

Bugaboo Adventures

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East Face of Snowpatch Spire

THE DAYS of route pioneering are still young in North America, especially in Canada where there are many great faces, as well as peaks, still to be conquered. Destiny is almost certain to favor the Bugaboos as a future climber's paradise because of its spectacular and varied terrain, its excellent granite rock, and increasing accessibility. It is already known as Canada's "Bergell" to outsiders. While the future generation may find this an ideal piton playground, 1959 seemed like a good year to attack the spectacular east face of Snowpatch Spire—the most stunning wall in the Bugaboos, which confronts everyone at Boulder Camp.

This great wall held an equal fascination for Hank Mather and me. We had done some training climbs in the springtime, and the discussion of "summer goals" generally concluded with the subject of the east face. With this climb in mind we prepared for the big effort in mid-summer. The weather was excellent in late July, and by then we felt in condition to attempt this ascent.

We worked our plan out carefully, organized a multitude of equipment in a glacier tent, and spent many hours examining the 2050-foot sheer face for a continuous route. After much discussion and looking, we decided on what seemed the most classic way: a direct line from the glacier up the center of the face to the true summit. We selected each belay point, picked out potential bivouac spots, and virtually studied every crack on the route. With equal care we chose pitons for size and usefulness, ropes, and bivouac equipment. The lower section of the face, almost up to the level of the snowpatch, was about 800 feet high. It was massive and vertical. Any through route involved at least two major and some minor overhangs, and any route would be largely direct aid. Higher up, the wall slowly began to back off into a shallow depression between the south and north summits. The wall appeared very slabby and crackless for many hundred feet, but the top third, though still very steep, seemed to offer the hope of some

broken rock, cracks, and tilted slabs. It was difficult to predict how much of it could be climbed free. Our plan, basically, was to force the route up the face from the glacier, day by day, leaving fixed ropes, until we felt it was safe to abandon support from below and cut off our retreat. Then we hoped the weather and our stamina would support us in a final push to the summit with a minimum number of bivouacs. We would have to risk the possibility of a sudden snowstorm, rain, or lightning.

Mather had done a good many such climbs in the Dolomites and in various other parts of the Alps. He was amused at the reaction some of his friends at home in Munich would have when they saw the pictures, but the closer we came to the wall, the more certain it seemed we would have more basic things to think about than camera angles.

Flanking the bergschrund on both sides, there were slightly easier places to "disembark." The only series of cracks leading continuously upward were about five feet distant—horizontally. The sun was already behind the mountain the afternoon of July 26, but we spent a few hours testing the lower defences. Hank, almost laughing, lowered me about 20 feet on the rope, while I swung around in circles, kicking at the névé wall in an effort to get hold of a crack on the rock. With the right thrust I finally managed to jam in an angle piton, hammer it, and stand on a sling. A few more angles, and I had climbed above an overhang beneath the belay level, on self-tension. This was a new technique. There was no need to place the pitons well—just for aid—and later I swung down to remove them. In about an hour I was some distance up, moving the slings along with the leading two pitons. We left it at that for the day and returned to Boulder Camp. Looking back, it did not seem as if we had accomplished much.

The next day we began in earnest and approached the wall with the dawn. It was just getting warm as I tensioned back up the rope to the top piton. About six hours later I nearly fell off in an exhaustive effort to push myself loose from a stirrup and mantle onto a thin two-foot ledge that was to become our first belay station. The pitch had required a total of about 40 pitons and 160 feet of vertical climbing. To climb over the difficult "moss" overhang I had had to dig and throw out about thirty pounds of moss clods. The glacier below was littered with green tufts. Rappels and prusiking later proved that we were more than *directly* over the bergschrund—we were able to rappel free from the overhang, spin around as we descended, and drop freely onto the glacier, out beyond the belay stance. Hank got chilly feet waiting for me to conclude this pitch.

