

The Great Canadian Knife — Logan Mountains

GALEN A. ROWELL

IN 1972, JIM McCARTHY TOOK ME to a place he described as paradise on earth. We were on our way back from failing on the 4000-foot southeast face of the Mooses Tooth in the Alaska Range, and I did not expect to be impressed by more rock walls because I knew we had left the land of huge glaciers with outsized Yosemite's poking through them far behind us. As Jim flew his Cessna 180 ever deeper into the eastern Yukon, the mountains were the kind normal people describe as rugged, gnarled, or impassable, but climbers aren't normal people. Nothing about the peaks of the Mackenzie Mountains quickened my pulse or hinted at the impossible. Green valleys curved in gentle arcs without the straight lines I had come to associate with great climbing.

As we crossed the imaginary boundary of the North West Territories, the simplicity of forms remained unchanged. Everything appeared neatly in its place as if we were flying over a huge Japanese garden. Then came the Cirque of the Unclimbables in the Logan Mountains. Vertical granite erupted from unbelievably green meadows fringed with snow and ice. Jim guessed that fewer than twenty-five people had ever set foot in Fairy Meadow below Lotus Flower Tower, which he had climbed for the first time by its most prominent face just four summers earlier. As we flew out of the cirque, Jim took me into a side valley that housed the southeast face of Proboscis, by far the steepest and most sheer of the region's big walls. He had climbed it in 1963 with Layton Kor, Dick McCracken and Royal Robbins on a grant from the AAC. The purpose of the AAC sponsorship was to bring rock climbers closer together with the club's mountaineers by making possible an ascent that would involve extreme technical rock climbing on a major mountain wall. I had no idea that two decades later I would be introducing younger climbers to Proboscis with a somewhat similar idea of blending today's most extreme rock techniques with ascents of the great wilderness walls of North America. Our new goal was to free-climb these routes.

Back in the summers of 1972 and 1973 I had failed to get up any major big walls when I climbed with Jim in the Cirque. Storms hampered us, as did the black lichen blankets and green-welded cracks on all but south faces that had lots of sun exposure. We gave up on the nose of Parrot Beak Peak even though it

PLATE 24

Photo by Galen Rowell

**"Great Canadian Knife" on Mount
Proboscis, Logan Mountains,
North West Territories.**



faced the same way as nearby Lotus Flower Tower because it was enough in the shadow of its neighbor to foster biological diversity beyond our wishes. We also backed off several other big walls that looked appealing from a distance. We felt it wasn't worth grunting our way through hanging ecosystems just to bag a first ascent. I know that a far better climbing experience was there, because I had personally found it on an eight-pitch route on Sir James McBrien with knobby white rock that looked the same as what we had seen from his plane on Proboscis.

Nearly two decades later in 1991, Todd Skinner called me to ask what I knew about the face of Proboscis. Jim McCarthy had told him in glowing terms that Proboscis might be just the wilderness wall he was looking for to have continuously extreme free-climbing, yet not require a single move of direct aid. Jim had described clean vertical granite with protruding feldspar knobs like those of Tuolumne Meadows in Yosemite. I seconded the description and told Todd how great the face had looked from the air and how much better the rock looked than what I had seen on fabled Lotus Flower Tower. We planned an expedition on the spot a year in advance.

Knowing how such a momentary high can fade like autumn leaves, I sent Todd and his long-time partner Paul Piana something to ponder over the winter: an exhibit print of my best aerial of the face. To the best of our knowledge the face had never been repeated. I assumed that we would follow the crack systems done in four days by the first-ascent party with pitons for direct aid on anything above 5.8. I saw no other obvious route.

