote—and in a way, it didn’t. His creative combinations of Palisades crests kept growing. He still etches his way onward, his form flitting in and out of pinnacles over gabled miles, his only trace the sweat dripping onto dark granite, soon dried by alpine breezes—as at home in these vast stone forests as Norman Clyde once was, so many years before.

Ridge Running, Part II

BY NOW, THE PALISADES TRAVERSE has been done perhaps ten times. In 2013 Jed Porter and Ian McEleney managed it over five frigid days from February to March. “No move or section or pitch was all that difficult,” Jed recalls. “The challenge came from the sum of so many moves and pitches and peaks. In the summer, approach shoes and bare hands allow fast movement.... In the winter we slowed down.... What made the

finish it car to car. And he leads onward. Following him, climbers occasionally right-face on top of Sill to run along the now-classic summits of the North Pal massif.

Car to car: kids nowadays...no respect for remoteness. One November, when the long nights at timberline were already streaked with ice, I was chatting with climbers before a slideshow in Bishop when I walked a couple of the Pullharder boys, acquaintances from San Diego. They hauled a damp and battered topo out of a hip pocket. It was my route, Dark Star. Would I sign it for them? They’d just climbed it car-to-car, and were down in plenty of time to crack a beer for the slideshow....

At Second Lake last summer, I spoke with Aaron Richards and Ian McEleney. They were headed up Dark Star and then back to the roadhead. I strolled with my coffee cup to watch them, but they’d already vanished upward. That was just one day, though, of a four-day project, during which their vehicle appeared at a different roadhead each morning. Yesterday, Keeler Needle. Tomorrow, Mt. Conness, and finally, the Incredible Hulk. The next morning, young Braden Downey rolled through. And when he checked back in that afternoon, he’d soloed Sun Ribbon, then Moon Goddess, and finally, Venusian Blind. Three Celestial Arêtes in a day. Some forty-six pitches. Those guys are all guides, stunning in their mastery, but still....

Perhaps tearing up the classic lines represents the cutting edge of Palisades climbing for now. Hustle is so contemporary, yet might it bring a bemused smile to Smoke Blanchard or Han Shan? Surely they’d notice how it bypasses a barefoot essence—to do the simplest of all things, stand and stare. In recent years, modern Paiute explorers have re-created the old pathways and trade routes across the passes, restoring a much earlier sense of history and presence to the land.

You Walk into the Palisades

HITTING THE TRAIL is usually sandy and hot. There’s a lot to be said for sneaking past its lower miles at twilight or with the freshness of first light. Finally, you enter cool aspen groves studded with wildflowers: the

[This Page] Ian McEleney between Mt. Jepson (13,390') and Mt. Sill, on Day 4 of the first complete winter ascent of the Palisades Traverse, in 2013. He and Jed Porter soloed most of the five days, only belaying forty pitches. Jed Porter | [Facing Page] Braden Downey on an unnamed new climb (5.11+) at the base of North Palisade, with SP Parker; the two