After loads of food, equipment, water, and ropes were hauled up, Hank ascended, removing all but the anchor pitons beneath the overhang. Leav-

ing these in place with the fixed rope would minimize the free swing while prusiking. He then laybacked up an inside-right corner, a 5th class climb for about 50 feet. This came as a welcome surprise. Even with the direct-aid work on the remainder of the pitch, he reached the next stance in about two hours, a platform large enough for one side of the hip. He anchored this spot in well, fixed two ropes and rappelled down. We rested a day, making a round trip to the road for more pitons.

The following two times on the wall we spent about half the day regaining old positions and pulling up loads. Certain anchor pitons were open to question. We placed Rawl drives at both belay spots. I had lead number three, which was another double-rope problem up some sensational vertical cracks on an otherwise flawless wall. It was a section where we had misgivings and feared that the cracks might not hold up. Amazingly, they did, though moss again greatly delayed progress. A serious problem was caused by the lack of sound cracks on a difficult overhang-barrier. This section took up about half our climbing day. The exposure was fantastic, and the moss clods whirred as they sped downward. Once a rock hurtled by like a missile, far outside us. Hank had the fourth lead, a very difficult and awkward one. The cracks were often insufficient or rotten, and there was much moss. The pitch was vertical and uncompromising. With some wood blocks and two small bolts we bypassed the worst section, but we had to rappel off in the semi-darkness and leave it unfinished. Looking up, our glasses showed us, just at the lower edge of the great *White* overhang, an obvious upside-down column that was a landmark of the route.

We now decided to plan the final push. After resting several days and climbing the west face by a new route, we stirred into action on August 5. After several unsettled days, the dawn was clear and the barometer up. Having reached the high point, Hank completed the lead in about two trying hours. Giant angle pitons did the trick on this jinx-pitch. Earlier, his hammer had broken and two pitons had pulled loose, but this time it went better. However, at the lead's end he had to make a stirrup belay in the confines of a smooth-walled chimney. I passed his hanging belay in mid-afternoon, did a wide stem, placed several untrustworthy pitons and then a bolt for aid, and free-climbed a difficult section to the ledge that was to become bivouac number one. Pitch five was an inside corner that took aid pitons rapidly—almost with mechanical speed. The wall leaned back just far enough to permit standing in the top rung of the two stirrups of a hanging belay. Hank followed and spent until twilight on the next lead. He worked up a vertical wall to the left, and with a system of lateral-tension slings he maneuvered onto a slab leftward. The combination of

tension and pressure enabled him to reach a left crack cutting into the *Black* overhang—a band that traverses this section of the east face. He placed the largest wedge we had, but even so, he could not get over the overhang without two of the smallest bolts (3/16 inch) and more wedges. This was the most exhausting problem on the climb. Not wishing to chance the uncertainty of finding a bivouac spot above, we left the pitch unfinished and retired to the ledge with our support equipment.

We roped ourselves in on the ledge, tied to pitons, and sat up all night inside our zeltsack. Sleep was impossible under the conditions, but we did drowse and get some needed rest. In the morning, shivering with cold, we had to prusik for the first 30 feet up a fixed rope that was frozen solid from running water. Fingers became so cold that they burned with pain. Hank tensioned up the overhang and spent about two hours climbing the solitary crack with direct aid. At the rope's end he put in a bolt and pulled up the loads. One rucksack and a duffle bag became stuck on the overhang and I had to work them up while I prusiked. I tried to climb the overhang with both loads tied to me, but could not muster the strength, even with tension. The ropes had jammed tight into the carabiners. Finally we had to rig a temporary sling to hoist the loads, and then re-anchor them once above the pesky overhang. The first part of this day was undoubtedly the low point of our luck, progress, and morale.

