

The North Ridge of Mt. Owen

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THE N. ridge of Mt. Owen is a formidable looking ridge whether it is seen from the floor of Jackson Hole near the vicinity of the Square G Ranch or from Lake Solitude. Rising out of Cascade Canyon, a massive steep face 3000 ft. high converges into the N. ridge which is then outlined against the sky direct to the summit. On the E. side of the ridge rest a series of snowfields which can be reached from Cascade Canyon. The W. wall of the ridge rises directly out of Valhalla Canyon which lies at the foot of the W. ridge of the Grand Teton and the W. side of Mt. Owen.

As soon as Jack Durrance had arrived at Jenny Lake in early July, he and Henry Coulter reviewed their plans of the previous summer for an attack on the N. ridge of Mt. Owen. Henry and I—we had been in the Tetons three weeks before Jack came—while climbing the W. ledges of Mt. Owen from Valhalla Canyon¹ re-examined a possible route onto the N. ridge from the canyon floor via the N. W. ridge. We later decided to use this approach.

Durrance, Coulter and I made the first assault on July 23rd, but bad weather forced us to retreat after a two-hour bivouac on the lower section of the N. W. ridge.

After several days of rainy weather had kept us on the valley floor, we again climbed up to Valhalla on August 3rd.

We were up at 3.30 on the following morning. After packing our sacks we were hungry for the hot breakfast which Coulter was preparing. Upon examining the thick substance which was cooking on the primus stove, vague doubts arose in our minds. Could this be oatmeal? To our sorrow we found that the sticky burnt conglomeration was oatmeal. It was Coulter's first experience cooking it; and he had emptied a whole bag of the cereal into a small can, adding only a few drops of water. After futilely attempting to swallow our soggy breakfast, we left it for the conies to enjoy.

In less than an hour after leaving the sandy floor of Valhalla, we had climbed the scree slope leading out of the canyon onto the lower portion of the N. W. ridge and had recovered the pitons

¹ *A. A. J.* iv, 234.

and karabiners at the bivouac position of our first attempt. Walking along the ridge for 400 ft. we changed from boots to sneakers at the foot of the first tower. Five rope lengths over loose, rotten rock on the left flank of the ridge brought us in back of the first tower. Although its summit was only 60 ft. above us, we did not climb it because of the poor rock. Continuing on up the ridge for a rope length, the abrupt yellow face of the second tower forced us to make a right traverse to the edge of a large couloir.

Durrance, with a firm belay from Coulter, carefully edged along a six-foot ledge to the foot of an overhanging knob. As he poised there examining the route, a black rock beneath his foot gave way. It went banging down the couloir gathering other rocks with it. He then climbed up and disappeared around the corner. After Coulter went around, I followed. The holds were large, but awkwardly spaced, so that it was necessary at one point to trust the handholds and haul upwards while the feet struggled to find new holds.

We then traversed back to the left, to a long crack extending to the top of the second tower. The rock on this pitch was not very solid, and near the top Durrance used several pitons while overcoming the difficulties of the first real barrier of the climb. From the top of this tower we walked along a large scree slope bearing to the left. After a brief stop for a second breakfast on the ledge leading from the scree, we continued straight up a black band of rock to the foot of the third tower. Two rope lengths of excellent rock work on a solid ridge led to the top of this tower where we built a tall cairn.

Leaving the tower we bore slightly to the right for several short pitches until coming to an opening in the ridge. Going through this window we traversed to the right to the foot of a 120-ft. crack. The crack began at a gentle angle, moving diagonally to the right, becoming much steeper in the top portion. The excellent rock provided one of the most enjoyable parts of the climb.

Several ledges and a diagonal pitch to the left led to the next tower. We passed through an opening beneath it and climbed up its S. side. A few more short pitches and a traverse to the right of a group of blocks, and back to the left brought us to the base of the Great Yellow Tower.

Smooth walls soared for 350 ft. above us. This was the crux of the climb. We had examined the tower—it is the first tower seen on the N. ridge—from the trail to Lake Solitude—and had

doubted if it could be climbed. Closer observation revealed its smooth rock to be every bit as difficult as had been anticipated. The only weakness was a long crack extending from the foot almost to the summit of the tower. It left the W. face and came out on the N. side 100 ft. below the top. Could it be climbed? "Let's give it an hour's try!" said Durrance. He then began climbing the lower portion of the crack. Although there was an absence of good holds, he was soon 50 ft. above us. From a good belay point he brought Coulter and me up to him.

