

The West Face of Howser Spire

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ON a stormy night in 1967, I was with Fred Beckey waiting out the rain in the plastic shelters at Boulder Camp in the Bugaboos. Climbers were already sardined into the hut. The door opened and in with the wind and the rain plunged a couple of wet and bedraggled people who said they had just climbed the west face of Howser Spire. Beckey's ears and eyebrows shot skyward and he began asking questions in a rapid staccato. He had climbed the west buttress some years before and had mentioned to me that the unclimbed west face was over 3000 feet, making it the largest in the Bugaboos.

"How did you approach it? How long did it take? How far did you descend to begin the route? Was the bottom of the face steep and smooth like a Yosemite wall? You say you came to a ledge with a bolt? That had to be mine; no one else has climbed on that side of the spire."

Beckey ascertained that they had made a variation to the north of his west-buttress route and had never been on the real west face. I was quite surprised to read in the next *AAJ* a description of their ascent of the "Direct West Face".

I became haunted by Beckey's description of the face. In 1968 I went to Canada alone, hoping to find a partner to attempt the face. Instead, I was treated to weeks of an unceasing waterfall that the Canadians call summer. The following year I even carried a large assemblage of big wall gear into Boulder Camp, but no one there was willing to climb on Howser Spire except by an established route.

Quite independently, Chris Jones became interested in the climb. He informed me that an eager bunch of British ex-patriots from Calgary were planning a mini-expedition for 1970. Since I displayed the social grace of an oncoming bulldozer, I was soon invited to join the group. But when summer came, unforeseen problems at home made it impossible for me to go to Canada. The weather proved to be abysmal, but during a two-day respite, a 2000-foot new route was made on the southwest face of the main spire by Chris Jones, Oliver Wilcock, and Archie Simpson. They began their route more than 1000 feet above the toe of the west face by traversing a gangway above a hanging glacier.

Returning to California, Chris was eager to try the complete west face in 1971. His group had air-dropped supplies by helicopter, and he was convinced that it was a jolly fine contraption, saving him the indignity of being an educated alpine mule. He described the lower half of the face as an El Capitan rock climb and the upper half as mixed

rock and snow. This description perched us on the horns of a dilemma: if we carried enough gear for big-wall rock climbing, plus ice axes, etc., hauling would be difficult on the more broken upper half and we would move incredibly slowly; if, on the other hand, we went light on food, water and bivouac gear, we could be in real trouble in case of a storm.

On a clear day in July 1971 I am again in Boulder Camp. This time it looks as if I might get off the ground. Chris and Tony Qamar, a quiet, capable climber from Berkeley, have already carried a load of equipment to a bivouac cave on the west side of the Howsers. They reported finding forty man-days of food left in the cache from the previous year. We convince Judy Sterner, another California climber, on the relative merits of being our cook-porter-supporter, and she agrees to come as far as the bivouac cave where she can view our progress on the face.

We spend the night inside one of the fiberglass Alpine Club of Canada shelters. It is a haven from the ravages of mosquitoes and snaflehoums, drawn to Boulder Camp in monumental numbers by the continuous summer habitation and outdoor sanitation of a wasteful warm-blooded mammal.

Instead of being made out of wood or stone to blend in with the surroundings the two Bugaboo huts are twelve-foot hemispheres of white plastic capped with red ventilators, conceived apparently by some breast-conscious follower of Andy Warhol who got the idea during a Rorschach test. When a more permanent hut is built, these huts are destined to mar other Canadian landscapes. In my humble estimation it would be better to donate them to a construction company for use as outhouses.¹

We spend a half day trudging across glaciers to the bivouac cave. Opening the food cache and sorting through things reminds me of a Christmas morning in the distant past. In the afternoon, we scramble down a knife-edged ridge for a look at the complete face. The route to the base of the climb appears complicated, involving a very steep thousand-foot descent to a glacier below the wall.

The following morning, we wake up to a drizzle. With the addition of a plastic tarp, the boulder cave becomes a weathertight bivouac. Beckey's description of the western Howsers as Patagonia rings true. We are surrounded by a vast panorama of snowy mountains, except at our backs where the vertical granite swells out of a matrix of snow only to disappear in the clouds overhead. It is not a day for climbing.

We spend our time reading and watching the changing scenery in wonder. In the late afternoon, Chris comes spluttering into the cave

¹After the summer of 1971, it was the intention of the Alpine Club of Canada to move one of the huts to the west side of the Howsers, where a natural bivouac exists and where no road, trail, or building is visible for fifty miles. Since then, they have wisely reconsidered, and it seems probable that no Howser hut will be placed, and that the Boulder Camp structures will be superseded by a single, more reasonable building.

with a possessed look about him. His usually calm demeanor vanishes under a flood of hot-blooded exasperation as he relates a tale of nearly being killed when he tripped on his way to get water from a rivulet in the side of the glacier. In the process, he lost all our water bottles over a large cliff with the exception of a single one-quart container. Unwittingly, he solved our dilemma: now we will have to go light and as quickly as possible, hoping to melt water from occasional snow patches on the wall with a small stove.

Before sunrise the next morning we have descended a long ridge and an unstable couloir to the glacier below the face. The first lead begins with a long two-inch crack on an absolutely vertical wall. It would be an engaging problem in Yosemite, but looks like a horror in stiff, wet, snow-sealed boots. My second protection piton, thirty feet above the snow, becomes the first in a series of aid pitons. The nailing is relatively easy, but quite forboding with 3300 feet of rock above and some of it coming down. How stupid of me; I didn't bring a hard hat like Jones and Qamar.