By about four o'clock we were sufficiently organized to continue. The character of the climb now changed drastically; one could occasionally see a few feet of free climbing. In fact, the summit was visible a thousand feet above, and the snowpatch to the south of us. Technically, we knew the worst was over. With care, luck, and good weather we felt confident that we would climb through. To lighten our loads we tossed about a dozen small bundles of equipment off the wall—mostly iron and rope. All fell clear or with one bounce to the glacier, and Elfrida Pigou made a 100 per cent recovery. We progressed with renewed vigor after a late lunch and made five and one-half leads before total darkness overtook us. Each of these leads had some desperate moments. It was the most enjoyable and actually the most difficult 5th class climbing we had on the wall. Two of the leads involved trying hand and finger struggles as we traversed left to a new series of cracks. The first, third, and fourth of these leads had a little direct-aid climbing, but we succeeded in working over these areas fast and furiously, as one sometimes does when keenly intent on pushing the climb to the limit. Threatening scud clouds suggested the advisability of establishing ourselves, for we were now too high to turn back. We retreated a half-lead to a tiny snow patch and a granite sand pile on a 30 degree slab. This

was our bivouac. Water, food, and canned fruit made the first part of this night endurable; later it was bitterly cold, despite the sack and the down jackets. A light from below signalled that the barometer was falling.

Except for four pitons on Hank's first lead, the final push next day was all free climbing. My biggest moment of anxiety was leading out over a wall while trying to fist-jam up a rounded groove. A side-pushing tactic with the boots provided the answer. Once past this difficult problem, the route was reasonably broken with cracks to provide fast climbing—not unlike the upper half of the regular route. We carried our rucksacks on the last two leads and shortly past noon stood happily on the summit. To reach it we had placed about 160 pitons, eight bolts, and some wooden wedges.

It was a pleasant feeling to relax about an hour and admire the ever-fascinating Bugaboo scenery, but we were not in a philosophical mood, just anxious to get off Snowpatch for a decent night's sleep. Elfrida appeared, coming over the Bugaboo col, and the thought of hot tea put us into action. We descended via our new west face route of a few days ago, placing a needed anchor bolt. Future parties on the mountain would do well to use our route down to the Warren Glacier. The following day there was one more chore—to prusik back up the ropes on the lower three leads. They had been left in as a safeguard in the event a forced rappel was necessary. That first prusik still involved swinging around, and again took nearly an hour. At one time we had done it in about 25 minutes individually, but now the incentive was gone. From the third belay ledge I pulled the loose end of the highest doubled rope. In another hour we were off the great wall for the last time. It had been one of the greatest adventures of our lives.

West Face of Snowpatch Spire

(Editor's note:—This was a new route and the third ascent of this face. The first ascent was made in 1956 by Kraus, McCarthy and Rupley. (A.A.J., 1957, 10:2, pp. 29-33.) A second route was made on the northern end of the face in 1958 by Buckingham, Page, Whipple and Guess. (A.A.J., 1959, 11:2, pp. 311-2.) The climb described below is the closest to the center of the face of the three yet done and leads to the central notch.)

Not wanting to waste this streak of excellent weather resting in camp, Brian Greenwood and I spent an afternoon making a reconnaissance of the west face of Snowpatch Spire. The fact that we managed to reach a point about 300 feet below the summit and still get back to camp before dark encouraged us to return two days later on July 31, with Hank Mather and Elfrida Pigou.

The route ascends a trough system on the great slabs of the west face to

the central notch between the north and south summits. The lower portion is largely 4th class, working left from the glacier. At one point the traverse of a 20-foot section requires agility and edge friction on very minute holds. A two-lead, 200-foot, open-stem chimney takes one to a great Y in the system. The chimney is not extreme, but is strenuous. If it were about five degrees steeper, it would be exhausting. As it is, protection is quite negligible. Here, our reconnaissance ended.

On the serious effort, we were hampered by a fresh snowfall and could not progress beyond this point until a noon sun had warmed the rock and air to melt the snow. I had already placed two protective bolts to negotiate a long traverse to the right, and when it was dry enough, climbed back out to the end of the *catwalk* ledge. Here, I had to make a very dangerous move into a right-sloping groove. It had to go, for I could not return on the same holds. In about three feet of strenuous pressure, I groped around the groove to a point where I did not trust my soles on the moist rock. My body and hands were forced out, and there was nothing for the hands but pressure—in the wrong direction for moving upwards. I twisted my shoes in the crack of the groove as best I could and hammered in a quarter-inch Rawl drive. With this new security I could risk the next 15 feet. As it turned out, I was thankful to have the Rawl drive since I almost fell out of the groove. Here the route veered left sharply, and a new line of pitons added to the rope friction. Since these bits of iron were barely firm enough to hold the carabiner's weight, as I inched up the difficult crack, I was just as happy there were two bolts directly below.