Having climbed with Todd and Paul on the first free ascent of another Robbins wilderness wall route in 1990, I knew that our climb was likely to be highly controversial. We would not be following the old ethic of starting from the bottom and leading each pitch on sight. When I had climbed the north face of Mount Hooker in Wyoming with Todd and Paul in 1990, we had done the hardest pitches in modern sport climbing tradition. Most all of the 5.13 and 5.14 sport climbs that have been done in recent years involve gymnastic sequences of moves that were first figured out, rehearsed, and memorized with a safety rope from above, often over a period of weeks or months, before they were finally led from below. Natural holds are previewed and brushed clean on rappel. Necessary fixed pitons and bolts are usually placed before the final lead. Since the hardest routes by their very nature seek out apparent blankness that avoids continuous cracks into which camming devices or pitons might be placed for protection, bolts are used far more often than on older, less difficult routes.

Thus the best rock climbers of the nineties are even more divided than those of my era in the sixties and seventies, which is less remembered for its comradeship than for its incidents of bolt and route chopping. However, today's antagonists are far less likely to be operating in the same arena. One discrete group trains almost exclusively for competition, while another pursues adventure on ultimate rock walls. They meet in passing on short sport climbs. Todd and Paul dreamed of merging the two by finding just the right wall to become, depending on one's point of view, either the world's most continuously difficult

alpine free-climb or the world's biggest sport climb. They believed they could do it without destroying the sense of adventure of a big wall or causing more impact than traditional ascents of big faces that have always used pitons and bolts where necessary. In the history of mountaineering, every new technique used for short ascents of rock or ice in ideal conditions has eventually worked its way up to use on climbs of the world's biggest and most remote faces. Why shouldn't they be first, as they had already been on the first free-climb of the Salathé Wall of El Capitan? Why wait for someone else to drill bolts before attempting a free ascent?

One day in late July 1992, I hopped into my old Chevrolet Suburban in California, picked up Todd and Paul en route, and drove to the Yukon. The Far North revealed itself slowly through a progression of changes as we detoured through Glacier, Waterton Lakes, Banff, Jasper, and Mount Robson parks. Days became longer, sun angles lower, and vegetation less complex as species dropped away with each passing mile. Here was the beginning of the simplified sub-arctic landscape that gives the Cirque of the Unclimbables a sense of paradise on earth.

I'd flown to the Far North a number of times in recent years without realizing how radically northern British Columbia had changed since I'd driven through it two decades before. The wild sheep, goats, elk, moose, and bears I had photographed beside the roads were all but gone, as were most of the old-growth forests. The Bowron Valley clearcut near Prince George is one of the few efforts of our species visible from space. If aliens have seen this 75-mile swath and haven't tried to contact us, it's because they've rightfully concluded our planet lacks intelligent life.

As we continued north up the Cassiar Highway, where I had driven through endless virgin forest the year it opened in 1974, virtually all the lower valleys were clearcut. Only after we crossed into the Yukon were the trees consistently standing. Our travel by car ended abruptly at a mineral exploration camp beside a remote lake on the Campbell Highway, a euphemistic name for a narrow dirt road that heads north from Watson Lake. We had arranged a 150-mile flight into the Cirque with Warren LaFave of Inconnu Wilderness Lodge, but decided to spend a couple of days at his lodge when he made us an offer we couldn't refuse. Did we want to spend a day or two surveying the climbing potential of the region by helicopter? He introduced us to Jet Ranger pilot John Witham, who was the nearest town's Justice of the Peace, coroner, dogcatcher, and ex-mayor, as well as one heck of a Country Western singer. Under stormy skies the next day we chased caribou and rainbows over intensely green valleys and scouted unclimbed rock walls in several ranges hundreds of miles away. We found several fine faces in the thousand-foot range, but nothing that approached the awesome Half Dome-like wall of Proboscis rising out of verdant splendor.