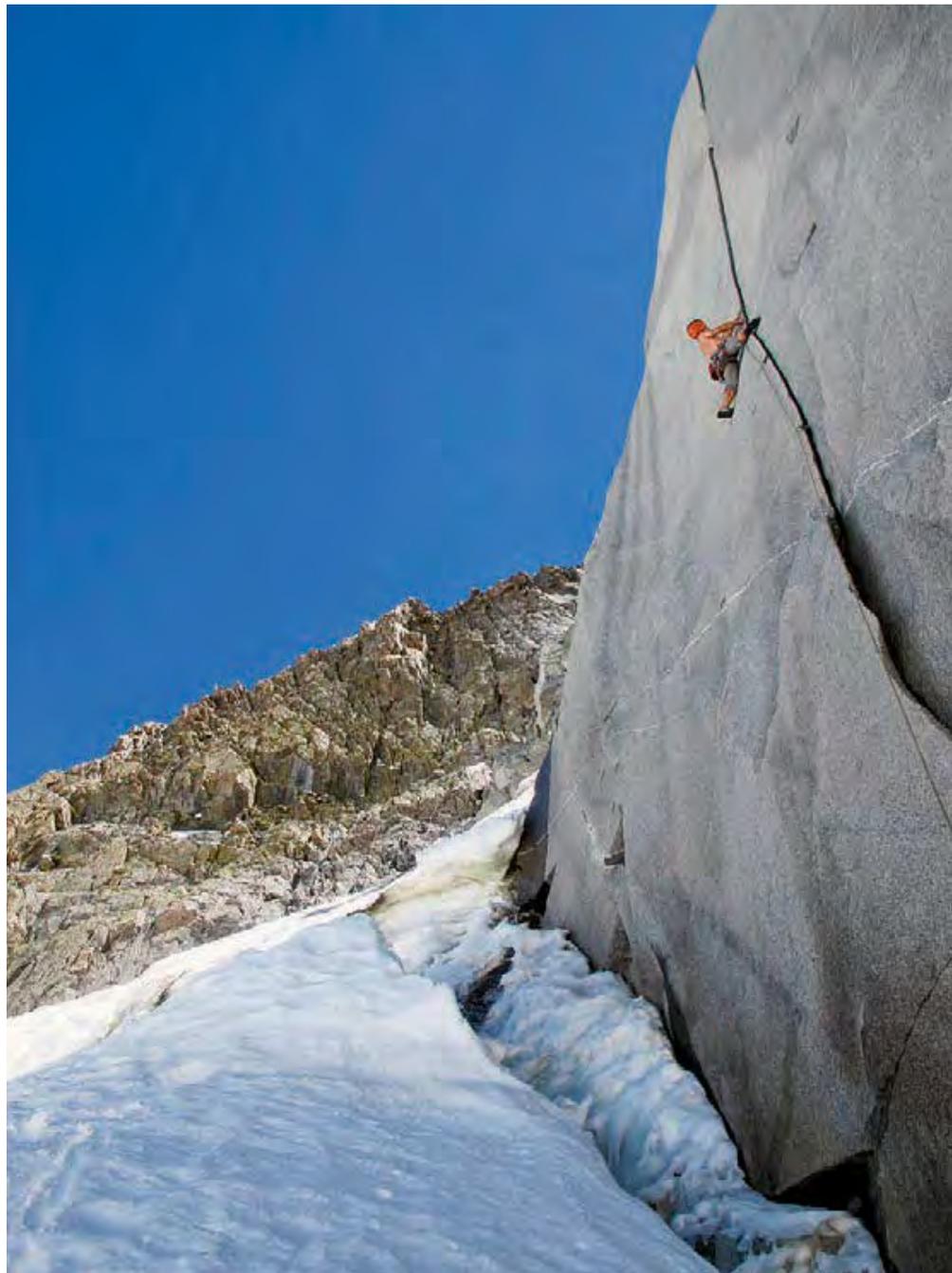
are among the handful of climbers still establishing routes in the area. In 2008, on nearby Starlight, Ryan Crochiere and Ken Kenaga contributed the ten-pitch Pirates (IV 5.10b). According to the Supertopo.com guide, “The rock climbing involves a bit of everything from loose 5.8R to splitter cracks to the best 5.4 pitch ever to a summit pinnacle.” SP Parker

wonderfully named Cienega Mirth. A huge flat-topped granite block catches your eye. This is the Banquet Boulder, where Don and Joan Jensen celebrated their wedding feast. Just beyond is a stone cabin. Really? Deep into wilderness? Lon Chaney, Hollywood's "man of a thousand faces," built it as a retreat. When the Wilderness Act engulfed it as a non-conforming "installation" fifty years ago, Inyo National Forest wisely did not demolish the stately, architect-designed structure. Now it's the occasional home to wilderness ranger patrols. Casting back almost 100 years, I like to imagine Norman Clyde dropping by, and picture the two celebrated men as just neighbors, pulling chairs up to the baronial fireplace. I wish I could eavesdrop on their conversations.

