

# The Cold-Dance Review

## Winter Ice Climbing and its Techniques on Kitchener

JEFF LOWE      *"To dance beneath the diamond sky  
with one hand waving free . . ."*  
—Bob Dylan

### *Part I — Winter Waltzes*

THE dance really started during the winters of 1971 and 1972. Up to that time winter ice climbing in the United States had been a timid affair at best, with climbs such as McCarthy's ascent of Pinnacle Gully on Mount Washington, without chopping steps, marking the limit of adventure. People were aware of the potential for climbing even vertical ice with the new, curved "cheating sticks," yet no one had had the audacity necessary to complete the ascent of a big, steep winter icefall. In March of 1971, however, my brother Greg capped days of practice bouldering on vertical ice with the climb of an obscure but important route on Mahlen's Peak waterfall in northern Utah. Belayed by a partner who seconded on Jümars, he led the 350-foot climb in four pitches. The first pitch is 130 feet of 70° to 90° ice, and the second pitch is about 75 feet of 50° climbing. But it was on the third lead that a new standard of free-climbing difficulty on ice was established. Over 200 feet off the ground, one is faced with 60 feet of dead vertical climbing, which in turn is topped by 15 feet of gently impending ice; the ice forms an overhanging bulge as it flows over the lip of a large ledge in the underlying rock.

In the 1971 issue of *Ascent*, Yvon Chouinard wrote about the "Black Gully, Cannon Mountain. A black, filthy, horrendous icicle, 600 feet high. Unclimbed." In the winter of 1972, John Bouchard started up using a self-belay. However, since the ice was rapidly melting, he soon stopped belaying and continued the climb unprotected. Several hours later he climbed the last of the bulges to arrive at the top of this climb that had so impressed one of America's best mountaineers.

That same winter Pat Callis and Jim Kanzler and others in Montana were learning the two-step-and-thunk on the Blue and Green Gullies in Hyalite Canyon. In Colorado, too, people were learning the brittle dance,



PLATE 22

*Photo by Michael Lowe*

**Jeff Lowe on the second pitch of  
Bridalveil Fall, Colorado.**

while out in the Valley fugitives from the rock races began shuffling around, crampon shod and with ice axes in hand. Where previously an overgrown cloud of caution had filled the skies of American ice climbing, a new adventurous attitude was blowing in on the winds of a personal understanding of what is possible. Many of those who had tried the cold-dance were extremely jazzed about the possibility of making great crystal climbs heretofore scarcely dreamed of.

The next winter was a time of maturation of techniques and consolidation of the gains already made. The small ranks of active ice climbers began to swell, but no new climbs were made that surpassed the Black Gully or Mahlen's Peak waterfall in overall boldness, beauty, or difficulty of technical performance required.

Mike Weis and I had both been introduced to the possibilities of steep waterfall climbing by my brother in 1972, and by December of 1973 we felt ready to try something really big. Our first inclination was to make an attempt on the Widow's Tears, a 900-foot waterfall in Yosemite Valley with an average angle of about 75°, but calls to the Valley informed us that there was no ice. However, we knew of a fall closer to our home stomping grounds. Bridalveil Fall, in Telluride, Colorado, is only half the height of the Tears, but much steeper. On completion of the climb on January 2, 1974, we had to admit that it had been a good introduction to a new sort of ice climb.

Mike and I knew from experience that the brittle ice produced by weeks of sub-zero temperatures would not allow tube screws to be placed, or wart hogs to be driven, without completely cracking up. So we made some pitons out of tubular chromemoly stock and bevelled the tips to the inside. These we found worked very well, fracturing the ice only slightly as they were driven in and freezing solidly in place. Their only drawback was the necessity for chopping them out. With these for protection we pushed the free climbing to our limits and managed to free-climb the entire icefall, only taking rests from pitons in a couple of places. Mike led the crux, which was a three-foot roof with giant icicles drooping from the lip. For 20 feet he climbed the slightly overhanging wall below the roof and then knocked a hole in the curtain of icicles. Next he delicately bridged between the base of icicles on either side of the hole, got the pick of his axe in above the overhang and muscled his way up. Following, it seemed equivalent to 5.10 rock climbing. We were both laughing and amazed at our success when we reached the top; we now knew we would never have to consider any ice climb in terms of aid.

At this point let's break away from a chronological recitation of American events, and look in on the dance they're doing up north in the Canadian Rockies, where the music of commitment does not play so loudly.

