

The First Ascent of the Diamond, East Face of Longs Peak

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LONGS PEAK, in Rocky Mountain National Park, is one of the best-known and most-climbed mountains in the United States. At 14,255 feet it is Colorado's northernmost "fourteener," and its rugged lines and dominant position have attracted mountain climbers for almost a century. Seen from the east, the peak presents a precipitous granite face of some 1800 feet on which, in past years, a great number of climbing routes have been established. In the upper center part of the face is a diamond-shaped area, roughly 1000 feet high and 1000 feet wide, which is relatively unbroken and of exceptionally high angle. During the past decade it has been the subject of much speculation among climbing circles and has acquired the name, the Diamond. In 1953 a party organized by Dale Johnson of Boulder announced its intention of attempting an ascent of this wall, but was refused permission by the National Park. Since then the Diamond has been "off limits" to climbers. Being thus protected from the climbing activity going on elsewhere in the country, it gradually assumed the distinction of being the most famous unclimbed wall in the United States.

It was therefore with considerable excitement that Bob Kamps and I read the letter giving us permission for "an attempted ascent of the Diamond during the month of August, 1960." We knew we were well prepared for the climb, coming fresh from a month's practice in Yosemite Valley. We had become acclimatized to Colorado's high altitude by climbing the Diagonal, a fine route located just below the Diamond, pioneered by Ray Northcutt and Layton Kor. (*A.A.J.*, 1960, 12:1, pp. 129-130.) We had an active and able support party consisting of Jack Laughlin, Gary Cole, Charles Alexander and Charles Roskosz, who, in case of emergency, would be aided by the Alpine Rescue Team of Evergreen, Colorado. We had the latest in chrome-moly hardware, made by Yvon Chouinard. Now all we

See plates 61 and 62.

needed was endurance, both physical and psychological, luck with the rock, and most of all, luck with the weather.

The afternoon of July 31 found Bob and me and the support party laboriously carrying our gear up the North Chimney to Broadway, a wide ledge forming the lower boundary of the Diamond. A steady drizzle prompted us to return to the snug comfort of the Chasm Lake shelter hut rather than spend the first night on Broadway, as we had planned. The grim aspect of the Diamond looming over us, veiled in clouds and weeping streams of water, did little for our morale.

The next morning, August 1, was windy but clear and our spirits rose as we trudged back up the talus slopes. Fixed lines in the North Chimney, placed the day before, enabled us to ascend quickly to Broadway. At about 9:30, while the support party was still moving our bivouac gear across a tricky traverse, Bob and I started the climb. We intended to follow a direct line up the center of the Diamond, along a vertical crack which is discernible most of the way and becomes a chimney near the top.

Leaving Broadway, our route first led up a rounded buttress where a series of firm blocks permitted easy free climbing. I stopped after running out our 150-foot rope and Bob took the second lead. He encountered increasingly difficult face climbing, about 5.6 on the decimal scale, as he approached the "first roof," an overhang slanting to the right. Placing a couple of direct aid pitons under the roof, he reached a comfortable belay ledge. I then continued up the overhang, using direct aid, and followed an easier section back slightly to the left, reaching a grassy platform with a large boulder. This was to be the only really commodious belay stance on the entire climb.

Feeling the patter of water drops, I looked upward apprehensively. They came, not from the clouds which were already gathering over the peak again, but from a waterfall which was plunging free from our chimney far above and splashing on the rock about 100 feet above where I stood. This proved that some 400 feet of the route ahead would be slightly overhanging.

As Bob climbed up to join me, our support party called good-by to us from Broadway and disappeared from sight down the North Chimney. Bob refused to be discouraged by the ominous sight above, and attacked the next section without delay. Thirty feet of difficult free climbing gave way to direct aid as the "second roof," a prominent six-foot overhang, was approached. Bob surmounted this with a single piton and passed from my sight. He found no good stance and was forced to set up a belay partly in slings. Since the pitons were poor, he placed a bolt for reinforcement.

By the time I had removed the hardware from this pitch and joined Bob, the weather was becoming very threatening. At this point we were at the lower edge of the water-washed area, and perhaps 80 feet below the large sloping shelf known as the Ramp. After making a few more feet of upward progress, we decided to descend to Broadway to avoid being soaked by the impending storm. This we did in three rappels, leaving the ropes in place behind us.

Soon after we reached Broadway the clouds began to clear away, much to our chagrin since it was only four P.M. Our support party had prepared a level area for our bivouac, protected by a small overhang. We snuggled into the luxury of sleeping bags and down jackets and spent the evening eating salami, raisins and candy, and watching a spectacular lightning display out over the Great Plains.

Early the next morning, when the face was glowing orange in the sunrise, we ascended our ropes by hand and by prusik loop to our previous high point. After struggling up a wide crack, filled with grass nurtured by the waterfall, I reached the Ramp. Here all was dry, being about 20 feet behind the falling water. The Ramp has an unpleasant outward slope of 40°, and there is only one spot where a belayer can stand comfortably. I pulled up the pack with our bivouac gear and Bob followed without delay, glad to get out of the water.

