

## Agathlan

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THE Monument Valley area of northern Arizona and southern Utah, just west of the "four corners," abounds in fantastic rock formations. Here it seems as if the very skeleton of the earth protrudes through its outer crust. Most of the monuments are towering sandstone survivors, carved by wind and water from an ancient plateau; but here and there a reminder of volcanic activity rears into the sky. The highest of these volcanic necks, and the most spectacular in profile, is Agathlan—or El Capitan. Since the Spaniards had a tendency to pin the name "Captain" on any outstanding formation, we shall refer to our peak by its Indian name.

In 1937 I had the good fortune to spend three and a half months as staff cinematographer for the Rainbow Bridge—Monument Valley Expedition. Assigned to cover field science activities over a rather extensive area, I also had an opportunity to scout out climbing possibilities. Agathlan was first on my list. Our 74-man field party included no other climbers, so all I could do was look. Harry Goulding, of Goulding's Trading Post, told me that there had been a few attempts in the past, but that no one had gone very high. He remarked also that the local Navajos, fine climbers themselves, called it impossible.

Ten years later I again visited the area and studied the peak at close range. The black dike on the northwest face seemed to offer the only feasible route. This was composed of crystallized blocks of basalt, unfortunately set at an angle. All visible ledges apparently sloped out and down. From one corner of the base of the peak, it was possible to bring this route into profile. The center section of the wall, perhaps 200 feet of it, averaged 90 degrees—and was overhanging in places. This was not a very promising route, but I could see no other possibility. There was another dike on the eastern side of the peak, but it was even steeper and would require almost half again as much climbing—the talus being lower on this side. All other faces and ridges were composed of a light-colored sandstone type of rock, without chimneys or ledges.

In the language of the Navajo, Agathlan (sometimes incor-

rectly referred to as Agathla) means "piles of wool." According to Navajo legend, a race of giants once inhabited the area. These ancient people scraped the hides of antelope and left the hair to be blown in the wind. The hair clung to the grass and caused the death of many grazing animals. Thereafter the ancient ones were careful to pile rocks on all hair scraped from skins. These piles of rock and hair (wool) are supposed to be the very mounds of ash and basalt which now surround the base of Agathlan Peak. Among the modern Navajo, the hair scraped from all hides to be used for ceremonial purposes must be placed under mounds of rocks. As long as this hair stays put, the skin is considered "good medicine."

In the spring of 1949 Virginia and I were making a lecture film in Arches National Monument in Utah. On May 28th we left our camp and drove south to Monument Valley. That afternoon we met Ben and Lee Pedrick, of the Kachinas, and Jan and Herb Conn, the roving rock climbers, at the base of Agathlan. They had been there since morning and had had time to circle the peak. That evening we discussed the possibilities and decided to try the north-west dike route.

The 29th of May showed little promise of being a good photographic day. We therefore left camp later than we had planned. At 7.30 all six of us started up, carrying 50 pitons, 40 tamp-in bolts (plus two sets of drills, tamp tools and hammers), 15 karabiners, four 120-foot lengths of nylon, 100 feet of quarter-inch hemp sling, a 16-mm. Ciné-Special camera, a magazine movie camera, Virginia's Speed Graphic, two reflex-type still cameras, lunches and twelve quarts of water. We climbed over the "piles of wool" and reached the base of the cliffs at 8.30 A.M.

It was obvious that we were facing an extremely difficult climb. Any more than three people on that wall at one time would mean a very real danger from falling rock. Consequently, we decided to make the first attempt with Lee Pedrick, Herb Conn and myself. Actually, we thought we would not get very high the first day. We fully intended to push as far as we safely could and then fix ropes for another try on the morrow. It did not work out that way, but proof of our good faith lies in the fact that we left all the food below.

Herb led off. He went up a broad chimney, passing an old piton and sling I had left on the reconnaissance in 1947, about 100 feet to a stance on a sloping ledge. Herb is light and climbs with

great delicacy—an all-important virtue for a leader on loose rock. Anchored to a piton, Herb belayed me as I climbed up to him. I then led out to the left and up to the top of a block about 30 feet above him. This happened to be the last horizontal ledge we were to see for many weary hours. I placed an angle piton for an anchor.