The exact view in the photo I had enlarged for Todd and Paul passed before our eyes as John's helicopter dropped us into the valley below Proboscis. To our surprise, a Spanish team was on the face ahead of us. We were reasonably certain that no one else had tried it since McCarthy's first-ascent party in 1963. Todd

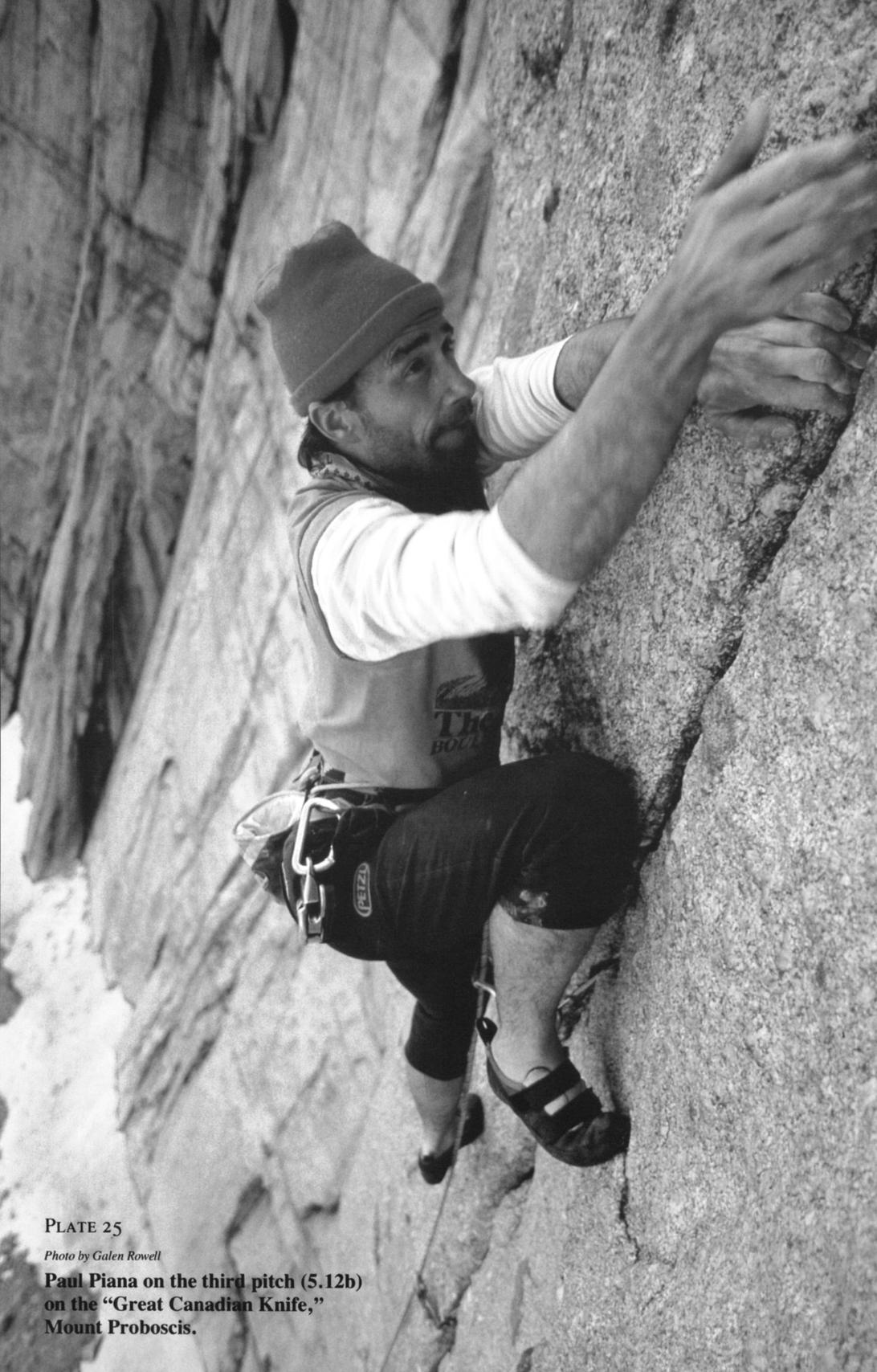


PLATE 25

Photo by Galen Rowell

**Paul Piana on the third pitch (5.12b)
on the “Great Canadian Knife,”
Mount Proboscis.**

walked a few hundred feet to the left with Paul and began eyeing a wild, vertical corner that projected out from the cliff. I thought the route looked ugly and unclimbable.

