

Wheeler Peak by the Northeast Face

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A STUPENDOUS vertical unclimbed rock wall—this was the challenge that brought Don Clarke, Harvey Hickman, Si Ossofski, and me to Wheeler Peak in eastern Nevada. Only two weeks earlier the same challenge had brought Cecil Ouellette and Dick Woodford to the mountain, but after surveying the tremendous precipice of the Northeast Face they realized that they were not prepared for that type of climbing and made the ascent by a different route. From their experience and from Weldon Heald's articles in several mountaineering magazines, we knew that this would be no ordinary climb.* Few mountains in the United States or Canada tower so overwhelmingly above one as does Wheeler Peak when approached by way of its north cirque.

But let me begin at the beginning. We had set the Memorial Day weekend, 1957, for our assault. We drove north from Los Angeles with some trepidation because of the late spring storms, and when we reached Baker, Nevada, early in the morning we found that these storms had transformed the high country into an out-of-season winter wonderland. The ranger station at Baker was not open, but we were able to get information about the approach to the Northeast Face of Wheeler from Frank Kaufman, an old-timer of the region who had been with Weldon Heald on his 1956 visit when Matthes Glacier, in the north cirque, was discovered. We drove on to the public campground north of Lehman Caves National Monument.

From the campground a six-mile trail goes to Stella Lake, but we soon lost it in the snow which came all the way down to the 8000-foot level. It was soft slushy snow, the kind that makes travel seem like wading upstream with your boots on. A mile and a half from Stella Lake we turned southwest and continued to push our way uphill through snow, now nearly waist-deep. On one occasion Harvey sank in so deep that we had to dig him out. Base Camp was finally made at timberline, at 9500 feet. Here a portion of the Face was visible. As we looked at it, it became more and more apparent that this was going to be a real climb—one not likely to be accomplished in a one-day assault. It was necessary to plan for a bivouac on the cliff.

*See Bibliography at end of article.

Fortunately for us it froze that night so that when we started at 4 A.M. we were able to walk up the snow which lay in a long gully that led directly to the great cirque and out onto Matthes Glacier. As we approached it the Northeast Face looked more and more formidable. Hours and hours of fifth-class climbing were in sight. By this time we were willing to settle for a route that would "go"—not one that would offer sporting difficulties. A series of unconnected chimneys divides the face, with the right-hand side appearing to be at a less severe angle. A short snow-tongue led to the first of the chimneys and involved about an hour of step-cutting. The real climbing then began. We worked our way up over a series of high-angle ledges, which kept getting smaller and smaller as the cliff became steeper and steeper. Snow or running water now and then filled the handholds. Several times rocks whizzed by like bullets, but we soon managed to get out of their path.

It seems to be a fact that on the great faces of most high mountains the angle of the rock slabs is against the climber. Wheeler Peak is no exception. Moreover, cracks for pitons were hard to find as we progressed. They either didn't exist or were too shallow. Once I led the party into a cul-de-sac from which there was no assurance that even hours and hours of fifth and sixth class climbing would get us to the summit. We got out by a 50-foot back-track and found another route that brought us to a point about 800 vertical feet above the end of the snow tongue from which we had begun the climb.

We were now about a hundred feet to the right of the chimneys perched on a high-angle snowfield. Because of the rockfall danger we had no desire to return to the chimneys and the face above us appeared almost overhanging. Later in the year, with dry rock, a strong party might succeed in a direct assault, but in the present circumstances we had either to find a route farther to the right or give up the attempt. As we had no intention of doing the latter, we traversed cautiously across the snowfield for about 300 feet. There we found a promising route, with short fifth class pitches alternating with easy fourth class ones. We kept going until 8:30 that night, looking for a place large enough to make a bivouac. At last with our ice axes we cut away some of the snow on a ledge about four feet wide, where, tying into a piton, we spent a shivery night.

At 4:30 in the morning we were on our way again. After a few pitches of easy climbing we came to a long steep snow-gully that led directly to the summit rim. We had to cut steps at times, but for the most part we merely kicked them out. We were on the top at 7:30—a first ascent by the Northeast Face.

Bibliography

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