By midday we are in a broken chimney system and moving quickly except for a few jammed haul bags and obscenities. We hope to reach a large ledge on the right side of the face by evening. The wall is full of surprises. In between two sections of relatively easy chimney is a four-inch crack. F9 climbing solves the problem in better style and faster than leapfrogging our meager supply of wide pitons. By dusk we have reached the ledge and fixed a rope above us on the 13th pitch. We are now level with Judy in the boulder cave, and the superb alpine acoustics enable us to carry on a conversation in almost normal voices. Water runs from a snowpatch below us and we fix a rope to reach it. The weather seems good, although a mantle of clouds covers the mountains to the west.

After a hot breakfast and a couple of easy pitches, we find ourselves in the depths of a dark, icy corridor. Tony chooses to nail out to the left, and soon he is kicking rocks on us as he struggles up a slanting F8 crack. For several more leads we follow the chimney system past snowfields and huge chockstones. Three leads of difficult free climbing exit us onto a platform to the left of the dwindling chimney system.

We eat lunch and discuss our incredible luck with the weather and the climbing, which has gone all free except for two pitches. We are actually climbing faster than a two-man party, because our third man Jūmars up immediately at the end of a pitch and leads the next with the remaining hardware as the second is still cleaning and hauling on the pitch below. The climb is quite different from what we supposed from a distance. Only the first pitch was like the alpine El Capitan we imagined the lower half to be. The upper half, where Chris had guessed we might climb roped together in some places, has been continuous and often difficult roped climbing all the way.

From our lunch spot we climb toward a broken recess that appears to guarantee easy going. It turns out to be a deadly jumble of loose

overhanging blocks held together by absolutely nothing. We bypass the recess by vertical face climbing on the wall to the right. After several more leads, we reach the crest of a knife-edged ridge leading to the main summit ridge. Just as I reach the ridge, I hear a roar and watch an avalanche rolling down a couloir to the north. Somewhere down there is the ledge with the bolt and the quasi "direct west face". I wonder if the avalanche was on the route.

The ridge is rather nasty, being quite exposed with many ups and downs between gigantic granite blocks. The last of it looks so bad that we rappel to the right into a couloir which we follow to the main summit ridge, joining it only a few yards from the summit itself.

We relax on top and the tensions of the climb are only memories. No longer are we in the middle of an alpine face without a surplus of water or equipment. We hear a yell from the direction of Bugaboo Spire and later find out that it was two of our Canadian friends who climbed the east face. They were able to see our movements on the summit against the backlighting of the evening sun.

I realize how impersonal our ascent actually was. I have few memories of individual personalities during the climb. I can count the 34 pitches but mainly as numbers and ratings, not as human events. The apathy was not purposeful. Perhaps we were too busy climbing, using our three-man system, always moving during the day. Perhaps the bivouac was too comfortable, eight hours sleep instead of talking all night in a sitting position. Now, the fervor of life returns. Tony is so stoked on the summit that he wants to stay there and bivouac. Chris and I recite the famous Bugaboo lightening epic of 1948, point to the clouds in the sky, and Tony changes his mind. We still have an hour of light to descend.

A large bird lands on a point of rock a few hundred feet away. At first we think it might be a raven or a crow, but as it takes off it flies very close and we see the bulk of its body and pure white head. A bald eagle. To describe the measurements of such a bird is useless. I remember another place, another climb, when an eagle landed on the same ledge with me. At that moment it seemed like a German Shepherd with ten-foot wings. We watch the bird soar across the glacier toward Boulder Camp, turn a gigantic arc, and fly past us between two of the towers, disappearing into a western canyon.

We begin to climb down the ridge. After several hundred feet we rappel to a notch, still on the crest of the ridge, where we set up a bivouac. The setting sun unexpectedly dips below a layer of clouds in the western distance, casting an orange beacon as it sinks behind a ridge of unnamed peaks. Words can not describe its beauty.

I sit and survey the wreckage of our equipment. We are very lucky that something didn't give out completely. The seat and knees of my pants are totally absent, the bottom of Chris' day pack is held together by a crudely-stitched shoelace, our haul bag has a foot-long gash

patched with medical tape, and our brand new Edelrid rope has the white sheath showing.

Tomorrow we will descend the east side, rappelling down the regular route on the mountain. Then we will go back to the boulder cave on the west side, pick up Judy and the rest of our equipment, and try to reach the roadhead by evening. Two days later I will open up a newspaper and read that a man testified before a senate subcommittee about his part in the slaughtering of 569 eagles from a helicopter in the midwest. I will remember our bald eagle in the Bugaboo sunset. He is among the last of a vanishing breed. The comparison is not so much a romantic one of watching the last mammoth standing on wobbly legs at the end of an ice age. It is more like an Einstein or a New Guinea tribesman trying for the first time to grasp the reality of an Auschwitz.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Bugaboos, Purcell Range, British Columbia, Canada.

NEW ROUTE: Howser Spire, Main Summit, first ascent of complete west face, July 31, August 1, 1971 (Christopher A.G. Jones, Tony Qamar, Galen A. Rowell). NCCS VI, F9, A2.