Farther up is another Hollywood relic, a set for *The Wedding March*, one of the last silent films. In 1928 its false-front stone walls once represented a country inn, with North Pal behind to stand in for the Austrian Alps. The innkeeper's daughter, played by Fay Wray, emerged onto the steps to be swept away by a dashing military officer. The film itself was widely panned, and everyone quickly moved on to the latest thing, talkies. But the set remained—a crumbling testament, perhaps, to the enduring mythology of the West, of frontiers and opportunities, that hovers about this place.

In August 1983, the roadhead slipped over a mile downcanyon. Your eye can trace where the cloudburst started if you stop about a mile up the hot sage hillside, above the new hiker parking lot. An immense, nondescript ridge towers across from you, with a gushing stream channel. It wasn't there before that fateful summer day, when a thunderhead snagged on the tiny cirque at its head and dumped an entire cumulus load into a funnel no more than a quarter mile wide. By the time its tidal surge arced out into the valley below, the cascade had erased the road. In 2009 Congress redrafted the boundary of the John Muir Wilderness, lowering it clear along the Eastside of the Sierra, and with the stroke of a pen, marooned the old roadhead where for years I'd parked my yellow '58 VW Bus.

Now when you arrive, after eleven miles, to camp in a sandy nook among the lovely slabs at 12,400 feet, in the morning there's still another mile of approach across the Sierra's biggest glacier before you set foot on the—finally!—steepening rock and ice of North Pal. This is the spot where I first came upon that plywood platform, right? Clearly that's been a campsite since climbing began up here; John Fischer discovered a sizeable woodpile squirreled away in a cave in the moraine, a couple miles above the last trees. It could only have belonged to Clyde. One night, after he died, the guides torched it as a memorial.



Things Fall Apart

NORTH PALISADE IS STILL the iconic alpine climb of the Sierra, yet a key passage of its classic route, the U-Notch, is coming apart at the seams. Local guide "SP" Parker had already warned me. Even sent a photo. Still, I wasn't prepared for how bad it's gotten. By the middle of June, streams of rocks, sand and gravel pour down the gully. The snow is melting away from the edges of the surrounding walls, exposing looseness in its bed, which, tilted beyond its angle of repose, is increasingly ready to go. To keep climbing here, as the planet continues to warm, we'll have to shift our perspectives as nimbly as we can.

So, I set out to scout a safer alternative. You might try the Doors of Perception, which I put up with Allen Steck. But that would mean the added weight of rock shoes, extra pro. I remember stout offwidth passages; Allen recalls a burly undercling. And SP is now laboring over

a hard new climb up the beautiful ridge to its left, calling it Gates of Heaven and Hell. If you scuttle to the right, you come to Clyde Couloir, that magnificent effort by our grand old man. Its mandatory steep ice may be attractive—I once hugged one side of a pillar while gingerly notching steps on the other. The downside is that it, too, has become notorious for rockfall.

Keep moving right, then, to Clyde's original passage between North Pal and Starlight, which starts up from the bottom of the couloir before cutting right onto the broad Starlight Buttress and sweeping over third- and fourth-class terrain (consider bringing your rope, though, and a small rack, because here I use "fourth class" in the old-school way that Clyde's generation defined it, which with modern grade-drift can encompass anything up to 5.5). Wend your way up ledges and nice little walls until the terrain steepens toward the summit of Starlight. Here you can get back in the snow gully for a pitch or two, then exit left, searching up cold dark chimneys to emerge into sunlight near the blocky crescendo of North Pal.

Some might continue to climb the U-Notch, from, say, roughly mid-May to mid-June. Before it begins to melt out for the summer. This gets to be a tricky judgment, however, because of the avalanche hazards that linger in the steep, north-facing gullies, long after the rest of the slopes have consolidated into the corn snow that makes delightful crunchy cramponing. Add spring skiers and climbers, who tend to see the crisp surface while ignoring the layered hoary depths, where the slipperiest blue ice still quivers under a groaning winter snowpack. Four springs ago, the central gully of Split Mountain flushed two of the best young steep skiers 2,000 feet from under its cornice.

