

Scrambles on Bear Creek Spire, Sierra Nevada

(First Ascent from the East)

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PERHAPS the least known of the finer peaks of the southern Sierra Nevada of California is Bear Creek Spire. Although only a moderately impressive peak when seen from the west, from other directions it is very beautiful and imposing, rising in steep crags and narrow crests terminating in a jagged summit 13,705 feet above sea-level. It is a "triple divide" peak at the heads of Bear, Pine and Rock creeks. Ascended for the first time in 1923 up its west face—a short but interesting climb from a very high alpine basin—it has since then been climbed from that direction by half-a-dozen parties.

In October, 1931, from a bivouac (10,000 ft.) on Morgan Creek, a tributary of Pine Creek, I proceeded up-stream in the direction of Bear Creek Spire. As I surveyed its precipitous east face across a cirque at the head of the stream, I began to consider the possibility of an ascent here rather than to go around the north side of the mountain and try it from the west, as I had originally intended. Upon carefully scrutinizing it with binoculars, it appeared to be feasible with the exception of a tier of high cliffs extending across the base of the mountain. But these, it seemed, could be flanked by going around their southern end. Above the cliffs the top of the mountain looked accessible by making an ascending traverse to the right across a series of couloirs and ragged ribs.

After crossing the cirque I began the ascent. Confronted by glare ice in a chimney, I cut steps for a short distance up this and then climbed its left wall, gradually swinging around to the mouth of the first of the couloirs above the cliff belt. These couloirs rise for many hundreds of feet at an increasingly steep angle; they were difficult to climb because of the few holds and because of deep new snow on the less precipitous portions.

For hours I continued to ascend these chutes one after another. Whenever one became too difficult, I would cross a rib to the next on the right. Progress was slow on account of the need of removing snow from the narrow shelves along which I passed. At one

place a scanty ledge terminated in an overhang at the end of a buttress that broke away in cliffs. Here I left rucksack and ice axe behind and advanced to reconnoitre. The overhang proved to be simpler than it looked, but beyond it a heap of loose rocks lay at a precarious angle above the brink of a considerable drop. By availing myself of handholds, however, I managed to swing safely over them. I then returned and brought my impedimenta around the somewhat disconcerting point.

Eventually having gotten free of the couloirs, I came out on the upper portion of the face of the peak where I proceeded without much difficulty, except for an annoying amount of loose snow. The afternoon being by this time well advanced, I made haste as rapidly as conditions would permit in the direction of what appeared to be the top of the mountain, but upon arriving, found it to be only one of a number of points surmounting the jagged summit-arête, the highest being still some distance to the north. As most of the arête was very difficult to traverse, I dropped down the face for a short way and after consulting a map, continued along ledges until abreast of the estimated position of my goal. Climbing directly upward, I presently found myself again on the crest, this time only a few rods south from the summit-rock, a low, rounded monolith, scalable only from the north. Having reached this side of the rock and substituted tennis shoes for nailed boots, I pulled myself up to the top, an area of only a few square feet and thus effected the first ascent of the mountain from the east.

There I sat for a few minutes contemplating the view. Bear Creek Spire is one of the best examples in the Sierra Nevada of the Matterhorn type of peak, three jagged arêtes abruptly descending and radiating from its narrow summit. It commands a magnificent view of a hundred miles or more of the lofty crest of the Sierra which falls away abruptly to the arid basin east of the range, but on the west slopes down gradually to the great interior valley of California. As the setting autumn sun was already nearing the dark line of the Coast Range looming indistinctly a hundred miles away, I made haste to descend from my lofty perch. Scrambling down the west face of the mountain, I swung around its north one and over a ridge extending northeastward to the headwaters of Morgan Creek which brought me to camp some time after nightfall.

During the following May I camped again on Morgan Creek. After proceeding several miles up the snow-filled canyon, I again surveyed the east face of Bear Creek Spire. On account of the great amount of snow, the route followed the previous autumn appeared to be hazardous. Avalanches might fall at any moment. I therefore considered the feasibility of reaching the summit by way of the northeastern arête. If a steep—apparently almost vertical—pitch a hundred feet or thereabouts in height near the base of the mountain could be scaled, it looked possible to continue along the arête to the top of the mountain. The buttress being found scalable both by a small chimney and a ledge running along its north face, I followed the crest of the arête in the main for a few hundred feet, but upon encountering difficulties, began to pick a way along shelves on the southeastern face. Near the summit, I again ascended to the crest of the arête, but a furious wind soon drove me back to the ledges. Having reached the end of one of these, I removed my rucksack and rather carelessly set it down, in order to uncoil a rope with which I intended to pull up the sack after squirming up a narrow crevice. Hearing a slight sound, I turned and saw it slipping down. I could not grab for it for fear of losing my balance and going along too. After falling about seventy-five feet, it slid down snow for perhaps eight hundred feet, and then over the brink of a five-hundred-foot cliff. Far below it reappeared, bounding down over another snow slope some five hundred feet in width, and finally coming to rest at the edge of a cliff. "That's the end of camera, binoculars, etc.," I thought.

After scrambling up to the crest, I continued along it to the top of the mountain, upon which I remained but a few minutes, a heavy wind almost blowing me from it. Returning along the arête to a point abreast of the lower portion of the larger of the two snow-covered areas, I traversed it for some distance and then began working my way along the cliffs in the hope of recovering some of my property. Failing in this, I returned to the arête and descended by it to the foot of the cliff which I scaled with no better results. I did, however, observe several dark-looking objects lying on the surface of the snow, which I regarded as fragments of rocks dislodged from above.

On the ensuing morning I returned to Bear Creek Spire. After scaling the first cliff, I continued across the lower snow area toward the dark objects seen on the preceding evening. Considerably to my surprise, I discovered that they were various items of my equipment, most of them in a more or less damaged condition. One lens was missing from the binoculars, the box of the camera was badly out of shape, but lenses and shutter seemed intact, and an automatic pistol, carried for collecting purposes, was apparently none the worse for the thousand foot combination of drops and glissades. While going over the cliff the rucksack had burst, scattering its heavier contents like a charge of shrapnel, but the sack itself together with some of the lighter articles, continued across the snow for another five hundred feet.

Being only about a thousand feet below the summit, after retrieving most of the lost articles, I climbed it for the third time, finding the day much more pleasant than the preceding. The central cliff being scalable, I could doubtless have crossed the upper snow directly, thus ascending the peak by a third complete route up its east face. In all likelihood this can be done safely in favorable conditions. Without dangerous snow, one can readily ascend the southeastern arête and descend the northeastern one, thus accomplishing one of the finer climbs of the Sierra, and one of a superb peak neglected thus far by California mountaineers.