

Cathedral Spires, Kichatna Mountains

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AS THE FOUR OF US STOOD silently watching the plane fly away, the reality of six weeks deep in the Alaskan wilderness began to sink in. Surrounding us, the sheer walls of the Kichatna Spires left each of us craning his neck with astonished disbelief. Doug Byerly and I had both visited this phenomenal climbing area for the first time in 1993, Doug with Calvin Hebert and I with Jeff Hollenbaugh. After having spent three weeks in the range, at independent times, we had both left with several summits and a very strong desire to return. Within a month of my return to Colorado, Doug and I began planning another trip for the following summer. It was no trouble at all to convince two good friends of ours, Jon Allen and Doug Hall, to join us. Neither had climbed in Alaska before, but knowing them well, we felt they both had the desire and the skill needed to succeed in such a place. Considering the atrocious weather that typifies the Kichatnas, we decided that six weeks' time would insure enough decent weather to accomplish our objectives.

On June 14, the Tatina Glacier became our home. Returning to this place for the second time, I felt a strong sense of familiarity. I felt I knew what to expect and what it would take to succeed. Two weeks passed before an opportunity to climb presented itself. In this time, the anxiety and anticipation grew among us exponentially. These days were occupied with gin and tonics and endless card games. Jon Allen and Doug Hall had chosen Mount Jeffers' west face as their first objective. Doug Byerly and I had focused upon an unclimbed buttress on Flattop Peak's southeast face.

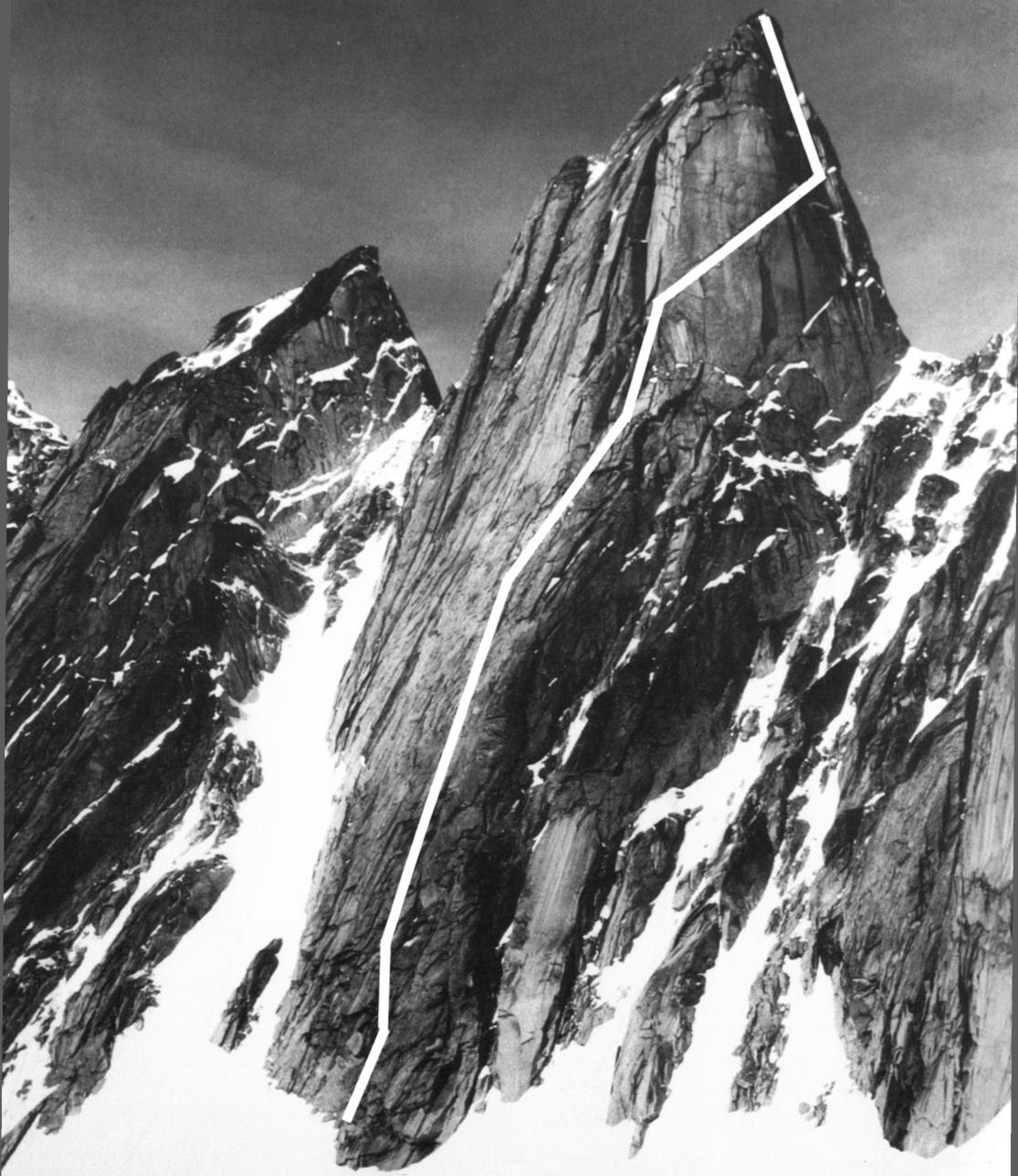
Our first spell of decent weather arrived on June 29. Barely having finished their coffee, Allen and Hall were off and running toward Jeffers. They had picked a line on the right side of the same buttress I had attempted with Jeff Hollenbaugh in 1993. Bringing two ropes and one pack, they had decided on a lightweight alpine-style ascent. Having previously fixed two ropes, they rapidly reached the base of the prominent buttress. The next few pitches were moderate and brought them to a section they had predicted would be the crux

