

# West Face of the South Tower of Howser Spire

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ONE OF the great mysteries in the Bugaboos has been the west faces of the Howser Spires, which are not only the most magnificent walls in the range but are on the highest and most alpine peaks. Since the conquest of most of the great faces and routes on the fore-peaks in the past three years, climbers have turned their eyes from Snowpatch, Bugaboo and Pigeon to the Howser Spires. At the end of the good weather in 1959 I had the opportunity to make a quick first-hand appraisal of the "back side" of the South Tower with Herb Staley and John Rupley. From camp at Pigeon Col we climbed down the Pigeon Icefall and traversed around to the low, west spur of the South Tower. What we saw was an overwhelming panorama of granite buttresses and couloirs streaking from jagged summit ridges into some of the most awesome canyons any of us had ever seen.

Our immediate reaction was: Patagonia. The Howsers looked like FitzRoy and Cerro Torre and their satellites all grouped together. The coloring was different from the Bugaboo fore-peaks; apparently there is an absence of lichen, for the rock is very white. Giant columns of rock soared upward for 2000 feet or more. Couloirs sank to the depths streaked with black ice, and below were icefalls that ended in hanging valleys, which plunged into smooth cirques directly into the forested valley. We were surely the first humans to stand so close to these awesome walls, walls that were so close to many other climbers but yet inhospitably far. No climber had ever set foot on these faces, and above us, perhaps 3500 feet vertically, was the second-highest peak in the Bugaboos, the South Tower, at that time still only scaled twice. Little did we suspect that 1961 would bring three more ascents, one by the normal route as well as the conquest of the direct east and west faces.

An hour of scrambling among giant granite blocks took the three of us

to a point where the great west buttress of the South Tower swept upward from its basal glaciers and spurs. The boulders turned upward into the initial wall. There was a fourth-class lead, then two long pitches where we used pitons for protection. First I went up an easy layback and then made a 5.7 move (Sierra Club decimal system) to a ledge. The next lead was an inside corner with friction and a series of jam-cracks for more than 150 feet, a good deal of it 5.6. Here the buttress steepens, and a beautiful series of cracks veered upward on the next giant "step." Looking upward, we knew that here was a climb of high Yosemite standards, almost 2500 feet in height, and subject to all the dangers of mountaineering in an alpine range. A fast team would require full bivouac equipment, water, and food for probably two or three days of continuous climbing. It was apparent that this climb was a classic; from any vantage point the buttress swept up in architectural loveliness. Its clean line, obvious exposure, and lack of any transverse ledges outlined it as the most spectacular route on the western Howser walls. And, above all, the most exciting part of it to a rock-climbing alpinist was the evident fact that there was only one route, no veering—just one line up the sweeping buttress. Either it could be forced or not. A great deal would depend on the party, the weather, and perhaps luck.

In the summer of 1961, Yvon Chouinard and I had been climbing in Canada since mid-July and concentrated on the Bugaboos early in August. Cold but clear skies made us decide first to climb new wall routes on Pigeon Spire and on the direct east face of the South Tower, with the hope that the weather would warm and become more stable for our long assault. Preparing for the climb, we completely circled the Howser Spires just above timberline in an arduous and taxing day, then left bivouac gear and fixed ropes at the top of the two pitches climbed earlier. This, we felt, would give us a chance to get onto the next section of the buttress with a minimum of time and effort.

Our ascent of the South Tower via the east face a few days before was very helpful. We located the rappel points, placed slings or pitons, and came to the conclusion that it would be safe to make the rappel over the ice wall on the regular route and the short trek down to our camp at Pigeon Col in *kletterschube*, after having done this first with regular climbing boots. In this way we were able to leave crampons, ice axes and climbing boots at the base of the western buttress and climb with only *kletterschube*. If we were successful, John Rupley and his wife Illa, who were now also camped at the col, would loan us enough equipment to retrieve the gear left at the foot of the buttress.

