

Fremont and Helen— Wind River Range

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THAT great axial uplift of the American Rocky Mountains, with the appropriate turbulent name Wind River Range, has long been a challenge to the fur traders, the mountain men, the Oregon and California emigrants, the surveying parties, and more recently mountaineers and rock climbers.

The fantasy of glacier-carved cirques and valleys, now everywhere filled with countless lakes, the myriad meadows with their flower fields, the erosion plateaus and their fell fields, and the subdued forest slopes of limber pine combine to produce a visual partnership with the jagged summits that is too magnificent to be described. The transition from desert shrubs of the foothills and alluvial fans of the ranch country peripheral to the range to the forested canyon and middle-altitude zone, then to the flower-strewn lake basins and raw heavily-glaciated, snow-and-ice-thatched valley walls is an image that can only accurately be captured by the human eye or one of man's creative wonders—the camera and film.

From the Green River valley near Pinedale, west of the chain of mountains, high isolated peaks such as Gannett, Fremont, and Bonneville attract the attention. A rock climber can readily detect the challenges of many massifs, and on closer scrutiny can identify the great façades of the Titcomb Lakes basin. Protected by a twenty-mile hike and perhaps the boldness of these façades, two of the great faces of the range, on Fremont Peak and on Mount Helen's west tower, had not yet been climbed. In the past decade a number of challenging routes have been pioneered in this basin, but the great sweep of rock that forms a pillar-buttress on the west face of Fremont, and the turret-like west face of Helen's tower had not been seriously attempted. Pat Callis and I some years ago climbed a route near the Fremont buttress, then advanced three pitches up the west tower, but the fierce, cold September winds upset the rhythm of climbing. Surely some other aspirants would rise to the call of such routes in the intervening years.

So I still thought when in late August Craig Martinson and Bill Lahr flew from Minneapolis to the grassy Pinedale airfield in Bill's nifty Cessna 310 to meet me for a ten-day trip into the range. The fatigue of travel, a leisurely breakfast in town, the confusion of food and the complex

equipment-sorting on the grass field consumed most of the first day. We evaluated each proposed item—from wire stoppers for narrow cracks to hammocks for possible nights out, from salami to giant loaves of expensive rye bread—in a process that must have taken hours. Perhaps it was the confidence derived from the mass of equipment and food, and the forecasts of continuing warm, high-pressure weather which served to postpone the long hike. But this was inevitable if we were to reach Titcomb Basin; somehow by nightfall the three of us had staggered, bow-legged under gargantuan packs for five miles along the packer-abused trail. The campfire glimmered near the shore of a small lake under the whispering of wind and pine branches. Tired as we were, there was still energy to think over the proposed climbs: we would try the great central buttress of Fremont first, perhaps after a day of reconnaissance. From what I recalled of the narrow, soaring crests, it would be nice to go light—without haul bags.

Perhaps it was the knowledge that we were wasting fine weather for hiking, perhaps it was the lure of fine rock, thin holds, and exposed, exhilarating free-climbing for which the range is noted, but the torture of the next day's packing was less than anticipated. In mid-afternoon we hiked past the first two Titcomb Lakes, identified gleaming floral displays near the blue wind-whipped jewels of cold water and marvelled at the exhibits of glacial erratics left at random near the lakes after the climax of the last stage of the ice ages. Fremont, Sacajawea, Helen, and the Titcomb Needles, all familiar vistas from previous trips into the basin, beckoned their challenge. Conditions seemed superb for late-summer: the weather was stable though windy, temperatures moderate, and there was none of the snow which clung to the walls during the big storms of August, 1975. From that episode I knew a good locale for camp—on the bench above Titcomb Lakes, where a high lake acquired the name "Mistake Lake" because of an erroneous planting of cutthroat trout. With all our food, why go fishing? But we relished the fresh taste when Lahr displayed his angling talents.

The night's sleep restored us, so the hike up grass, slab, and snow to the west face of Fremont seemed a pleasure in the morning of August 29. With binoculars we had already picked out the general plan: to climb slabs and a right-curving ledge system that led to broken rock near where the west buttress ended the lower, steep section. The main portion of the soaring, narrow crest could then be attacked directly. As we climbed moderately difficult slabs, cracks and gullies (unroped, but with care), it became more apparent that the route would have to keep on the narrow crest; the north flank appeared very down-slabbed and what crack systems did exist, seemed either to overhang or end in blankness. From my previous climb in the area I knew that the south flank cut away into a deep couloir. But the first sight of the true crest proved intimidat-

ing. Cracks seemed to run out on the first pitch, suggesting bolting. The icy wind whipped us. Craig suggested a rappel into the chasm on the south to search for a route on the south edge of the first pitch, but I had announced my desire to take the first lead, and so I climbed up blocks on the narrow crest to rub noses with the difficulties. A few tricky moves and I could go no higher—but a crack offered a strong piton placement. It now seemed possible to make a very delicate downward traverse to the right. The holds were small, and the steep wall made the exposed F9 run-out precarious, but the gamble won. I was able to turn a difficult corner move into a continuation of holds and cracks to a belay on the south flank. By now the wind had whipped the chill factor into true unpleasantness: an interchange of shouts around the corner confirmed that it would be best to vacate the scene. I tied the lead rope to anchors, then rappelled diagonally to a platform far below the belay. Craig pitched me the end of a spare rope, slid down Jümars, and soon I was back on the crest. We did our class 4 and 5 scramble back to the base, then to our lake camp.