Here the sides of the chimney became even smoother. The critical moment was at hand. With a belay from Coulter, Durrance started up the crack. It was mostly friction work. He slowly gained height until 15 ft. above us he drove a piton into the first available crack. This was just below an evil-looking chock-stone which had the appearance of being ready to fall down the chimney at the slightest pressure. Cautiously, from a very delicate stance, he inched his way over the balanced boulder. After progressing several feet higher, he shouted down for Coulter to come up. Fearing the chock-stone might fall out, Coulter avoided the chimney by following a ledge below to the left, then onto a narrower ledge which was traversed to the right entering the chimney above the chock-stone. (Durrance could not safely have done this because he would have lacked an adequate belay.) After Coulter joined Durrance, I spent an unpleasant hour endeavoring to relax on a cold, narrow ledge, while Durrance and Coulter worked on the next pitch. Although I could not see them, I could hear the ringing of pitons as they were banged into the rock. At last a yell from above. I climbed onto the 15-ft. traverse and immediately wished that I had remained in the chimney. The traverse to enter the chimney was started as a foot wide down sloping ledge. There were no handholds—just tiny protuberances for the fingers at wide intervals. As the ledge progressed, it became narrower until a few feet from the chimney the toeholds had all but vanished. After regaining the chimney, I expected to find the rock rougher. Instead it continued to be smooth, and almost devoid of holds. Twenty feet above the chock-stone—20 ft. of delicate climbing—there was a small pocket in the crack. Resting here before beginning the next pitch, Durrance had driven in two pitons with three karabiners, and with good reason, for the next 80 ft. were also very delicate and required all of my concentration even with a direct belay from above.

At the top of this pitch, Durrance and Coulter, taking advantage of the sun which was shining upon us for the first time that morning, were enjoying a sun bath.

It was obvious that we could not continue the climb on the W. side of the tower. A perpendicular face completely blocked the way. Traversing around the block to the N. E., we looked down upon a large snowfield with the E. prong of Mt. Owen rising beyond it, seemingly within a stone's throw. A steep 80-ft. pitch, very smooth looking, led up to the summit of our yellow tower.

Durrance decided to climb directly up this pitch. Ten feet above the ledge on which Coulter and I were standing, he drove in a piton; after climbing another few feet he put in a second piton which was followed by a third 20 ft. from the top. Coulter removed the pitons as he climbed, then I began. This pitch was as smooth as the rock on the W. side of the tower. Half way up I began to be aware of the weight of the ice-axe and pack which I was carrying. Possibly this had some bearing on my request to Coulter that he maintain a tight belay on me.

We were now on the true N. ridge. As we faced the summit, Mt. Teewinot rose on our left; the W. ridge of the Grand Teton with its five stubby fingers was on the right. Before leaving the summit we built a huge cairn. While descending the tower on the S. side we looked up and saw to our consternation that we had built the cairn on a great overhanging slab, and it was a question whether it would remain in its present position or topple down into Valhalla.

Descending 200 ft. onto a wide glassy ledge, we drank deeply from several trickles of cold water which came from a snow patch above. Removing our parkas and heavy shirts, we lounged in the warm sun. While lazily eating lunch of chocolate, cheese, and bread, we observed two climbers who were moving about on the East Prong. At 2 o'clock, with a great amount of will power, we terminated our pleasant siesta and climbed back onto the ridge above, continuing on its E. flank. Two rope lengths led to a hidden chimney.

At the top of this 100-ft. chimney there was a chock-stone which apparently blocked the route. After a careful study of the problem, Durrance began climbing. The first 10 ft. were extremely smooth, requiring a great deal of care. A wet spot about half way up complicated the already difficult rock work. Upon

reaching the chock-stone, Durrance discovered an opening beneath it. He carefully wormed his body up through and disappeared. A few minutes later his voice floated down to us, "Come on up!" Coulter went next, removing the pitons as he climbed. Shortly he, too, disappeared behind the chock-stone. Several minutes went by. The rope which I was playing out was no longer moving. A terrific bellow burst down upon me. "I'm stuck!" he roared. There followed a tirade against all narrow chimneys and the carrying of heavy packs which were of no aid to the climber in such a position. After several more minutes of struggling, and with the aid of Durrance's tugging, he succeeded in squirming out of the narrow opening to join Jack.

I had some difficulty in getting started on the smooth rock at the beginning of the pitch. A few strong pulls on the rope from above, despite my protestations, speeded my progress. About 20 ft. up the pitch the chimney widened enough to permit the thrusting of a foot into it. Sixty feet higher was the chock-stone. To avoid Coulter's embarrassing procedure, I removed my pack and handed it to Coulter while Durrance kept a belay on us. With the pack off, it was a much easier matter to climb up to the others.

Leaving the chimney we went to the right over a steep pitch, then continued for two rope lengths on the E. flank to regain the ridge. Our route led up this skyline ridge to the summit of the second tower. From here we descended 70 ft. to the next notch. The following pitch on the ridge appeared to be too difficult to attempt since there remained only a few hours of daylight. Therefore, we descended to the W. for 100 ft. and traversed on yellow, loose rock, onto the W. face. At the end of the traverse a crawl, similar to that on the Owen route of the Grand Teton, brought us to a couloir about 400 ft. below the true summit. The couloir in three rope lengths led onto good rock. Several slabs were followed by a long traverse back to the left beneath the Owen chimney.

Once on the ridge again Durrance led the summit knob direct from the N., and we arrived on the summit at 5 o'clock.

We hurriedly scribbled in the register. The descent was via the summit chimney onto the S. W. ridge, which we left by a 60-ft. rappel onto the W. ledges. Climbing down the ledges for a few hundred feet, we entered the snow couloir of gunsight notch and glissaded for 400 ft. in good snow. It was 8 o'clock and almost completely dark when we slid down the snowfield leading into camp.