The technique used for climbing steep ice in Canada is best described

by its originator, Bugs McKeith: “. . . faced by pillars of brittle, vertical ice, and lacking the guts to front-point up them, I had attached aid-slings to the shafts of both Terrodactyls and had found that, even on vertical ice, I could relax and spend as much time as I wished clearing rotten ice and placing each axe alternately to my complete satisfaction.”\* All the big Canadian climbs have utilized this technique, as well as fixed ropes and what is much worse, bolts on some belays. The aid techniques and fixed ropes don't bother me much; they're simply slow and unenjoyable, like climbing in leg irons and trailing a rope that's anchored in fear. But they cause no damage to the mountain, and are therefore a matter of personal choice. The bolts, however, are a different matter. After the pioneer ascent, bolts on an ice climb are not always available for subsequent use, as they are on rock. This is because most icefalls form differently from season to season and even from week to week in the same season. Thus the bolt may be buried under thick ice, unseen and unreachable, during heavy icing, or unreachable and in the wrong place when there is less ice than that encountered on the first ascent. Is each new party to place a new set of bolts, then? That's absurd, of course, and destructive and degrading to the climb. If a climb can't be done without resorting to such tactics, then I don't think it should be made. The big climbs in the Rockies all await first free ascents, and many await first clean ascents, i.e., without the use of bolts.

It's heartening to know that no bolts have been placed on important American ice routes, so that a strong tradition of adventure is developing. Take for example this year's best ice climb: Kevin Worrall's and Mark Chapman's first ascent of Widow's Tears. After numerous attempts they finally found climbable conditions and in three days of free climbing with two bivouacs on the climb, they completed America's most beautiful ice climb. They carried no bolts, and this was only the second or third ice climb for either of them! This was the first first-ascent of a Scottish grade 6 accomplished in one continuous push. Another climb made in this style was the Keystone Green Steps, near Valdez, Alaska. John Weilund and I started this 600-foot climb, which consists of six pitches of 75° to 90° ice, on the last day of 1975, and made one bivouac.

So the cold-dance is in full swing. From Frankenstein Cliff to June Lake, from Colorado to Alaska, climbers are waltzing on front points in greater and greater numbers. And the name of the tune they're dancing to is: DON'T FALL OFF THE FLOOR.

### *Part II — The Alpine Ballroom*

Climbing frozen waterfalls offers the ice climber the same sort of opportunity to sharpen his technique as crag climbing offers the rock

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\* *Mountain* 41, Jan. 1975.

climber. But to the alpinist the skills and strength gained on the waterfall are primarily important in their application to major new routes in the high mountains. Actually, normal alpine ice climbing becomes easier for one who has trained on winter icefalls. The proof of this is the first solo ascent of the Black Ice Couloir on the Grand Teton, made by my brother Greg the summer following his ascent of Mahlen's Peak waterfall. And John Bouchard used his experience on the Black Gully to good advantage this summer on his solo climb on the north face of the Grands Charmoz, and on his new solo route this summer on the north face of the Grand Pilier d'Angle, on Mont Blanc, one of Europe's most impressive ice walls. Yvon Chouinard and Mike Covington used their winter experience to advantage on the first direct ascent of the Diamond Couloir on Mount Kenya, which has several pitches of nearly vertical ice. In fact Americans experienced in winter ice climbing had one of the best seasons ever in the Alps. At the same time in the Canadian Rockies, Mike Weis and I were aided by the confidence acquired on Bridalveil Falls and other winter ice climbs in the ascent of a hard new route on the north face of Mount Kitchener. The account of this climb may serve to illustrate that blend of objective hazard, subjective trauma, and technical difficulty that must be overcome in the ascent of a modern alpine ice route.

The story of the first ascent of the 3500-foot north face of Mount Kitchener has already been told in the pages of this journal. (*A.A.J.*, 1972, 18:1, pages 66-9.) For those involved, the "Ramp Route," as I call it, was a terribly satisfying experience, and a difficult climb in its own right. But for me at least, the face held an even greater attraction—the great central couloir that falls from the broad summit of the mountain like the tail of a white comet. I doubt if anywhere else in the Rockies there is a couloir of equal size that is at once so beautiful, and steep, and singularly imposing. Perhaps I should add *dangerous* as well, for it is the natural path for rockfall. Indeed, on my first encounter with the slopes below the couloir, in August of 1970, with my cousin, George Lowe, the weather was warm and the couloir rumbled with the noise of traffic as heavy as Grand Central Station on Christmas Eve. Since that time I have always thought of the big gully as the Grand Central Couloir.

For several years following the climb of the Ramp Route yearly attempts on the Grand Central Couloir were made. Brian Greenwood, George Homer, and Bob Beal managed to work a way up the ice and rock buttress to the left of the couloir in 1973. This was actually an attempt on the couloir, but rockfall forced them to follow a more protected line. Then in the winter of 1975 at least two determined attempts were made, doubtless in the hopes that the winter cold would reduce the rockfall. In the end the short winter days, brittle ice, and avalanches confined both attempts to the lower half of the face.