"The rock is perfect!" Todd called out to no one in particular as his fingers ran over feldspar crystals that projected out from the granite just enough for extreme finger and toe holds.

"But look at that hideous slime in the crack," I remarked as my eyes followed a single line draining melting snow from the upper face.

"Not that *inside* corner," Todd laughed. "I'm looking to the right where that *outside* knife-edge merges with the face again. It goes for over a thousand feet like that. I checked it out in that picture you sent me."

"But there are no cracks," I said, searching the projecting rib for natural protection possibilities with eyes trained for route-finding in the sixties.

"That's the point! This is just what we've been looking for. It's got 'Route of the Nineties' stamped all over it. No one's ever free-climbed a natural feature this big and steep that wasn't a crack, but with that edge to hold onto and all these little crystals to stand on, it's worth trying. It's the wildest line I've ever seen in my life, either in photos or on real rock. I can tell you one thing, I won't be able to live with myself until we find out if it goes."

Todd and Paul were eager to invest weeks of preparation if necessary to climb the knife-edge with direct-aid and rig ropes from above to work out the hardest moves. The next morning Paul led the first pitch up a wet 5.10 crack, ripping out familiar hanging ecosystems of moss and flowers to make upward progress. After 160 feet, the soggy crack merged abruptly into clean rock that stretched upward as far as we could see. For the rest of that day and the next four days, Todd and Paul worked on three steep pitches up tiers of little overhangs. They used a combination of free-climbing, sky hooks on crystals, direct-aid anchors in discontinuous cracks, and an occasional drilled bolt to gain the top of each pitch. Bolts were placed extremely frugally, and on the rare occasion when one wasn't in line with the final free-climbing route, the hole was drilled long so the shaft could be driven in after use and capped with gravel and moss.

The second pitch immediately forced all Todd's cards on the table. It began with a maze of possible moves up crystals so small Todd couldn't see them at first. "I had to mark all the possible crystals I might use with chalk, then begin slowly erasing those I couldn't use until I found the right combination. Some of the crystals I had to use were so small I could only locate them with my fingers to know for sure they were there. Without a mark, I can't find the next hand hold fast enough to move my foot before it slides off one of those little guys. I think I'll only be able to lead this section when the weather is cloudy and dry, but not too cold. It's got to be warm enough to hold on with my fingers, but without direct sun that will soften my boot rubber so it won't hold my weight on those tiny crystals. Putting the whole thing together on one lead is going to be a real mind drain. It starts off with 5.13, then keeps going and going with complex 5.12 and no rest spots for the full 165 feet. And if it rains hard before I try it, it'll wash away the chalk and I'll have to prep it all over again."



PLATE 26

Photo by Galen Rowell

**Paul Piana on the fourth pitch (5.12d)
on the "Great Canadian Knife,"
Mount Probooscis.**

I was aware that some of the extreme preparations Todd and Paul have used for their hardest free climbs have been controversial in the past, but I was impressed by how rigidly they followed their chosen ethic. They pushed their limits so hard that they took too many falls to count during preparations, yet every pitch on the final ascent was led clean without a fall. One might argue over whether chalk marks are clever tools to access the hidden natural character of a cliff or visual direct aids, but in no case did I see holds altered or any kind of real direct-aid used for the final ascent of any pitch. I bring this up because after Todd and Paul free-climbed the Salathé Wall, rumors that they hadn't really done it all free made it into print. To the contrary, Todd told me, "We were so paranoid about being watched through spotting scopes every inch of the way up the Salathé that we were scared to go to the bathroom."

