

A First Ascent on the North Face of Hallett Peak

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AT FOUR A.M., on the morning of July 28, 1956, a shrill wail pierced the brisk mountain air at Emerald Lake, Colorado. On this particular morning, however, being awakened by an alarm clock didn't bother me and I silenced the blatant thing without the desire of throwing it. Today would be a big one, one which both my climbing partner, Harvey Carter, and I had been looking forward to for a long time. Today, that vertical hulk of granite towering above us would be climbed for the first time.

This wall, the north face of Hallett Peak, is located in Rocky Mountain National Park, about two miles west of Bear Lake. Slightly lower and to the east of the main summit, this face is divided into three buttresses approximately eleven hundred feet high, and is composed of a very smooth and solid type of granite.

We were aware of the fact that the dividing chimney between the east and center buttresses had been climbed. According to all the information available, however, the outer face itself had never been done. This was our goal. We had already pushed a route two thirds of the way up the center of the west buttress, and this time we were determined to finish it.

The sun shone brightly as it rose into the blue of a clear sky. We ate our cold beans and tuna, and after securing the ropes and equipment, started up the moraine toward that vast silhouette of black and gray. An hour of arduous scrambling brought us to the base of the wall, and after climbing a relatively short series of ledges, we roped up and I started the first lead. Although fairly exposed, and with limited protection, I found this first lead quite simple, with an abundance of handholds and footholds. The top section of it put me in an extremely tight chimney; however, I avoided its drudgery by traversing out onto a wall requiring some rather ordinary edgework, around a corner and up to a good-sized ledge offering the first belay position. Harv soon followed, and upon reaching the ledge,

bypassed me in leapfrog fashion. We continued upward in this manner for some four hundred feet, the climbing becoming somewhat more difficult, most of it still of a full-sole variety with a great deal of stemming between ribs. So far, the climbing, although quite vertical, offered little need for pitons, for the irregularities, small and rounded as they were in some cases, made truly enjoyable climbing.

By ten o'clock we had gained a ledge large enough for both of us to stand on. Here, for the first time, we could really observe the magnificent scenery around us. Far to the west, the Never Summer Range was silhouetted against a cloudless sky. Directly opposite us, beyond the col, stood old and gentle Flattop, while hundreds of feet below lay the glacier and stream feeding the sparkling chain of Emerald, Dream, Nymph, and Bear lakes to the east.

Knowing that time was precious, we decided to push on. Having reached what we called the "lower traverse," we prepared ourselves for the more serious climbing, for from this point on, the character of the face changes considerably. Above, and to both sides, the rock is braced in a maze of smooth, vertical, and overhanging walls.

After Harv banged in an anchor piton and went on belay, I left the ledge and began working my way across the wall to the east. Although rather thin, and tremendously exposed, this traverse is, as we say, "all there," and offers a variety of full, and partial full-sole combinations. The first half of this lead, which is approximately one hundred and twenty feet in length, is well protected by three good pitons. The last sixty feet, however, which is the most difficult portion of the lead, yields a different situation as an absence of piton cracks forces the leader to complete the remaining distance without any security. Finishing upward and into a chimney, I secured the stance used on our last attempt and went on belay.

With Harv's arrival, I again moved out and started the next pitch, avoiding the slight overhang directly above by traversing to the right a few feet, then proceeding upward. This pitch, like most of the remainder of the face, bares to the climber a rather intriguing absence of irregularities demanding an extremely delicate edge-technique. Its verticality and smoothness, make either *Kletterschuhe* (preferably) or flexible boots with a narrow welt almost imperative.

Pressing on, we transcended this area, turned the "middle shoulder" and once again stood on the high-angle slab beneath that gigantic horizontal overhang, the highest point hitherto attained on the face.

This slab is quite climbable; however, immediately below, it has for its defence a rather unique shoulder, perhaps forty feet in height. Staring at

the brink of this wall, my mind rolled back to the previous year when I had first climbed it. I recalled very vividly, an experience which had taken place but a few feet from where I was now standing.