Chouinard was very optimistic that we could force the climb in two days; we took along enough food and water for 2½ days, as well as our bivouac gear and a carefully selected stock of Chouinard pitons and carabiners, bolt kit and stirrups. We usually hauled up one load each pitch while the second man carried the second rucksack. Our pitons were all chrome-alloy, ranging from the thinnest knife-blades to 4-inch specially treated aluminum bong-bongs, which Yvon had made.

Climbing up the fixed lines on the first two pitches was almost disastrous; on the second lead a "snafflehound" had chewed through two strands of the three-strand nylon. Luckily it held, and luckily it was a spare rope we could leave behind. Pitch three had a 5.7 jam-crack that had one difficult overhanging move and some easy direct-aid climbing (9 pitons). Pitch four had 5.6 shallow jam-cracks, 6.5 pitoning, and then 5.3 laybacks. Pitch five was third class for 80 feet and then 5.4 for 110 feet of layback. Pitch six was a one-piton aid, then 5.4 climbing on perfect rock. Pitch seven used five pitons on the beginning of a prominent dihedral 250 feet high and followed a single crack for 130 feet (5.7) with one piton aid in overhang. Pitch eight continued up the dihedral for 150 feet, using 17 pitons (6.3 and 5.5). Pitch nine was fourth class and pitch ten was a long chimney against a series of exposed blocks. Pitch eleven was a 5.5 chimney for 110 feet and the next pitch ascended a crack for 100 feet, followed by fourth-class blocks to the base of the great white headwall.

The exposure and the starkness of the route at this point become unique, as one is climbing on the narrow headwall between the terrible drop to the north couloir and the sweep of the great south face. Pitch 14 was nailing up a single large crack; then came a nine-piton pitch of 130 feet in a corner. This took us to the base of the great chimney on the white headwall. We had alternated leads all the way, and Yvon had climbed about two-thirds of this one when darkness set in. We hastily retreated to a sandy ledge beneath pitch 14, leaving ropes behind. After sipping water and eating some bivouac food, we snoozed the night through on the ledge. The stars were bright, and although the breeze had a chill, it was a perfect night for such a bivouac. Later a veil blotted out most of the stars. Although we felt anxiety about the weather upon awakening, the day improved as we climbed.

The first pitch of the continuous headwall (150 feet) took 16 pitons (6.4 nailing), and continued from a hanging belay-in-stirrups for 13 more pitons (140 feet) into the chimney on the right. Pitch 18 followed the chimney as it widened, using occasional pitons for safety; the next pitch, continuing up the chimney, used six pitons, only one of which was for

aid. We then continued 40 feet in the chimney, past a prominent block, and then after some concern about a possible exit we nailed up the left wall of a dihedral chimney with the help of knife-blades (6.5) to easy cracks on the left side of the ridge. Pitch 21 and 22 were 5.2 up cracks and along a sharp arête. Pitch 23 dropped down from a crest notch and traversed right. From there to the summit was another 400 feet of fourth-class climbing and scrambling. We ate some of the food and drank the remainder of our water; it had been a strenuous climb and the continuousness of the jam-cracks was exhausting. A summit rest was refreshing, and a yodel assured us that our support party knew we were successful. In addition to anchors, the ascent had taken 135 pitons; no bolts were used and no pitons were left behind.

After admiring the Purcell and Selkirk scenery for an hour, we began the descent, which finally culminated in some cool footwork rappelling down the icewall, over the schrund, and running down the sun-softened glacier slopes to camp. The weather remained good another day, allowing us comfortably to retrieve our boots and equipment at the base of the buttress. Looking up, it appeared more hospitable, but only the knowledge that we had climbed it made it so.

#### *Summary of Statistics*

AREA: Bugaboo Group, Purcell Range, British Columbia, Canada.

ASCENT: West face of Howser Spire, 10,750 feet, August 16, 1961—  
first ascent.

PERSONNEL: Fred Beckey, Yvon Chouinard.