*Recipient of an American Alpine Club Mountaineering Fellowship Grant.

PLATE 13

Photo by Jonathan Allen

**Southeast Face of STALAGMITE
SPIRE, Kichatna Mountains.**



of the route. A pitch of difficult aid traversed up and left to the base of a corner leading all the way to a feature known as the "Grey Scoop." This corner presented excellent free climbing on solid rock.

After twenty-four hours of nonstop climbing, Jon and Doug were halfway up the wall at the base of the Grey Scoop. The wall became less steep at that point, and they assumed the main difficulties to be over. It was not so. They had yet to deal with some extremely run-out 5.10 climbing on friable flakes. Three pitches later, they reached easier terrain.

By midnight on the second day, thirty-six hours into the climb, they had safely got to the upper flanks of Jeffers. A tremendous wind was blowing and both Jon and Doug were thoroughly exhausted. A few hundred feet below the south summit, they found refuge in a small cave and tried to sleep. When at 2:30 A.M., the sun began to rise, they made their way to the summit. At one P.M., after having descended the south ridge, they returned to the security and comfort of Base Camp.

Meanwhile, Doug Byerly and I had moved to our advanced camp on the west fork of the Monolith Glacier. We accessed this glacier by the col between Mounts Nevermore and Neveragain. When we stood beneath the awesome, untouched southeast pillar of Flattop, I found it hard to believe that I was actually there to climb this spectacular shaft of pristine granite. I had first seen this amazing buttress the previous summer and had immediately known I would return. Now it once again stood before me, beckoning.

At seven A.M on June 30, I unzipped the tent to the sight of the upper buttress bathed in glorious morning light. After brewing tea and munching on pop-tarts, a five-minute approach took us to the base of the wall. The first couple of hundred feet were scary, unprotected free-climbing interspersed with a few moves of exciting aid. This brought us to a continuous vertical crack, which we followed for several pitches. In some sections the crack was shallow and flaring, providing enjoyable aid-climbing on small nuts and TCUs. Other parts gave fantastic free-climbing in the 5.10 range.

Six-hundred feet off the glacier, the crack we'd been following pinched down to nothing. Fifteen feet to the right was another crack leading to the top of the buttress. Doug led up with hopes of discovering a way to this crack. Unbelievably, he found some solid flakes on which he could traverse right. The main mystery of the route was solved. From that point, we fixed four ropes to the glacier and descended for the night. The next morning, we ascended the lines to our previous highpoint. After gaining one more pitch, gale winds drove us down. In deteriorating weather, we returned to Base Camp.

On July 5, severely hung over from our raucous Independence Day celebration, all four of us moved to the west fork of the Monolith Glacier. Doug Byerly and I were anxious to complete our primary objective, while Jon Allen and Doug Hall had their sights on an unclimbed spire just to the south of Flattop.