At this point we noticed a pronounced change in the rock. The granite in the middle section of the Diamond turned out to be of a loose, fractured nature, and often our pitons were somewhat shaky. The central crack, which we were following, now proved to be a sort of slot filled with irregular blocks. For the next several hundred feet the climbing would be largely direct-aid, overhanging, and quite strenuous. The rope moved very slowly now through my hands as Bob labored upward. From my position on the Ramp, I could see a group of spectators watching us from Chasm View, an overlook point on the ordinary route. Isolated watchers and photographers could be seen at various spots along the ridge leading northeast to Mount Lady Washington, and around Chasm Lake far below. Occasionally the crackle of a Park Service radio echoed across from Chasm View. The hauling line running down to me swung gently to and fro, hanging several feet clear of the wall.

Bob stopped after 120 feet and arranged a belay, standing partly in slings. Again a bolt was necessary for security. I followed, collecting the hardware, and led on past Bob's uncomfortable position. My objective was a small ledge which we knew was about 110 feet higher. About 20 feet below the ledge the crack changed into a tight chimney in which free

climbing was possible. The ledge turned out to be perfectly flat and level, about 22 inches wide and perhaps 7 feet long. When Bob arrived, we placed a bolt in the crackless wall behind it, and then pulled up the pack from its resting place on the Ramp, two rope-lengths below. It did not touch rock all the way up.

By now it was about four P.M., and Bob started on the next section without delay. This pitch contained the hardest direct-aid climbing we encountered, probably about a 6.7 decimal rating, and the rock was the most overhanging here. Bob made 90 or 100 feet before evening and placed a bolt in the not-too-sound rock. Leaving a rope tied to it, he backed down his ladder of pitons, removing them on the way.

Back on the ledge it was getting cold, and we put on all our clothes, ate some food, and tied in for the night. I sat in a cross-legged position all night, while Bob was able to recline partially. The night was clear and we watched the shadows from the moon creep stealthily along the slope of Lady Washington below us and across the shimmering blackness of Chasm Lake. We both managed to doze for a few hours. Since the temperature stayed above freezing, the waterfall continued all night, occasionally splashing us. The altitude at this point was about 13,700 feet.

When the sun rose over the plains the third day we could see that a number of spectators had already reassembled at their stations. After stretching the stiffness out of my bones, I prusiked up the line Bob had fixed, dangling out from the rock, and continued on to the point where our route crossed a prominent horizontal crack running across the upper part of the Diamond. Here a small cave gave an adequate though cramped belay stance.

Bob followed through and started on up the central crack; this was now widening into a chimney but was unfortunately blocked by overhanging, mossy chockstones. The waterfall emanated from the lip of one of these. It appeared easier to climb the wall on the left, using direct aid in cracks which now seemed to take pitons very well. In the absence of any ledges, Bob had to nail himself in to the wall and belay in slings; a more exposed position is hard to imagine.

By this time we were getting anxious to finish off the climb, particularly since storm clouds were once again drifting over the peak. I climbed past Bob's anchor position and continued nailing up the wall, which had ceased to be overhanging but was still vertical. After about 60 feet, I was able to get back inside the chimney. From this point it appeared that free climbing would be possible. Bob left his uncomfortable stance without delay and climbed past me about 20 feet to a small platform in the

chimney. At this vantage point we pulled up the pack, which had been waiting patiently in the cave two pitches below, and straightened out the tangle of our four ropes.

The final pitch deep inside the chimney was not difficult but was partially obstructed by several huge blocks of ice, whose melting generated the 400-foot waterfall below. At one point I remember doing a layback against a block of ice. Nevertheless, the top was reached in short order and by 1:30 P.M. on August 3, Bob and I and the pack were reunited with our companions, including Bob's wife Bonnie, who had all climbed the peak to meet us. A melodramatic touch was added by a brief hail-storm which broke just at that moment.

The actual summit of Longs Peak still lay 200 feet above us and, leaving our friends with all our baggage, we scrambled on up to sign the register. Several hardy newspaper reporters were on hand at the summit, and as we descended the regular route, we met others who had been defeated by the altitude at various levels. The extensive newspaper coverage of our climb, and the dizzy aftermath of parades, banquets and television appearances, showed the enthusiasm of Coloradans for mountain-climbing and confirmed the exalted reputation of the Diamond.

We owe a special note of thanks to Jack Laughlin, who forsook the celebrations and spent another day removing the fixed ropes and retrieving our equipment left on Broadway. This climb required the active participation of the support party, and we are indebted to all of them.

In retrospect, the climb turned out to be somewhat harder than we had expected, because of the difficult rock in the central section. We never resorted to bolting for direct aid, our four expansion bolts being used only to anchor belays and prusik ropes. On the whole we were favored by the weather, which is undoubtedly the largest single factor in any climb on Longs Peak. A retreat down the overhanging sections would have been difficult, particularly under storm conditions. Climbing the Diamond will always be a serious undertaking, and I doubt if there will ever come a time when climbers will cease to be impressed by this great wall.

Summary of Statistics

AREA: Longs Peak, Colorado.

ASCENT: First ascent of the Diamond, August 1 to 3, 1960 (Kamps, Rearick).

PERSONNEL: Robert Kamps, David Rearick; support party: John Laughlin, Gary Cole, Charles Alexander, Charles Roskosz.