

Northwest Face of the Great White Throne

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NE hundred eighty million years ago or so, the area which is now southwestern Utah was thought to be a sahara-like desert and in the course of time, a layer of sandstone over 2000 feet in depth was built up. Today, it is called Navajo Sandstone. The small but active Virgin River has since then carved through the entire 2000 feet, producing a canyon of overpowering beauty and grandeur. The lower part of this canyon has been made accessible by an eleven-mile paved road and is now the major tourist attraction of Zion National Park.

The tributary streams have sliced deeply into the canyon walls leaving a variety of impressive monoliths. One of them is particularly spectacular in the esthetic sense and its lighter-colored sandstone has provoked its name: The Great White Throne. The northwest face of the Throne as viewed from the road has become almost synonymous with Zion Canyon, much in the way Half Dome is with Yosemite Valley. The many postcards attest to this fact; there was even a postage stamp issued bearing a picture of the Great White Throne.

Although many climbers had admired the northwest face and had generally noticed two very feasible-looking routes, it was apparently untrodden by man until April, 1967, although the 700-foot east face has been ascended by several parties. One possible explanation for this is that the whitish rock comprising the upper part of the Throne was rather soft. While not a great hindrance on the relatively low angle (though not trivial) "backside" route, the quality of the rock would obviously not be pleasant on the canyon side (northwest) because the final 800 feet are high angle and appeared to require hanging belays from artificial anchors. Secondly, and perhaps for the just-mentioned reason, the National Park Service has long refused to give permission for climbing on the long and steep canyon-side faces.

It was with great excitement on April 9 of last spring that Fred Beckey, Galen Rowell, Hal Woodworth, and I found ourselves straining for our first real-life glimpse of the Throne. Our car mysteriously guided *itself* up the winding canyon road since everyone's attention was entirely commanded by the towering walls of red and gold, the road receiving only an occasional glance.

We were there due to the energetic ground-laying by Fred whose persistent correspondence with the Park Service led to permission to make an attempt. Also, Fred had passed through the Park a few months earlier and although low clouds prevented viewing the route, he found the rock to be quite sound on the lower part of the walls.

The first afternoon, we carefully examined the massive face and mutually agreed on the line on the left part of the face which began with a deep, 300-foot chimney, then exploited two large brush patches and finished in the left-facing dihedral. The crux of this route appeared to be a 500-foot section about three-fourths of the way up which contained some blank-looking areas.

The next morning dawned gray and none of us felt like committing ourselves to such a vast and unknown face. We decided to spend a couple of days on a "scouting" probe during which we would return to the valley floor at night, leaving fixed ropes. This would allow us to get the feel of this strange rock, give us some physical conditioning which we all needed, and hopefully give the weather time to settle.

So we gathered together hardware and ropes and were soon approaching the first difficulty of the climb just ten minutes walk from the road. This was a 60-foot dihedral on the right side of a gigantic block leaning against the base of the wall. Galen led up; a hard lay-back and then easier climbing soon took him to the top of the block. Coming second I cursed Galen for his almost over-driven pitons but was actually very comforted and relieved that such sound pins could indeed be placed. Galen and I now eagerly scrambled up 200 feet of class-three brush to the base of the giant 300-foot chimney. Fred stayed behind to haul loads and Hal, who was to be our observer and radioman, helped him.

Somewhat apprehensive of what lay ahead, I headed up. With the help of a friendly tree to get started, the first pitch went entirely free and was not too hard. For the second pitch, however, the chimney widened and overhung.

Galen used several pins for direct aid, then disappeared into the cavernous depths of the upper chimney as if swallowed by an ogre. He set up a belay in the chimney, placing two bolts in the crackless walls. Fred had now joined us, and we were heartened by Galen's complaints at the difficulty in driving the bolts. Fred then led on to the top of the chimney to a large tree at the base of the second brush patch. We then returned to camp, feeling exhilarated at our progress and encouraged by the soundness of the rock.

The next day we hauled four days' food and water apiece up the fixed

ropes and on to the upper right-hand corner of the second brush patch where another steep wall stopped us. I led up a moderate crack and chimney system for 150 feet and Galen continued for 300 feet more on fourth-class rock and dirt, bringing us to the lower left corner of the third and highest of the brush patches. By the time we had lugged our heavy loads to this point it was late and rain was threatening; we again retreated to the security of our tents below. That night two inches of snow dampened the valley and our spirits.