Herb moved up to me. Lee Pedrick then tied in and came up to Herb's first position. Herb then made a very fine face climb of about 60 feet diagonally to the right. He drove in three pitons for protection en route. Now he faced an overhang and could find no suitable piton crack. He started to drill a hole. (Note for volcanic neck climbers: Don't try to drill basalt.) He hammered away for a long time and was rewarded with only a slight depression. The sharp tip of the brand-new stonemason's drill turned back on itself. Finally he had a hole about one-half inch deep—and a pair of worn-out arms. He belayed me as I climbed up to his position and took over the drilling. The ledge we had to stand on was of a comfortable depth—about six inches—but of a very uncomfortable angle—about 40 degrees. I pounded away until the required one-inch depth was reached. Then I tamped in the lead sleeve and screwed in the eyebolt. Setting this one bolt had taken us an hour and ten minutes! Also, it had so weakened us both that neither felt up to leading the overhang.

Herb went back down to the top of the block and belayed Lee up. Then Lee moved up to me at the bolt and took the lead. Lee is only 18, but he has had four years of experience on the pinnacles of the Arizona desert, has climbed Popocatepetl in Mexico, and has spent six weeks in the Tetons. Lee's lead over that overhang was a beautiful thing to watch. He moved smoothly, tested all holds carefully, and went over the top with just the proper number of grunts and groans. Lee's older brother, Ben, who watched this performance through binoculars from the desert floor, was very proud of this lead. As with most brothers, there is some rivalry between them, and very little outward show of affection. Now Ben merely shouted, "Hello, brother"; and Lee's answer drifted down from the heights—"Hello, brother." But this little interchange was charged with all the pride and affection of the Pedrick clan.

Lee continued up over two slightly bellied-out sections, using two pitons for protection. Then he came to another overhang. Here he placed another piton and did a straight hand pull to reach a

small sloping ledge. His fourth piton acted as an anchor point as he prepared to belay us. This lead of Lee's carried the party a vertical distance of 50 feet, and later proved to have been technically the most difficult portion of the entire ascent.

Lee belayed me up to his position, and I led a 100-foot face climb up and slightly to the left. The exposure was bad, and the basalt blocks were loose, but they were clean and well balanced. I placed two pitons before reaching a reasonably comfortable stance. I say "reasonably comfortable" because I could assume a semi-sitting position—but the block I was sitting on rocked a bit. Herb moved up to the bolt, then on past Lee and up to my stance.

Herb led out to the left and then straight up over an intrusion of rotten light colored rock. This was the most dangerous lead. Herb placed three pitons en route, but he doubted that any of them could have held a fall. Near the end of the 70-foot lead Herb had to negotiate an overhang. He was able to drive a sound anchor piton on a small ledge above the overhang.

Lee moved up to my ledge and stayed there while I joined Herb. Herb retained the lead and climbed diagonally out to the right to a series of sloping ledges. The rock was again good clean basalt, but many of the blocks were delicately balanced. The value of Herb's ability to move over loose material without dislodging anything was again clearly, and cleanly, demonstrated. Here for the first time the angle of the dike began to ease off. It was no longer quite vertical. At the top of this 80-foot lead Herb placed an anchor piton. Then Lee moved up to me, I joined Herb, and Lee continued up to complete the trio. This was the first time we had been together since leaving the talus.

Lee led 50 feet to the base of a chimney. Both Herb and I were again able to join him. Lee then led up the chimney. This was the first and only opportunity for the use of side pressures on the entire climb. There was a small chockstone, but Lee passed it without difficulty, using a protective piton. At the top of the left wall of the chimney, he found a small platform and took up his stance a distance of 60 feet above us.

When Lee belayed me up to his position, I could see what certainly must be the summit of the ridge only half a rope-length above. However, we had been fooled three or four times on the way up by overhanging portions of the face which concealed the

cliffs still above us. We were tired and a bit tense from the continuous exposure. I decided to make a quick rush for what I believed to be the summit of the ridge. Here the blocks of basalt were free of loose material, but were again delicately balanced. The way led out diagonally to the left, and I was soon sufficiently clear of Herb and Lee to be sure that they were out of danger from falling rock. I was also high enough now to see that the ridge actually was only a short distance above. I checked the rope to make certain that it was running clear and then climbed the remaining 40 feet just as rapidly as I could move. Many of the blocks moved under me, and a few did break loose and plunge down the precipice; but I was moving up so fast that my weight was on new holds before the old ones fell away. I stood on top of the ridge at 5.00 P.M. Lee and Herb quickly joined me.