I can't lead 5.12, so I spent all the early days photographing and watching Todd and Paul work out the route up to the seventh pitch, from where we planned to go for the top in one push. Paul spent two days working out both the third and fourth pitches. On the first section he was able to hold onto the sharp edge of the corner with his left hand while he pulled on tiny crystals with his right to gain just enough purchase to walk his toes up the wall. The pitch was continuous 5.12, but no harder. The fourth pitch, however, began with a ten-foot overhang that required a complex series of finger pulls and dynamic moves into a lieback. Paul rated this part 5.12d, but didn't up the rating for the pitch even though it continued for another 150 feet of vertical and overhanging 5.11. It was somewhere here that Paul first suggested, "If we ever make it up this blade, let's call it 'The Great Canadian Knife.'"

We talked about other names and Todd quipped that if we succeeded we should rename the whole place "The Cirque of the Freeclimbables." Our positive energy was soon interrupted by a major rainstorm that brought both the Spaniards and our team back to Base Camp for two days. We learned that they were using direct-aid in cracks that stayed wet for days after every thunderstorm. They no longer had any intention of pushing their whole route free. Our route, on the other hand, dried out minutes after a storm because it projected out from the wall without cracks that seeped water from above.

Several days before we were ready to make our final push, the Spaniards succeeded in repeating the original route with some minor variations and a bivouac on the summit ridge after a twenty-hour push from the base. They decided not to do the final few pitches to the true summit. After they left by helicopter, we prepared our route to the sixth of 22 pitches and began free-climbing in earnest. Preparing the route had taken up nine climbing and two storm days.

Todd and Paul flawlessly free-climbed the first four pitches over two successive days, during which we returned to the base to sleep. Finally, Todd was ready to try what he thought might be the crux of the route, the fifth pitch up he called "a pure textbook arête." With his left hand on the edge much of the time, he moved up with "quiet feet" from one tiny crystal to another toward spots where he had rehearsed letting go for a brief moment to move his hand higher or clip a

bolt. Ten minutes seemed like an hour as he clung to the face in total concentration to negotiate just twenty feet. Somehow, he kept going when it seemed his fingers would no longer hold him, a technique he equates to “a spiritual lessening of gravity when something kicks in from the ozone. You feel like you’re faking it for a few moves, but you don’t fall.” He breathed a sigh of relief when the difficulty eased back from 5.13b into eighty feet of 5.12 with no possibility of a rest until a two-inch ledge at the end of the pitch.

Meanwhile, I had been using the fixed ropes strung for prepping the route to take photographs. It feels quite bizarre to be on a big wall watching a companion from three feet do a hard lead and be right there with him when he mantles up, ties off, smiles broadly, and gulps a Powerbar, our only food for the final three-day push we had now begun.

When I asked Todd what he thought of the lead, he said he had to think about it because no one move or sequence stood out. Difficulties were just piled one on top of another. He later told me, “That pitch was something you might dream of finding on the ground, but never in your wildest fantasies would you ever think of it being up here 600 feet off the deck in the middle of a continuous arête. It’s the best of this kind of climbing I’ve ever done.”

A re-energized Todd continued leading up the sixth pitch to the highest point where the route had been prepared. The climbing was 5.12 with a crux that required a traverse into a dripping short crack. Then Paul took over for what he thought would be an easier lead that began with underclings and liebacks up a solid flake with a crack behind it. As he started out, he said he’d love to have the pitch in his backyard. After the crack ended abruptly, Paul finished the pitch on 5.12 crystals yet again.

Paul’s lead brought us to the first ledge large enough for a person to sit on, but we still couldn’t see a decent bivouac ledge anywhere around us. We appeared to be in a system of cracks that led continuously for more than a thousand feet to the summit ridge, and we expected the difficulty to ease up considerably.