PLATE 23

*Photo by Jeff Lowe*

**Weis soloing left of the bergschrund  
on the Grand Central Couloir,  
MOUNT KITCHENER.**

Such was the state of affairs when Mike Weis and I arrived at the Icefield's Campground in mid-August. We were back for yet another of our annual attempts. On our first try this year our now traditional bad luck held, and a snowstorm caught us before we crossed the bergschrund. Soon the avalanches were roaring and we were doing a quick-step to get down out of their range.

Several days later we were back at it. This time the weather looked as if it might hold. We had also adopted new tactics. We carried minimal food, water, and bivouac gear. Starting up at six P.M., we planned to climb through the night with headlamps and finish the following day. By climbing at night we hoped to be above the zone of bad rockfall by the time the morning sun hit the top of the face.

The real climbing began to the left of the lower of the two bergschrunds of the small hanging glacier at the bottom of the wall. The bergschrund itself was impassable without undue exertions. Climbing on ice and rotten snow over ice, we climbed unroped, each with his own thoughts, for four or five hundred feet to about the level of the upper "schrund." At this point the ice got very hard. Mike cried "uncle," so we got out the rope. I'll have to say that I welcomed the added security, too. While the features of the huge amphitheater at the top of the face gradually darkened to a ragged silhouette, for six or seven rope-lengths we moved simultaneously but with two screws between us for safety. At the top of the right-hand *rognon* in the lower icefield, we had a bite to eat and drink and prepared our headlamps for the dark hours ahead. I said I thought we would bag the climb this time, but Mike cautiously reminded me that "We've barely gotten started."

From that point on we belayed each pitch. While the leader stomped slowly up with vision limited to the small circle of light projected by his headlamp, the belayer had time for reflection. To spur his thoughts, he could gaze into the infinite darkness of the valley or peer up at the starry sky, his headlamp turned off to save on batteries. For a while the Aurora Borealis flashed. Then, as the gully narrowed and steepened, we bumped into the lowest of two or three polypropylene lines, remnants of an attempt the previous winter.

The eastern sky began to lighten. At the vertical narrowing of the upper couloir, it was six A.M. and full light. We were at the top of the fifteenth roped pitch.

The next pitch looked as though it had been borrowed from a hard Scottish gully. It was my lead. Initially it was almost a chimney. I could bridge with the left crampon on rock and the other on ice, while using the axe to whatever advantage it could be put. This moderate going came to an end all too soon. The couloir widened and forced me to climb the thin face of ice and snow directly. With only knifeblades between frozen blocks for protection, the climbing was extremely nerve-

wracking. Seldom would the tools penetrate more than half an inch before meeting rock. The crux was climbing out from under an ice mushroom, crammed into the couloir like a huge marshmallow. It took a couple of hours before I had a hanging belay from wart hogs in the rock at the side of the couloir. We had no jümars or hauling rope. Even with his 30-pound pack, after a couple of pendulums from underneath the ice mushroom, Mike pulled himself over the bulge by amazing brute strength.

The angle eased now, to a "mere" 65°. The ice was thick and held our points well; we made quicker progress for several pitches. Then we came against the final section of the upper couloir, which had looked well-iced from below but turned out to be steep compact rock, thinly veneered with snow. Luck was with us; we found a narrow ice gully leading out to the right onto the rib that borders the couloir. Several hard leads of mixed snow and ice with one or two short but hard rock steps brought us out onto the summit ice cap, just 200 feet short of our goal. In our thirsty and fatigued condition, time had moved faster than we. Our thirst was greater than our fatigue. With the air scratching at our throats, we climbed the last pitches. The first pitch was ice at a moderate angle, and the other a vertical path on rotten snow through the summit cornice. The last few feet had been as difficult as any and were an exhausting capper to 26 hours of intense climbing. It was eight P.M. when Mike and I stood side by side in the sun's horizontal rays on top.

Then we turned, and with the sun a shimmering red disc at our backs we wobbled through deep snow toward the east ridge, which was our descent route. We still had several hours to go before we could rest and drink much needed water that trickled from a snowfield in the saddle below the small peak known as K2.

The best dances are sometimes marathons.

*Summary of Statistics:*

**SUBJECT:** Various winter ice climbs, their techniques and application to big, alpine ice ascents.

**NEW ROUTE:** Mount Kitchener, Canadian Rockies, Grand Central Couloir on North Face, August, 1975 (Jeff Lowe, Michael Weis).