The weather had been threatening all day. One moment we were in sunshine; the next threatened rain. By late afternoon the western sky was banked with clouds, and we knew we were in for an early dusk. We held a quick powwow and decided to go on and chance a bivouac. It had been a long hard fight to achieve our present position, and none of us relished the thought of climbing that 550-foot wall again. We were still only midway between the talus and the summit, but anything would seem simple after the face climb we had just completed.

The ridge we now stood on was one of two which flanked a deep couloir on the north side of the peak. Our ridge curved up to an impossible angle. The true summit ridge was a few hundred yards to the east, and seemed to be a walk—if we could reach it. We roped down into the couloir. It was broken into two separate gullies. We walked across one and, in a position where no danger was apparent, suffered our only injury. As we turned the corner into the second gully, I was holding lightly to the wall on the right. My hand dislodged a sizable boulder which struck my right thigh. If I were not a well-padded individual, this might have been serious. As it was, the only result was a painful bruise.

The second gully opened into a still larger one which resembled a huge cavity in the tooth of Agathlan. Here we found grass good enough for grazing in a country where good grass is rare. Navajo legend places a spring here, but we found none. We did find a chimney which brought us directly onto the summit ridge.

Here we started climbing again; but, as Herb remarked, it was the type of climbing we had had every right to expect at intervals on the way up the wall. We moved rapidly and confidently. I led 40 feet up the knife ridge, belayed the others, and then went another 40 to a point where all three of us gathered again. Then Herb led 50 feet up the steepest pitch of the knife ridge. It was truly knifelike, dropping a few hundred feet on the right, and nearly a thousand on the left. Three more pitches of about 50 feet each, and we heard Herb's yell of triumph. At 6.30 P.M. all three of us stood on the summit. Old "Piles of Wool" was ours!

We spent a full hour on the summit. The sun peeked through the clouds long enough for us to take pictures—both movies and stills—and fully to appreciate the magnificent panorama. Here was a very different view from that which greets the eye from the summit of a snow peak. Agathlan stands considerably higher than anything else in the area. We could see the weird land of the Navajo spread out to the north, east and west; we could see the Hopi mesas to the south—all bathed in the blood red of the sinking sun. This wild desert country has a mysterious grandeur which is most evident under the spell of the sunset. We should have thoroughly enjoyed the experience if it had not been for the disturbing thought of the precipice between us and food and rest.

We built a cairn about three feet high and placed an upright pointed rock atop it. This should be visible, through binoculars, from the floor of the desert. Within this pile we left a film box containing the record of our climb.

At 7.30 P.M. we began the delicate journey back down the knifelike ridge. Fatigue was now catching up with us; it was evident from the condition of our nerves. We climbed where we should have walked; we crawled where we should have climbed. By the time we reached the top of the dike, the sun had set. With only the afterglow to light our way, we decided to attempt the descent. This was a poorly considered decision—further evidence of our fatigue.

I placed a piton on the top of the dike ridge, tied a short sling in place, and rappelled down a doubled rope made of two 120-foot nylons. I cleared all loose rock en route so that the others would not bring it down on my head. This consumed so much time that it was thoroughly dark when I reached a small sloping ledge. I then pounded in a piton and clung to it while I tried to call to Lee to

follow. I opened my mouth—and gagged completely! My throat was as dry as parchment, and coated with dust. Any attempt to yell just closed it off. For 11 hours we had had only two quarts of water for the three of us. Most of it was now gone, and what little remained was now with Lee and Herb atop the dike. I shook the rope and made some gasping sounds to indicate that all was in readiness for Lee to come down. To complicate the situation, the wind had risen, so that I could not make out what Lee was trying to call down to me. But the rope soon began to move. I knew he was on his way.

It soon became evident that my efforts to clear loose rocks had not been very thorough. The deadly hum of falling rocks rose above the moan of the wind. I flattened against the face as tightly as I could, wishing I were about 60 pounds smaller.