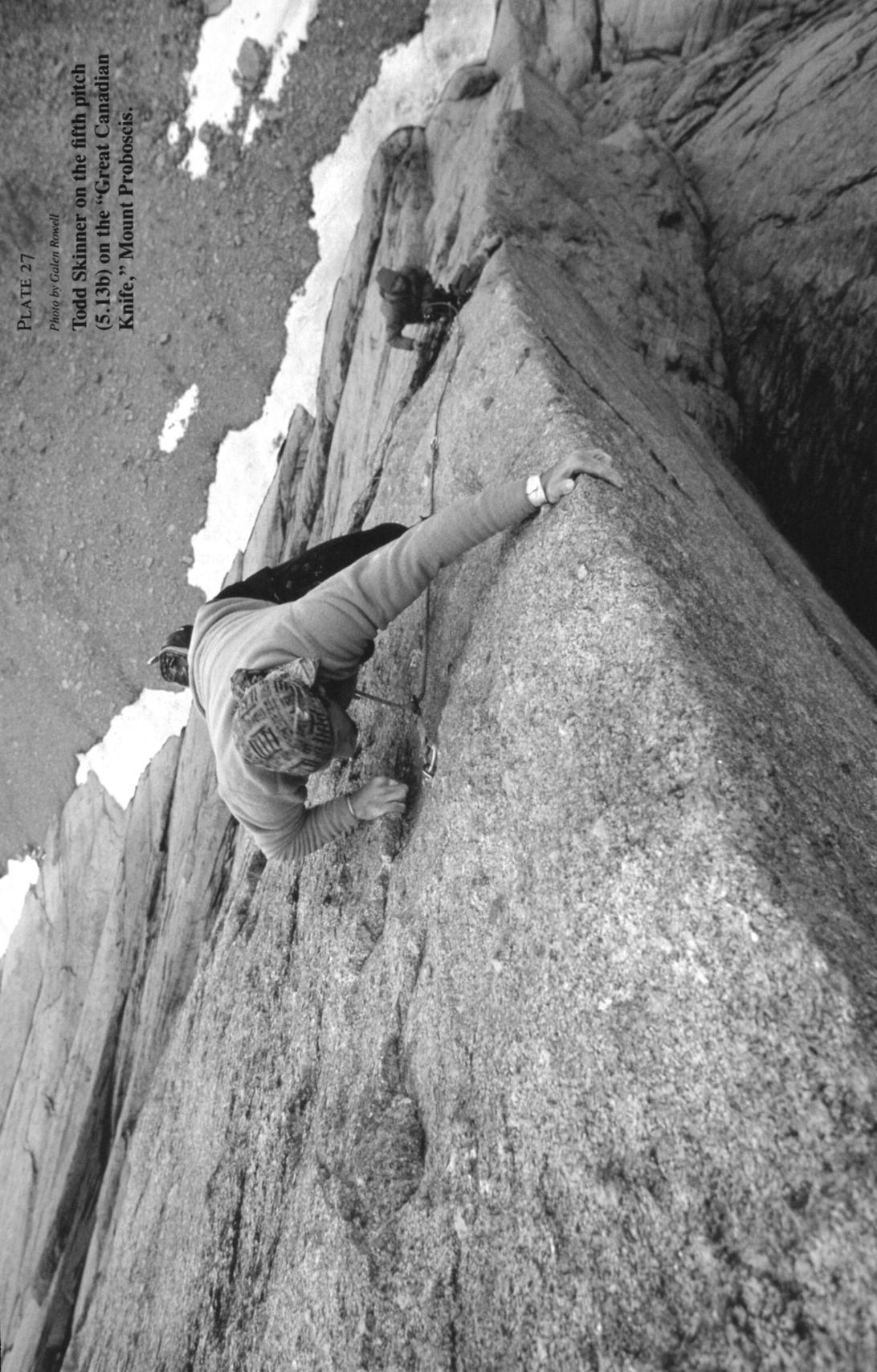
Todd insisted on leading the single crack above us, but a hand-jam quickly widened into a continuous six-inch off-width that stayed the same width inside and out or up and down. He intensely disliked the inelegance of thrutching his way up off-widths, but he did so without whimpering or attracting vultures as he drew blood. In fact, he felt so strong at the top of the 160-foot lead that he took the next unchanging six-inch off-width too.

