

New Colorado Ice Climbs, 1973-1975

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THERE was little interest in winter ice climbing in Colorado as an end in itself until fairly recently. Improvements in technique and equipment, and a general keenness to do something different and exciting during the long winter months has led to a greater acceptance of ice as a climbing form equal in interest to rock, and in some ways more fulfilling. Ice offers an infinitely variable and interesting terrain for climbing, and few, if any, of the harder routes are ever crowded. It is also an area with many possibilities for fruitful exploration, and more important, great adventure.

The climbs I will describe are all within a small area of Colorado, centered around Glenwood Canyon and the Crystal River valley. It is an underpopulated area in terms of climbers, and we feel fortunate in having been able to do these climbs in a remote and non-competitive atmosphere.

Things started to happen in 1973. Mark Hesse, Larry Bruce and Lou Dawson climbed an isolated ice pillar near Redstone, netting a long, sustained pitch of near-vertical ice; the route has yet to be repeated. A few weeks later, Dawson, accompanied by Ken Williams, climbed the classic Marble Icefall. This is a very sustained 150-foot frozen waterfall located in a beautiful canyon a mere half-hour from the road. The climb was repeated shortly afterwards by Brian Robertson and Steve Shea. Several ice-bouldering areas were also discovered, notably Hays Creek Falls and the Grotto Icefall.

But the major challenge of the area, the Glenwood Icefall, remained untouched. Several early attempts failed due to the poor ice, which gets a lot of sun. A strong party consisting of Brian Robertson, Mark Hesse, Rich Jack and Steve Shea made a bold attempt on a bitter cold day in February, 1973. They were two thirds up the climb when their attempt was abruptly terminated by Robertson's thirty-foot power-dive off the rotten and brittle ice. So ended the 1973 season.

In 1974, things began to move. Several ascents of the Marble Icefall were made, and several short climbs of note were found. The most interesting of these was the Redstone Ice Pillar, a 70-foot free-standing pillar of rotten, bulging ice. Lou Dawson and I managed it with some difficulty; it has yet to be repeated. Many attempts were made on the

PLATE 24

Photo by Michael Kennedy

GLENWOOD ICEFAEL. Routes from
left to right by Dawson-Kennedy,
Lanbeck-Loeffler, Kennedy-Shea.



Glenwood Icefall as well; I made at least five, with various partners, and several other parties tried as well. These all failed below Robertson's high point.

The most outstanding ascent of the season was made by Michael Loeffler and Bob Lanbeck, who climbed the central ramp line on the Glenwood Icefall. Indeed, the climb was done in such a quiet and unassuming manner (both parties left the area shortly afterwards) that I didn't get full details on the climb till a year later, after making what I thought to be the first ascent of the fall. This line to my knowledge, has not been repeated.

In 1975, conditions were excellent and many ascents of note were made. It was a rare combination of weather, conditions and climbers. Lou Dawson, Steve Shea and I made an attempt on the right side of Glenwood Icefall; we failed after climbing the crux due to a rapid warming and subsequent deterioration of the ice. A few weeks later, Steve and I returned and climbed the route in five hours; we encountered everything from thinly glazed rock, vertical pillars of ice to alternating layers of ice and powder snow. The route was repeated a couple of days later by Mark Hesse and two others.

A week later, Lou and I were back to try the left side. Although it was technically more severe than the right side, it was a bit less sustained. The crux was the last pitch, a 70-foot vertical column; we climbed the entire route in 4½ hours, and it has not been repeated. Shortly after this ascent an unseasonably warm spell melted away most of the ice.

For two years I had been eyeing a mysterious set of icicles high in a side canyon in Glenwood. They were visible from the road, but only if you knew where to look. At the end of March 1975, Dave Wilkinson and I decided to take a look; after an hour of hard slogging up avalanche debris we were rewarded with the vision of the most incredible icefall I had ever seen. The lower section was fully 300 feet across and 160 to 200 feet high. Above, a series of bulges went on for at least another 300 feet before fading into several free-standing icicles hanging from the limestone roofs.

Steve Shea and I returned the next day and climbed the easiest looking line; it turned out to be the hardest pitch of ice either of us had ever done. Fully 165 feet long, it consisted largely of vertical ice, and the top actually overhung by a few degrees. Purists may scoff, but despite my being plastered as close to the ice as I could get, our extra rope hung out at least five feet from the base while I was seconding ten feet from the top. All other possibilities look as hard, and longer and more sustained, than our line on Hidden Falls.

A few brief notes on the techniques employed in climbing these routes follow. Firstly, no fixed ropes were used, and all belay anchors

and protection were on ice screws, runners, nuts or ordinary rock pitons. No bolts were placed; it seems foolish to resort to such tactics as they are not only destructive to the rock, but impermanent; ice build-up will vary year to year, and it is doubtful that bolts placed one year will be found the next. Minimal aid was used on all of these ascents. This consisted of tying off the tip of an ice axe to the swami belt, allowing rest and both hands free to place protection. Etriers were not used, nor were steps chopped or protection used for progress. And in many days of climbing, at least among the small group I know, no falls were taken. This technique allows for a fast, clean ascent of ice without excess gadgetry and wasted time.

What of the future? Few major features remain in the area without at least one route, although the Hidden Falls offer at least two more routes that will be harder than anything yet done here. As advances come in techniques, equipment and concepts of what is possible, ascents will be done in better style on established routes, with fewer points of aid or even solo; new routes will be found in remote and untraveled areas. As with rock climbing, these climbs are also stepping stones to big alpine routes, where speed, efficiency and daring make the difference between success and failure.