Suddenly, the foolishness of our plan struck me. It was now completely dark. We had a long, long way to go. Each stopping place had to be large enough to support three men while the ropes were pulled down and placed in position for the next rappel. To choose these stances, set pitons, and slide down over the loose rocks, was a foolhardy thing to attempt in the dark. By the time I had reasoned this out, Lee was only about ten feet above me. Again my throat closed as I attempted to call to him. He was now close enough to understand, even though I could only gasp the explanation. Lee was to tie into one end of his rappel rope, and call to Herb to fix the other in position. Then Lee would go up the fixed rope while Herb pulled as hard as he could on the other. It took a long time for Lee to yell these instructions to Herb. Finally he started to move up. I could hear Lee puffing and snorting as he pulled himself up by the sheer strength of his arms. Herb was pulling hard, too, but most of his effort was consumed in friction of the rope on the rock. Half an hour later, I felt a tug on the fixed rope—the end of which I had retained throughout. I tied in, and then heard Herb and Lee call for me to start up. Again my throat blurred the answer, but the rope drew taut and I was on my way. With both of them pulling, it was a rapid and easy ascent. My only difficulty was in dodging falling rock. When I reached the summit of the ridge, we held another powwow to decide where to bivouac.

Far below, we could see lanterns moving from our camp toward the base of the peak. We thought the others might have heard our

gasps as we fought our way back up to the ridge—and interpreted them as distress signals. Then followed an exhausting exchange of shouts, many of which were carried away by the wind. Finally, we thought they understood that we were safe and intended to lay up for the night. At any rate, we could not yell any more.

We decided to turn back and go into the first gully that would afford some protection from the wind. The nearest thing to a platform was a 30-degree shelf of grass. Driving two pitons to anchor ourselves and the equipment, we settled down to await the dawn. It was a long wait. We were sheltered from the main blast of the wind, but the eddying swirls found us and chilled us to the bone. Light shirts, jeans and sneakers are not the last word in bivouac wear.

Lee had a box of matches with which he tried to create the illusion of heat. It did not work. The sky clouded over, and lightning flashed in the distance. We braced ourselves for the crowning discomfort of rain, but it never came. We dozed a few times, but sleep was impossible on that steep slope. At 4.30 the east was glowing, and we made our way back to the top of the wall.

The rope we had started down on the night before was still in position, and we immediately began the descent. Being the heaviest, I went first; Lee and Herb thought this an excellent test of the strength of the rappel rope and its mooring. This time I was able to reach a better stance, 100 feet down. I placed a sound piton and rigged the next rappel sling before calling to the others to follow. When Lee and Herb were down, we all pulled on the rope—and it jammed! Herb climbed straight up a chimney, about 60 feet, to a small ledge. I joined him here and gave a belay as he worked out to the left. About 15 feet laterally from me, he was able to free one of the ropes from a crack where it had wedged. We both rappelled down to Lee. The rope slid easily this time.

The second rappel was from a single piton with a four-foot piece of sling rope leading out over the edge, and a descending ring tied to the end of it. I roped down 100 feet and then worked leftward to a slight depression in the vertical face. Hanging from the rappel ropes, I hammered in two pitons and fixed a sling. Clinging to this sling, I called for Herb and Lee to come down. The only place for our feet was an outward-sloping ledge which gave very little support. The exposure at this point was terrific. When all

three of us were gathered at this point, we literally hung from the sling with one hand while we pulled down and reset the rappel ropes with the other.

The third rappel was 115 feet down on a slight diagonal to the left. This time I could not even find a semblance of a ledge for a rappel station. I worked a little farther to the left and found a section where the basalt blocks were quite loose. Hanging onto the rappel rope, I tore several of the blocks loose until I had actually manufactured a ledge large enough for all three of us. Here I placed two more pitons and rigged a sling.

The fourth rappel measured 105 feet directly down to the top of the comfortable block above Herb's first lead. Here we pounded in two more pitons and, with an extra long sling, were able to rappel the final 130 feet to the talus. We were off the mountain at 8.30. It had taken us four hours to engineer the descent of the 550-foot wall. We had been on the peak exactly 24 hours.

There were eight quarts of water in the packs which had been left at the base of the cliff. They proved to be enough even after our long thirst. There was also one small lunch, which did not even begin to dent our appetites. After a short rest, we headed back to our camp and a big meal.

As we marched triumphantly over the "piles of wool," we looked over our shoulders with mixed emotions toward the towering Agathlan. It had stood there since time began, and we were proud to think that only our feet, and those of the legendary giants, had ever trod its summit.