Repetition of the lower portion of the face was pursued with less fervor, for by now the moves had been practiced both up and down. But victory was uncertain, because of the threat of snow squalls, the first of which reached us after the rappel off the ridge to begin the first jümaring. Wearing parkas and with hats pulled low, we shivered and continued, a new leader each pitch. Craig began with aid above the anchor, then went into a single dihedral of the buttress, where a vertical stretch required difficult bracing. Lahr found a frisky face lead with the pleasures of cracks and chickenheads, finishing the lead in wind-blown snow. While squalls were a cold nuisance, blue skies to the west prompted our continuing. The frontal buttress now seemed to blank out, and while the situation was not critical, we were concerned over both time and weather. By climbing a very exposed edge on the right skyline, but one that looked as if it would involve slow aid, a favorable crack system seemed attainable. An idea dawned: climb the ramp on the left of the buttress, then make a high pendulum to the cracks. This proved not easy, as pitons could only be placed on the far left, making exertion awkward. But the procedure worked and the pitch continued up steep cracks. The next pitch took a chimney on the left of the buttress, then continued up steeply on the crest. The rock was superb, with good diorite knobs and feldspar crystals. Several times the route appeared as if it might blank into unclimbable smoothness, but judicious route plotting found the way. The next mini-blizzard wet the frictioning, causing concern, but the surface dried in the wind. Blue replaced clouds and we climbed onward, with the second and third men sometimes climbing, sometimes jümaring. Both flanks still fell off sheerly, with no alternatives, but the buttress became layered with great exfoliation slabs.

Pitches became obscure in the late afternoon and somewhere we unroped, each making his way up blocks and ledges to the summit. Tomorrow would be a day of rest.

From a new camp on a glacier-polished slab the towers of Mount Helen formed a jagged outline conjuring a classic Valhalla outline. The architecture of the first tower, rounded like a great tilting cylinder, was a superlative magnet to the eye. It seemed unbelievable that in this day of technical rock climbing, some party had not climbed the face. Our study with the glass convinced us that there was little choice of route: a single fracture system led from the talus base to within a few hundred feet of the summit (an even more classic possibility immediately left appeared to vanish high on the face, amid a jumble of crackless overhangs). While our prospective route appeared to need much aid, confirmed by the probe with Pat Callis earlier, this later proved unfounded, as pitch after pitch went free due to the solid rock and good surface for climbing. On our first climbing day we managed four pitches, hauling bags with food and water for the summit push; the first and third pitches had some challenging free-climbing, but protection was good. On one pitch I became tangled with some slow aid-climbing, but this broke into the continuity of the system. By the middle of the second day we explored the system of ledges near mid-face that we had dubbed "Minnesota Ledge" and located the best bivouac spot. Lahr led a full pitch of steep cracks, then Craig was confronted with a puzzling route problem, which had three alternatives, all quite difficult. It was important not to lose time with the wrong choice. After some hard free moves he had to place a bolt to protect a very difficult leftward traverse. The pitch ended where continuity still seemed hopeful.

The night was virtually sleepless, but we had plenty of food and water. The wind shrieked and howled, flapping bivouac sacks and plastic wrappings and making rest difficult. Gusts must have reached 50 miles per hour; later we found that our base-camp tent had blown down. In the shadow of morning we jumared up the fixed ropes, hauling bags for a possible second bivouac. Another pitch of partial aid led to magnificent, exposed free-climbing, with small holds invisible from below. Bill Lahr managed this slow pitch nicely; then Craig found the route up the steepening dihedral of the final sweep to the overhanging headwall. Difficult free-climbing—often far between solid protection for the moves—led to a hanging belay under the worrying overhangs. A whitish crack flared out beyond the vertical, then went into an alcove where two exit possibilities appeared, both overhanging but with chimneying opportunities. When struggling with a flake on the overhanging wall about 15 feet above the belay, I broke off a 14-inch sharp edge and suddenly found myself at the anchor level. What seemed like a poor protection piton held! Scratched hands needed attention, so Craig con-