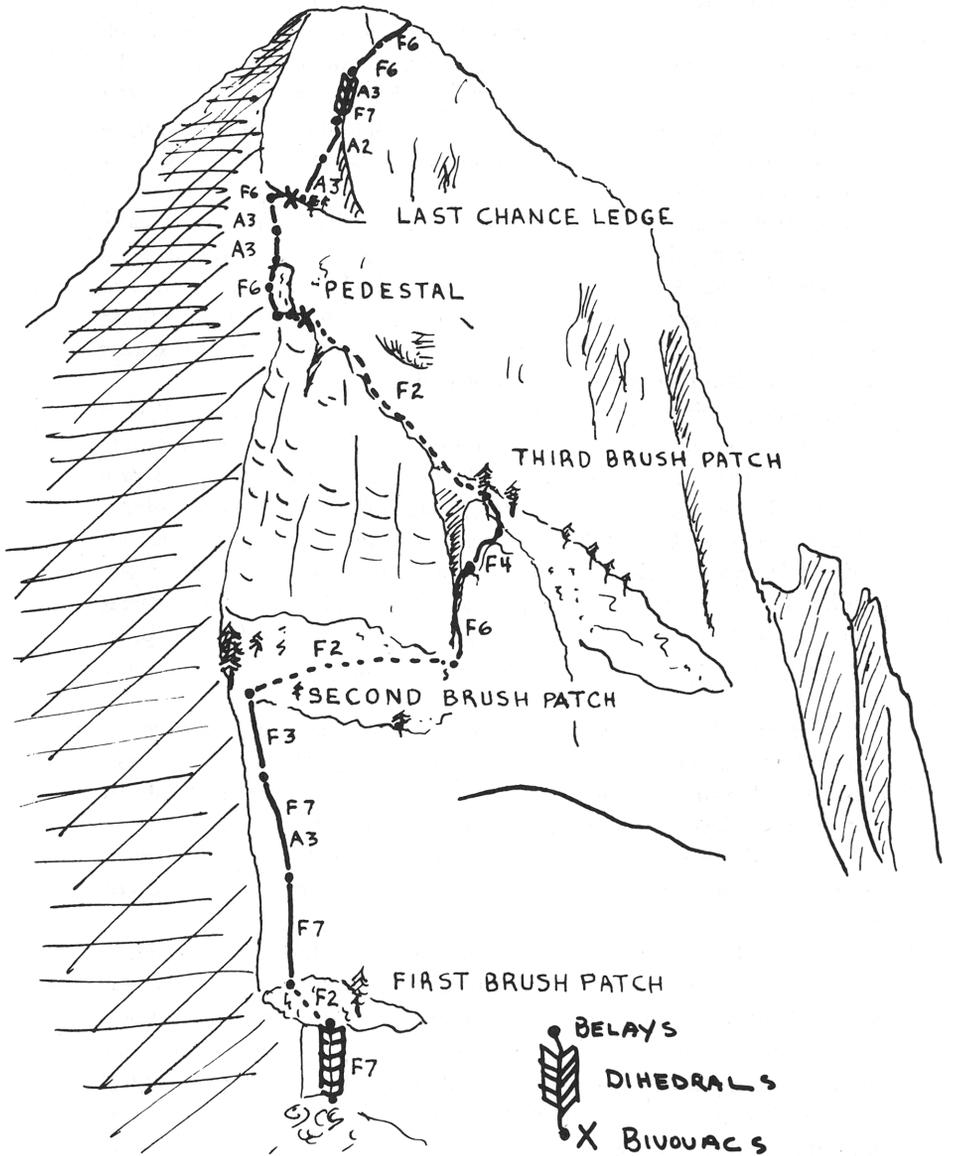
After two days of waiting the rock appeared dry. We set out early the next morning, this time planning to continue on to the top if at all possible. We quickly reached our cache, pulling up the fixed ropes as we went. Galen and Fred made their way up the left side of the brush slope and soon arrived at the base of a 150-foot pedestal on the left corner of the final 1000-foot wall. I stayed behind to relay loads.

Two short leads by Fred took them to the top of the pedestal, and providently, a good crack system was found to lead upward. However, the character of the rock was suddenly different: moist and soft. Fred proceeded with due caution for 100 feet, using direct aid. At one point a bolt was necessary and far below I heard a series of bitter exclamations as the hole was being drilled. A substance not unlike brown sugar was exuding from the hole which itself was considerably larger in diameter than was the $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch drill. As a stop-gap measure a $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch angle piton was driven into the hole, a trick that desert climbers often use on soft rock.

Late in the afternoon Hal told us on the radio that rain was expected that night or the next day. Considering the softness of the already moist rock, we all felt that it would be foolhardy to continue with the probability of more rain. Dejectedly we again retreated leaving fixed ropes.

The next day was spent making what was apparently the first ascent of the Pulpit, a nice looking 150-foot spire across the river from the end of the road.