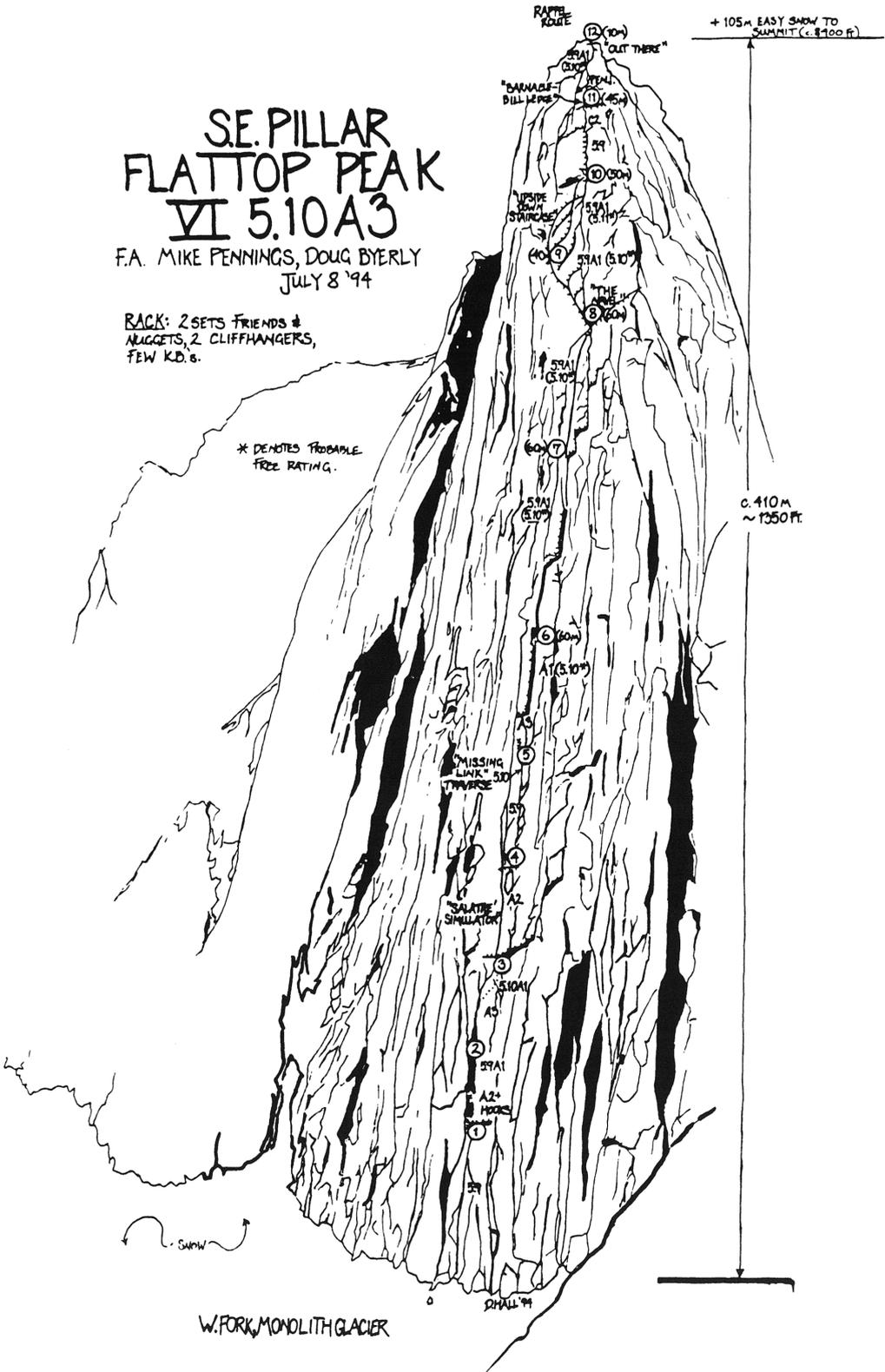
The morning of July 8 dawned clear. As Doug Byerly and I started up our fixed lines, Jon Allen and Doug Hall headed for the base of what they would

SE. PILLAR FLATTOP PEAK VI 5.10A3

F.A. MIKE PENNING, DOUG BYERLY
JULY 8 '94

RACK: 2 SETS FRIENDS #
NUGGETS, 2 CLIFFHANGERS,
FEW K.D.'s.