Eventually I established a piton belay, brought Brian up, then continued onward up a crackless wall, drilling two bolt holes twice from very sensitive footholds. By then Hank Mather had arrived at the belay spot and volunteered to complete the last lead to the summit ridge notch. My ankles and toe muscles were fatigued from edging on the small holds while I drilled. The uppermost bolt was just high enough for Hank to pendulum about 12 feet to the left and jam his hands in an overhanging chimney. The slab I had been climbing swept upward uselessly, Hank somehow managed to hang on and place a piton in a convenient crack. Using direct-aid, he climbed upward, inserting giant angles and a bolt. He drove more angles and hammered in a piton upwards to swing out over a bulge in the crack, in order to reach a curious groove which we could not see from below. This he managed to struggle up, placing another piton, and pulled himself onto a ledge. We then followed two at a time, while I knocked out the iron on tension. The sun tried to sink before the party reached the top. Since the north summit was nearest, we made record time along the ridge and up a

final chimney to the top. The idea of a bivouac was discarded, and we rappelled quickly and efficiently down the shadowy slabs to the snow. The pre-preparation of the rappel slings paid off, and we were back in Boulder Camp not long after dark.

West Face of Bugaboo Spire

During the last several days of good climbing weather in early August, on the eleventh we were fortunate enough to make the first *complete* climb of the west face of Bugaboo Spire. Although planned as a reconnaissance for a full day's climb, it ended as a furious effort to reach the summit before dusk and an oncoming snowstorm.

Pete Geiser, Roman Sadowy and I left Boulder Camp at 10 in the morning, traversed over Bugaboo col and descended the Warren Glacier to the outlet of a gully and scree slope in the center of the west face. We climbed upwards, unroped, for about 400 feet before traversing left four rope-lengths to the edge of a ledge system. Twenty feet out there was a vertical crack leading to a new system. I traversed the 20 feet and then jammed my way up the crack, a strenuous process which wore most of the knees and hips out of my climbing trousers. Above there was a long trough system, banked by a longitudinal rib. To save time, we unroped and climbed another 400 feet. Pete then led a steep, loose section to a new trough. Again we unroped to climb a long, slabby gully and roped when the slabs became difficult. Eventually we found ourselves about 300 feet directly below the summit. Although we had planned an exit to the south ridge, it appeared that the route would go if time permitted. We had two hours left before darkness and a storm was already engulfing the Howsers. Roman wormed his way up a layback and steep chimney before belaying me as I stemmed from a step-off ledge to a short, overhanging-flake layback. Good piton protection made a delicate traverse reasonable. Another piton followed, and then a final awkward move after I had carefully studied the hold sequence. After that, the climbing was strenuous 4th class; one lead took us to the craggy, thin west arête; the last lead virtually straddled the crest and took us to the top. There was just time to get off before darkness. As we made the gendarme rappel, Snowpatch grayed out in the snowfall. It was the end of the season for us in the Bugaboos. The spell of good luck had ended.

Summary of Statistics

AREA: Bugaboo Group, Purcell Range, British Columbia, Canada.

ASCENTS:

East face of Snowpatch Spire, preparation of lower pitches: July 26, 27, 28, August 2, 1959; first ascent of the whole face: August 5, 6 and 7, 1959 (Beckey, Mather).

West face of Snowpatch Spire, reconnaissance: July 29 (Beckey, Greenwood); new route: July 31, 1959 (Beckey, Greenwood, Mather, Pigou).

West face of Bugaboo Spire, August 11, 1959 (Beckey, Sadowy, Geiser)
—first *complete* ascent of the west face.

PERSONNEL: Fred Beckey, Hank Mather, Brian Greenwood, Elfrida Pigou, Peter Geiser, Roman Sadowy.