Also that day we made an important discovery. I had brought along some $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch diameter ice screws, thinking that they might in some way be useful on rotten rock. It was found that if one of these screws was screwed into a 3-inch by $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch hole drilled in soft, moist rock, the efforts of three strong men could not budge it. However, the coming of the rains that night forced a mutual decision to "cool it" for a week or so until this endless procession of storms which had plagued climbers up and down the coast all spring was at an end. We turned to various other activities and Galen was commissioned with the task of turning out a dozen 4-inch by $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch lag screw anchors.



GREAT WHITE THRONE — UTAH

Two weeks later the weather map finally looked favorable and we all met in Zion again one evening. The next morning dawned cold and gray, and Fred was ill; we stayed on the ground. The next day the possibility of showers still existed, but we went up anyway since the following two days were predicted to be clear.

We reached our previous high point early in the day, and I cautiously went up the pitons Fred had placed two weeks before. They were still surprisingly solid, even though a lot of water had run down the crack during the intervening period. But as I began nailing above Fred's pitons, the sky became dark and from far below came the wailing of a violent wind rushing up the canyon floor, bending the trees and whipping the water of the river. Lightning, thunder, and suddenly the air was full of swirling snow. I stood in my slings as though in a trance, fascinated and frightened by the swiftness in which the storm had transformed our world into a hostile place. The storm seemed to magnify the distance between my belayer and myself, and I felt alone and frail. Meekly, I retreated down the snow-choked crack in a puppet-like response to the beckonings of my companions. The storm, however, passed as quickly as it had come and the friendly warmth of the sun returned. Once again, I climbed up the line of pins and was soon setting up a semi-hanging belay, using one of our 4-inch lag screws for an anchor as well as several pitons. Galen then nailed straight up for 100 feet and did some delicate fourth class to a good tree. An easy pitch then put us on Last Chance Ledge, a 100-foot by 30-foot bench just 500 feet below the top. The sun was now rapidly dipping toward the horizon so we rappelled the 400 feet to the base of the pedestal where we had a luxurious bivouac complete with a fire.

The first part of the next day was spent hauling all the loads to Last Chance Ledge. Then I began nailing up a spectacular crack system which after 250 feet joins the large cleft in the upper left part of the face. In this soft rock, pitoning is more work than in granite. Typically, to get a good sound pin, one inserts it about a quarter of its length into a crack and then beats on it like a blacksmith. With each hammer blow, it goes in about an eighth of an inch until it is up to the eye. Such an energetically driven piton could never be removed from a solid granite crack, but here we had no trouble. By the time I had reached a tiny ledge 130 feet up, I was as exhausted as I have ever been in the mountains. Here again, there was no tree, and the belay was anchored by another lag screw, a 12-inch Austrian blade ice piton, and three rock pins.

Fred came up and by sunset had reached a tree in the dihedral. The

night was spent in a restful bivouac on Last Chance Ledge, again with a fire. Early the next morning, Galen and Fred began pushing towards the summit while I began Jümaring loads up the steep wall. We had hopes of reaching the summit that day, but things did not go so smoothly at first. From above, I heard a terrible crash, followed by loud oaths. It seems Fred had persuaded Galen to use a dead tree as a foothold and it had broken. Undaunted, Galen fought his way up the nearly vertical dihedral. He had just surmounted a 15-foot bulge by some strenuous free climbing when a pin that he was standing on to rest popped out resulting in a disheartening 30-foot plunge; a sling around a tree stopped his fall. By this time, Galen's language began to betray certain personal feelings toward this pitch. A short time later, he had passed the overhang with the help of an ice screw and was soon belaying Fred up. The angle now eased and the route veered to the right of the main dihedral leading to a large ledge 15 feet below the summit. Two rope lengths later, Galen was standing on this ledge, and a few minutes after that announced cheerily that he was on top. When Fred and I had climbed happily onto the summit, we were all amazed at the strikingly abrupt transition between wall and summit. One instant you are doing a steep bit of third class and suddenly your head comes above the edge and several acres of desert wonderland lie before you.

In the quiet twilight, we walked across the half-mile wide summit feeling very aware of the beauty around us. That night was passed in a peaceful bivouac near the southeast rim. The next morning, six or seven long rappels, all from trees, delivered us from the summit, and that afternoon, after picking our way through the picturesque Zion high country for about four miles, we rendezvoused with our support party.

The next day we left Zion and its Great White Throne; but they will not leave us.

Summary of Statistics.

AREA: Zion National Park, Utah.

ASCENT: The first ascent of the northwest face of the Great White Throne by Fred Beckey, Galen Rowell, and Pat Callis, May 5, 6, and 7, 1967 (final push).

TECHNICAL DATA: NCCS VI, F7, A3; 130 pitons, ca. 9 bolts and other fixed anchors. Piton selection: ca. 40, including 2 2½", 2 3", and 2 4" bongs. No knife blades or short horizontals.