On that initial ascent I had started too far to the right and had begun working my way up this perpendicular buttress by using a somewhat limited series of minutely narrow, smooth, and rounded edges. Having seen a fracture midway up, I had felt quite confident of putting into this wall at least one piton for protection. No such luck. Upon reaching the crack, I began driving a small vertical only to see it bend like a piece of tinfoil. Being unusually tight and shallow, the crack allowed but a half-inch of penetration of the smallest piton I had. Bending it over flush with the wall would have rendered it sufficient for tension, but still useless for a fall. As this presented a problem quite common to that part of the face, I did not become unduly alarmed over the situation. To climb back down would certainly have been more hazardous than continuing upward. So, up I went. There just wouldn't be, there just *couldn't* be any mistakes. Continuing upward along a wall dealing not in footholds and handholds, but in minute edges and fingerholds, I neared the top and stood but a few feet beneath the slab. I raised my right foot, planting an inside edge on a rounded, miniature wrinkle. And as I took lateral pressure from the extremities of my right hand, I straightened my right leg, elevating myself to a position almost level with the lip of the slab. Slowly, I relaxed my left hand, swung it in an arc above my head, and at last, although not seeing it, I felt the prominence of a solid but somewhat scanty hold on the slab above. Feeling I had this one behind me, I released my right hand, and slid it along the wall to secure another hold above. Suddenly, a terrifying sensation pierced every fiber in my body. My right edge had given away, leaving me hanging by the fingertips of my left hand. Aghast, I glanced down the rope at my partner on his narrow ledge below, and saw on his face an equal look of apprehension. We both knew that this thin, white bond of nylon would do neither of us any good. His belay anchor had driven very poorly, and we had absolutely counted on my getting in an intermediate piton. Almost frantically, I searched the rock for another edge. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, though it was only a matter of seconds, I found one, regained my perch and practically shot up to the slab above. As I look back on that incident, I'm glad it happened, for I have rarely underestimated a lead since then. So much for the past.

Now, taking a slight amount of tension, I skirted the west lip of the overhang and found myself in a very tight, and overhanging chimney. With a little work, however, I managed to weasel out of its clutches, make

my way up to and beyond a shoulder and onto a comparatively roomy ledge where I set up the next belay position.

On Harv's arrival, a brief reconnaissance seemed in order. With a couple of exceptions, the overall difficulty of the rock above us appeared to taper off. The overhangs could be avoided, and according to our estimation, less than three hundred feet of upward climbing stood between us and the top. Things were looking up. We'd have to hurry, though, for a rising wind, and the rumble of thunder in the west told us our fair weather was coming to an end. Harv led off, and following a hundred-foot traverse to the right, across a rather broken up wall, established our next belay point. Leapfrogging, I passed this section, ambled upward some thirty feet of moderate climbing, and began another traverse to the east.

If the simplicity of these last thirty feet caused our mountain any ill feelings, she must have been overjoyed on this traverse. To say the very least it is quite thin, and even if there were cracks for iron, maintaining position to drive it would be doubtful. Of course, the weather wasn't helping us to any great extent as it had already begun to sprinkle, and a small amount of electricity began making itself felt.

Once across this "upper traverse," another thirty feet of vertical mod-eracy put me on a shelf beneath the last major overhang. Although this overhang seemed to span a great portion of the face, a small chimney several yards to our left appeared to sever its barrier, giving feasible access to the summit. Traversing eastward, Harv engaged this next rope-length, and soon disappeared into the chimney. Being somewhat narrow and awkward at its base, this chimney rises vertically for approximately eighty feet, widening out as it goes, then cuts more deeply into the face, allowing very simple passage off the face by means of a broken series of ledges. These lower eighty feet, however, offer just about every technique of climbing known, and are truly enjoyable.

Borne with an anticipation of victory, we continued upward, and on the third lead Harv scrambled out of the chimney and on to the gentle, rounded boulders of the summit ridge. Seconds later I joined him.

As the worst of the storm had missed us, with nature now concentrating her artillery in the vicinity of Estes Park, we strolled up the ridge toward the main summit. The North Face was ours.