# Tehipite Dome

FRED BECKEY

IF TEHIPITE DOME were in Yosemite Valley, it would come close to rivaling El Capitan in height and grandeur. But it is located in the wilderness of the Middle Fork of the Kings River, and here it has no rival. Its 7700-foot summit towers 3600 feet above the glaciated valley floor, and of this, about 2500 feet is a rounded dome, facing west, south, and east. On the north a gentle ridge connects it to a wooded spur. Standing next to an abandoned prospector's cabin, after a 21-mile hike from the North Fork of the Kings, Ken Weeks and I just shook our heads in despair. Not only were we cut off from our projected assault of the immense south face by a torrent called Crown Creek, but the majesty and size of the Dome was simply overwhelming. It may be the biggest dome in the world, and looking up, it was unbelievably more impressive than photographs would have had us believe.

The canyon of the Kings here is most spectacular, with miles of scooped slab walls, some with very impressive waterfalls. The south wall near the Dome is said to rise 6000 feet in a horizontal distance of only two miles. As a climbing project, Tehipite Dome has been a fireside topic for many years, but a serious assault did not materialize until our project in mid-May of 1963. Many climbers wanted to be the first to conquer the Dome, but the distance from civilization was a discouraging factor, and there was a reasonable feeling that "nobody would attempt it for a few years yet".

I felt the time was ripe, especially after hearing rumors of several projected groups going after it in the summer. To explore its base and reconnoiter a route, Weeks and I spent a trying three days carrying heavy loads up and down, much of it through breakable snow. Studying the face of the Dome from Kings Canyon, we concluded that not only was it more than a two-man project, but that we would have to revise our plan of attack. The rushing river and the valley heat brought us to a unique decision: rather than fight a torrent, yucca plants, and rattlesnakes between the valley floor and the foot of the Dome proper, why not tackle it from a base camp above and behind the Dome? The trail approach was better, and though it looked like rough going, it appeared that it was possible to back-pack climbing gear down to the base via rock-

slides and cliffs to the east of the Dome. A transverse ledge about 1300 feet below the summit would give us another supply access, this time from the west. The entire climb and its preparation had the makings of an expedition, but our spirits rose with the hope that this new plan would be the key to success.

The tough climb back out of the valley with loads took toll of our time and energy. We had to forgo a real reconnaissance of the Dome, but we left our climbing and sleeping equipment in cache bags hung in a tree in Crown Valley, some six miles from the "back" of the Dome. A week later, we returned with even heavier loads and reinforced by Herb Swedlund and John Ahern. Since late snow on the trails prevented the use of packhorses, we had to carry extra loads and make relays to a campsite near the back of the Dome. Ahern and I hiked in first, leaving a "marked" trail for a final mile to our Dome Camp, with the hope that Swedlund and Weeks would find us in two days.

Our first reconnaissance proved to be a 17-hour day, and by the time we made the tedious climb in the dark back up to camp we were talking to ourselves. But as we were successful in finding a way to the base of our proposed route directly up the center of the south face, this had been a key day in our eventual success, although it hardly seemed like it at the time. We had descended some 2500 feet of steep mountainside, with brush descents, traverses, and some moderate rock climbing. A terribly exposed cliff band almost turned us back — and this would have been the end of the entire project. However, after much scouting and probing, we were able to make a series of rappels from hanging trees. We returned the following day, left fixed ropes, and carried climbing gear across a comfortable ledge to a promontory on the face. We studied three possible crack lines and finally selected the most elegant possible route. It started up a crack behind a 200-foot pillar leaning against the main wall, then followed a very steep and exposed crack system just a few feet east of the *nose* that forms the center of the Dome. Ahern and I then spent a day relaying loads to our Base Camp and the following morning descended to the starting point and prusiked two leads up ropes that we had left from a start on the wall on the second reconnaissance day. This section involved a tricky pendulum traverse, a long and difficult flaring chimney, and a nasty crack that was extremely hard climbing, some of it free and some of it aid. Knife blades were put to use, and in two places it was necessary to place bolts. In retrospect, this was one of the two hardest pitches on the entire climb.