I was eager to get a lead in somewhere in this section of off-widths that were in the 5.10 and 5.11 range, but darkness was coming on too fast. It was midnight by the time we set up Portaledge under a nearly full moon. I fell asleep in total comfort, looking forward to leading free-climbing within my abilities in just a few hours.

In the middle of the night I awoke to the sound of rain on my wind fly and imagined the worst. The thought of retreating down a thousand feet of wet ropes to end up at the bottom like a drowned rat made me shiver. Todd later told me that he never let himself think about defeat. “All I could do was tuck back in and hope

Photo by Galen Rowell

**Todd Skinner on the fifth pitch
(5.13b) on the "Great Canadian
Knife," Mount Probosecis.**



we didn't get wet. It wasn't going to end our effort because we had a month's supply of food. If we had to, we'd wait for a better period and start the entire thing again."

The morning was windy and damp, but by noon we were heading up rather than down. The brief storm had passed, our face was dry again, and I felt glad to be doing the next lead, even though it was a strenuous 5.10 off-width. Paul drew yet another off-width filled with moss that took hours to clean before he could lead it from below. Ideally, we had hoped to do the final push entirely free without any more prepping of pitches, but the vegetation in the cracks was prohibitive as well as slow to clean. It was late in the day by the time I continued up a 5.10 corner that I hoped would end on a broad set of ledges we thought we had seen from across the valley. Instead of flat ledges, I found tiers of ramps that sloped off into space like pagoda roofs. Since we'd left our Portaledges far below in hopes of climbing more quickly and reaching a level place for our final bivouac, we decided to keep climbing into the night.

While Todd climbed on, darkness came and snowflakes began to fall. He found no place to belay, so we tied on an extra rope until he had free-climbed a total of 330 feet above us. When Paul and I jumared up the rope with headlamps at one in the morning, we found ourselves perched on a knife-edged ridge that dropped 2000 feet to a glacier on the other side. With the wind roaring and the temperature down into the teens, we tied ourselves to anchors and waited out the night lying down as best we could, heads hung over one valley and feet dangling above the other.

For a second night in a row the weather raged at night and cleared after dawn. To our surprise, we had six more pitches of climbing along a spectacularly narrow ridge to reach the true summit. By mid-morning we were on top in the warm sun, gazing down into magical Fairy Meadow at the base of Lotus Flower Tower and wishing we could be there. Our helicopter was due the next morning and the meadow was across a sheer ridge from the valley below our face.

On the summit Todd and Paul seemed uncharacteristically restrained about discussing what we had just done. In their minds, alerted by a little incident of falling off the top of El Capitan at their moment of triumph on that free ascent, our climb wasn't over yet. As we made our way down, Todd asked Paul if the climb would be a success when we got back to camp. Paul replied, "Not till we're back in Wyoming alive."

The next morning John Witham picked us up from our Base Camp right on schedule. Instead of our expected hour-and-a-half flight, however, we were in the air for less than five minutes. He landed in Fairy Meadow right where I'd camped on my first visit in 1972. To our complete surprise, a victory banquet in our honor was served to us in the meadow below Lotus Flower Tower by a lady chef he had flown in 150 miles from a mining camp just for the occasion. We began with wine, worked our way through hot soufflé, and devoured the ice cream like eager children. That night we soaked our tired bodies in the Inconnu Lodge hot tub before heading south by road.

Todd must have considered the climb a success as soon as we crossed the Canadian border back into Montana. He used the past tense to say, "What we just did may be one of a kind in the world. There may not be another piece of rock so well suited to hard free-climbing. That 800-foot section of 5.12 and 5.13 is the most continuously difficult stretch I've ever heard of on any big wall, alpine or not, without a move of direct-aid. Even on El Capitan, the hard pitches weren't all in a row like that. What shall we try to free-climb next year?"

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Cirque of the Unclimbables, Logan Mountains, North West Territories, Canada.

NEW ROUTE: "The Great Canadian Knife," Southeast Face of Proboscis, VI, 5.13b, August 13, 1992 (Paul Piana, Galen Rowell, Todd Skinner).