* DENOTES PROBABLE
FREE RATING.



W. FORK MONDLITH GLACIER

later call "Stalagmite Spire." At our previous highpoint, Doug and I were greeted by the welcome warmth of direct sunlight. As we continued upward, the gorgeous sunshine was displaced by a sea of fog. We followed solid cracks which gave spectacular free-climbing and some straightforward aid. Before long, the wind was howling and visibility was limited to twenty feet. Knowing the top was close, we pushed onward. Around seven P.M., we joyously stood on the top of the buttress. From there, we walked along the ridge to the true summit. The fog was so thick that we could see nothing, but this did little to detract from our deep satisfaction. We rappelled back down the same buttress.

Two hours after we returned to camp, Jon Allen and Doug Hall stumbled in. They had successfully completed the first ascent of Stalagmite Spire. The next morning, we all exchanged tales of our adventures. The other two spoke of climbing blindly in the fog, following a route completely different from what they had planned, reaching the summit at night in the rain, and obviously rappelling 1000 feet down the other side. That afternoon, the four of us returned to Base Camp.

On July 13, after several days of enjoying the luxuries of Base Camp, Jon and I moved to the west fork of the Sunshine Glacier. The weather seemed promising. Our plan was to climb the Embick route on the east buttress of Middle Triple Peak. Carrying all our climbing gear and ten days' food, we trudged over Perfect Echo Pass (just to the east of North Triple) to arrive on the Sunshine Glacier at four A.M. on July 14. That afternoon, we fixed our two ropes on the first pitches of the climb. The next day, the weather looked good, but we both felt we needed a day's rest before committing ourselves to the route.

We planned to climb early on July 16, but when we awoke at six A.M. to cloudy, threatening skies, we agreed to more sleep. We awoke again at eleven A.M. and heard on Jon's walkman radio a forecast of sunny, clear weather for Anchorage. It convinced us that the time was right. With a tent, one sleeping bag, one pad, four days' food and four liters of water, we headed off to climb.

At four P.M., we started up the fixed lines. Twelve hours later, we reached the top of the lower buttress, where we chose to bivouac for a few hours. At seven A.M., an intense sun pleasantly caressed us awake. We simul-climbed up the ridge to the base of the upper pillar. The sun continued to shine throughout the day. The climbing on the upper pillar was absolutely phenomenal. Aside from two points of aid, we managed to climb it all free at 5.10+. At four P.M., we stood on the summit with the most spectacular view of our lives. Above the entire Kichatna Range, Denali stood proudly in the distance. Jon said, "Mike, I've never felt so far from the ground as I do right now!" At four A.M., thirty-six hours after leaving the relative security of the glacier, we were greatly relieved to return to it.

An hour after reaching camp, the rain began to fall. Four days later, we returned to Base Camp on the Tatina Glacier. It was great to see our friends and hear what they had been up to. On July 16, they had done the second ascent of Mount Nevermore via a new route on the northwest face. Their route followed

a snow couloir to the saddle between the twin summits, then easy mixed climbing up the ridge to the north summit. From Base Camp, they had reached the top in four hours.

On July 27, the four of us were grateful to hear the buzz of the plane. With our appetites for adventure satisfied, we all longed to return to the pleasure of summer.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Cathedral Spires, Kichatna Mountains, Alaska.

ASCENTS: Jeffers, c.2439 meters, c.8000 feet, New Route on the West Face, Summit Reached on July 1, 1994 (Allen, Hall). Flattop, 2560+ meters, 8400+ feet, New Route on the Southeast Buttress, Summit Reached on July 8, 1994 (Byerly, Pennings).

“Stalagmite Spire,” c. 2408 meters, c. 7900 feet, First Spire just south of Flattop, First Ascent via Northeast Face, July 8, 1994 (Allen, Hall).

Nevermore, c.2469 meters, c.8100 feet, via a New Route on the Northwest Face, July 16, 1994 (Byerly, Hall).

Middle Triple Peak, 2693 meters, 8835 feet, via East Buttress (Embick Route), Summit reached on July 17, 1994 (Allen, Pennings).

PERSONNEL: Jonathan Allen, Douglas Byerly, Douglas Hall, Michael Pennings.