The Great Chain of Being Climbers

I STILL LOVE THIS PLACE—seems like everyone who comes here does. Some of us have become full-blown addicts, and we react in unreasonable ways to valid critiques: the horseshit on the trail, the crowds in the North Fork, the looseness of the rock. Most of the time, it's still easy living here. The peaks are big, but on a temperate-zone scale, not standing up into the jet lanes gasping for air. The weather can get fierce, but only for so long. Winters, it still generally snows a lot, and by early in April, you can find steep peak descents, as well as rolling country—the legacy of plane-it-down glaciation—that's just so fine for gliding mile after mile downrange. There's the surprise of finding ice not far above where the sagebrush thins out, the scratch-at-it flinty surfaces of gullies so transparent and blue you can sometimes see deep down to bedrock.

Palisades climbing isn't really cutting edge in a technical sense anymore. Even Dark Star could only be considered classic rock—as the likes



of Peter Croft solo by. But maybe Smoke had it right about mild mountaineering. The routes still hold your attention, move by move by move. To keep moving, almost smoothly, is somehow at the heart of this dance. I'm starting to realize that rhythm in motion itself is very conducive to that elusive state of flow, when your limbs feel light and you're so tuned in to the rock that you're hyper-aware and so synched up with your surroundings that you're climbing more safely—and it starts to feel as if you embody, in a

now that begins to verge on infinite, the very essence of climbing.

And if you wake up after a day like that and feel so contented that you have no need to untangle the rope and head up again, that's a gift as well. Roll over and snooze into a warm morning, peel a grapefruit, fire up the espresso maker—you brought it up on the second carry for mornings like this, for the luxury of stretching into a day of nothing special; maybe read the book you carried, too, take a dip in Third Lake, though it's definitely too bracing to swim, stretch out the tightness from that long descent into twilight, and be surprised to find yourself bouldering anyway.

You reach for your notebook, but you realize that if you try to put such contentment into words, you'll only sound trite. You sit back, grateful, into the granite backrest you chose this campsite for, feel the sun on your cheek and the first tendrils of breeze bringing the scent of pine and laughter from somewhere upcanyon, and your eye drifts once again to that stretch of Temple Crag that's caught your attention lately. You smile, realizing that you're grateful that this life you didn't ask for, that you just fell—pardon the expression—into, is rich with beauty and challenge, and that it is brimful. I think back to what Thomas Jukes wrote in *The American Alpine Journal* about Clyde, after his death in 1972: "He had lived as every alpinist wants to live, but as none of them dare to do, and so he had a unique life... He was the only man I knew who gave himself up completely to a passionate love of the mountains." The daring, I realize, isn't always a matter of what we climb—but of how deeply we can surrender ourselves to the wild.

A few years back, down on the coast, I had a vision that I was lying on the ground right here, in my campsite tucked in the rocks at Third Lake. Deep into raising kids, I'd been missing the Palisades more than I knew, I guess. In my vision, the sand at my back was cold. I was cold, a skeleton, androgynous, with generations flowing from between my legs, arcing into the future. Behind and above me, countless generations gave birth to me, a bright flash in a long progression, a soul train. From a long perspective, I saw a succession of searchers, brightening as they were tempered by alpine rigors. Being cold bones was OK, just part of the progression. I had my time on this terrain. Used it right up. Pass it on. ■

[For a selected bibliography, see Alpinist.com.—Ed]

[This Page] Clyde in Tuolumne Meadows, about a year before his death at age eighty-seven. "No one's going to equal Clyde," Palisades climber Claude Fiddler told Rassler, "All of us are just visitors. That was his life. He established the myths. He established the legends. Then everyone could have this hero figure and know that you could go out

there and live out there." Tom Gerughty | [Facing Page] Agassiz Col, between Mt. Winchell and Mt. Agassiz. In *A Night on the Ground, a Day in the Open*, Doug Robinson describes the ethos he absorbed from the Palisades, "To be a mountaineer / Is first to love the mountains / Then to climb them. / Technique can never replace devotion." John Sanders