An overhanging wide-angle crack took bong-bongs, but the free climbing, when the crack widened, was difficult and almost caused a fall. A

full pitch on the very *nose* was exposed and took many hours of difficult piton placing, interspersed with some hard free moves. Finally it was possible to make a tension-traverse left into a chimney. Here I direct-aided up a loose offset crack and climbed a very severe, unprotected fifty-foot slanting ramp to a shallow chimney. Night was falling, so it was bivouac time. We sat up most of the night, eating and quenching our thirst in small spurts to pass the time. In the morning I continued up a difficult chimney that had been the subject of jamming, and finally bolting, in the dusk of the evening before. We caught a glimpse of our two partners who had been packing loads to the upper section of the face via the western transverse ledge. More annoying bolting finally led us out of an impossible chimney, and in another two hours we reached the big ledge. Here we met Weeks and Swedlund and learned that they had not only set up a fine cache of supplies and food but had climbed four pitches.

The route above the ledge starts out on overhanging brush leading into a deep chimney on the west side of an immense tower. A full pitch of difficult wide stemming brings one to a pitch of scrambling, then a full pitch of marvellous flake-and-crack work, some free and some aid, above the tower on the exposed main face. Hauling loads behind us, Swedlund and I continued on that afternoon, first prusiking the fixed ropes he and Weeks had established, and then exploring the fifth lead above the ledge. Here a droopy cloud ceiling suddenly cut loose with one of the worst cloudbursts I have ever seen. We slid and rappelled in near panic down the face and the chimney; if it had not been for the fixed ropes, we would have been in trouble; as it was, we were half-drowned in the chimney. The lack of cracks and non-porous nature of the Dome's sheer face made the granite a sheet of rushing water. The slightest depression or crack became a vertical water-cascade. Soaked and shivering, we covered the cache the best we could and all made our way across the slippery ledge without mishap. Still in pouring rain, we clambered up gullies to our Base Camp, and somehow got a much-needed fire going with the help of bacon fat Weeks had saved.

During the night the cloud cover vanished, and the morning, June 2, was brilliant. We planned to push the lead ropes up the face another day, and then make a final push with bivouac gear after another trek out for more food. While Weeks and Ahern were hauling supplies up the deep chimney, Swedlund and I prusiked up to our high mark and continued up the dihedral system that became our route line. I worked up an overhanging layback that was difficult but went free to the end of a lead. Swedlund then spent several hours nailing up a pitch that was a slanting overhang.

We were now far above the tower, where we could see our companions below. It was still early afternoon; we decided to make one more lead and then leave all ropes hanging for the finale. The dihedral flared out badly, forcing me to do a great deal of hand-jamming and awkward pressure work with the right shoulder. It was slow going. Fortunately the protection opportunities were adequate, and once past a really hard crux move, I saw that the angle of the wall began to decrease. Also, knobs and solution holds were beginning to appear. After Herb arrived, we held a war-council and decided to risk a lead further. Sensing a victory that day, because of the lessening angle and the appearance of knobs, we took only a selection of iron, some slings, and with the one rope began to climb like demons. After a pitch Herb yelled that it looked even better; so we continued up on several pitches of marvellous, exposed face climbing, always with just sufficient knobs. Piton cracks vanished and made protection a major worry, but the climbing was some of the most enjoyable difficult rock I have ever seen. At a crucial smooth slab, the dihedral suddenly re-appeared, much to our relief. Swedlund made a fine direct-aid maneuver around a corner, on a slanting overhang, and then swung left from a piton to a bush. "Climb like mad" was the shout, "I think we'll make it." That was good news, for in an hour we would either have to be off, or sit out the night with no food or water.

Climbing with a feverish passion for two pitches put us on a slab that led out into a lower angle. We unroped here and rushed, panting, to the top, over the top, and on to camp just as night took over. When our companions arrived by flashlight, we confirmed the successful news, and decided to divide the party again, to facilitate the pack-out and enable them to complete the ascent. We were quite low on food at this point, so Swedlund and I made the two-day return hike, packing extra equipment out at the same time. In the meantime, Weeks and Ahern repeated the final route in beautiful weather, and 'cleaned' the wall of pitons and all hanging ropes. Then the four of us made the final pack-out to the Wishon Dam with heavy loads. It had been an expeditionary rock climb, and one of the great "classics" of the Sierra Nevada had been successfully conquered. We rated the entire climb as a NCCS V-8-A3. There were seventeen leads, and we used 100 pitons and ten bolts.

*Summary of Statistics*

AREA: Kings Canyon National Park, California.

ASCENT: First ascent of south face of Tehipite Dome, June 2, 1963 (Swedlund, Beckey); June 3 (Ahern, Weeks).

PERSONNEL: Fred Beckey, John C. Ahern, Herbert Swedlund, Kenneth Weeks.