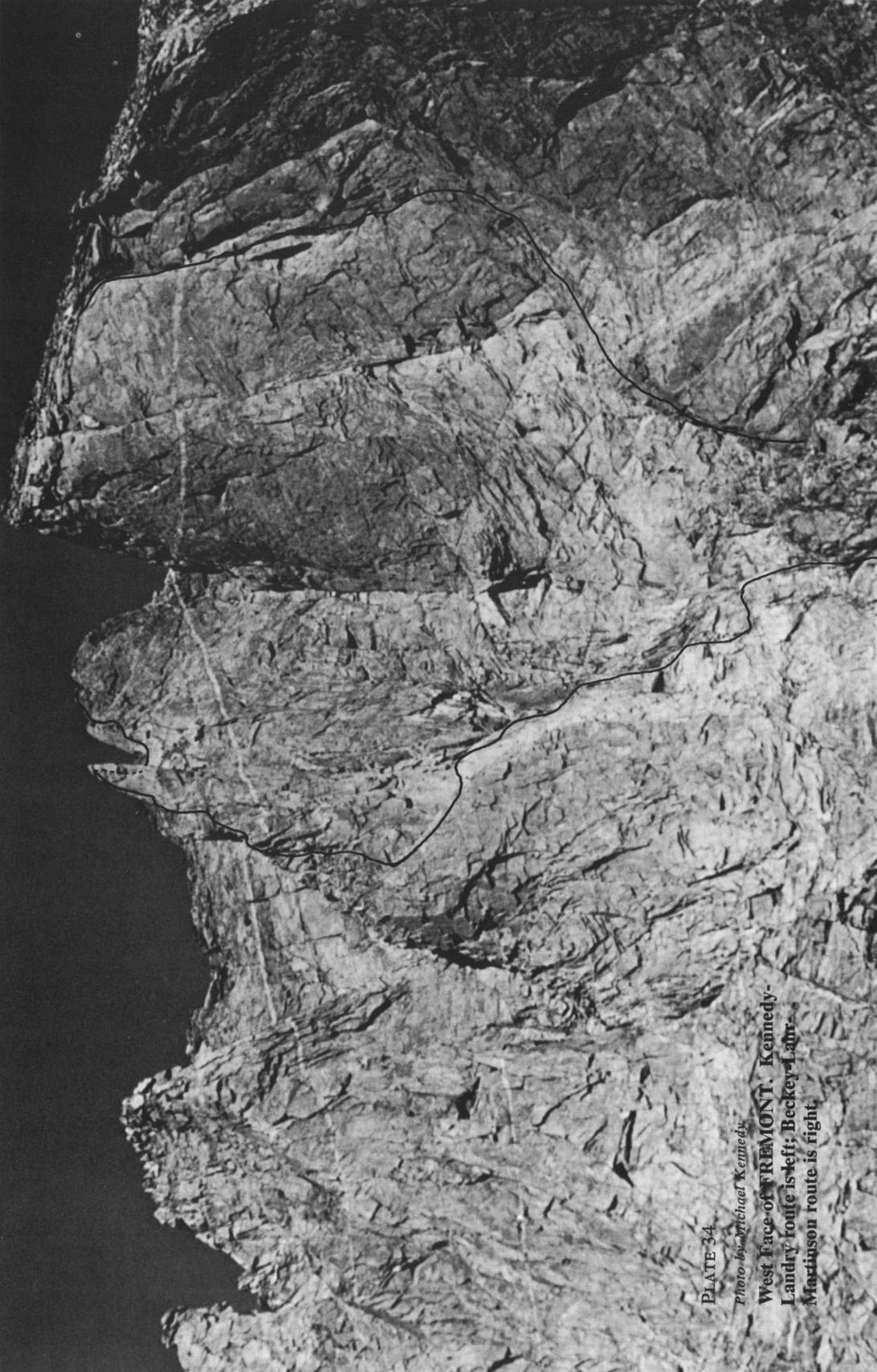


PLATE 34

Photo by Michael Kennedy.

West Face of **FREMONT**. Kennedy-Landry route is left; Beckey-Lahr-Martinson route is right.

tinued the lead. The wall threw one off-balance, and chock protection was hard to set. A bong deep under an overhanging block allowed a final improbable stemming conclusion to the hardest pitch on the climb. Haul bags swung free. Bill and I jumared our separate ways through the air to the top of the main section of the wall. An awkward traverse to the right took us to the logical end of the route. The wind was blasting again. It was a strain to climb two pitches to the true summit.

In waning daylight we descended, climbing and rappelling, usually lowering rucksacks and haul bags, on a west trend. The route was not obvious, but this southwest face did have some ledges for gathering and plotting the way for the next drop-off. True darkness caught us between the lower rappels. On three occasions we stopped to bivouac, then talked ourselves into continuing the down-climbing in the dark. As the stove purred in the darkness of the re-erected tent, our bodies rejuvenated from the energetic episode. We realized that the Wind River Range had indeed been kind to us.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Wind River Range, Wyoming.

NEW ROUTES: Fremont Peak, West Buttress, August 29 and 30, 1976
 (Fred Beckey, William Lahr, Craig Martinson) NCCS IV, F9, A1.
 Mount Helen, First Tower of the West Face, September 1 to 3, 1976
 (Same party) NCCS V, F10, A2.

