

Mount Hooker's North Face

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THE GOLDEN Age of Mountaineering is still with us on great, impressive faces in the Wind River Range. The 1800-foot north face of Mount Hooker was one of the better-known, though not the only one of these unclimbed walls. After a week of climbing in the Cirque of the Towers region, Royal Robbins, Charlie Raymond and I made a reconnaissance of it from Base Camp at Graves Lake. The face has a prow-like bend in the middle, which appears in sharp, nearly vertical profile as you approach from the lake. A network of cracks cover it, and two long, sloping ledges high up slash across the left side. The upper one, which we dubbed Der Main Ledge, diagonals up to the summit, and the lower one, Der Minor Ledge, parallels it a few hundred feet below. Its appearance from the base discourages the climber and it is easy to see why at least two other parties surveyed the wall but did not climb it. Although the face is covered with a maze of cracks, there is no obvious line of attack. Various cracks appear climbable but many are useless because they either have inaccessible beginnings or lead nowhere. We noticed a promising series of chimneys and jam-cracks, starting 800 feet above the ground. They lay on the prow and led to Der Minor Ledge and eventually the summit. The route on this chimney system was circuitous and had blank sections but seemed feasible.

When we started, we were uncertain about parts of the route through the lower section and expected to place more bolts than we actually did. The climbing began with moderate difficulty, and 250 feet up we traversed to a direct-aid crack in an open book. One lead up the open book brought us to the giant detached flake that had been the final discouragement to one of the previous party's attempt and marked their high point. We used three bolts interspersed with pitons behind the ominous, creaking flake to gain the crack beyond it. This was our first day's high point and we rappelled down to a ledge 200 feet below for the night.

We prusiked up our fixed lines the next morning and spent the rest of the day crossing a 300-foot relatively blank section to the chimney

system we had seen from below. I was prusiking with the gear and had a lot of time on my hands, as is usual if the climbing party is doing continuously difficult direct aid. Hauling is a tiring drudgery but it does have its advantages. When one prusiks past the leader's pitons before the second man has reached and removed them and sees how many are sticking out for most of their length or how insignificant are the nubbins on which a fifti-hook was used, one can not help being glad it was someone else's turn to lead.

Charlie and I spent most of the afternoon hanging side by side from a couple of bolts on a vertical holdless wall, while Royal led the pitch above. The wind coming from the peaks to the west swung us to and fro in our belay seats. An occasional gust would rattle our parka hoods, about our heads and we would have to shift our feet to maintain balance. The strong wind made the delicate climbing that Royal was doing nerve-racking. Once he sandwiched three pitons together in a crack. Just the tips were caught, but they held his weight. After Royal reached the crack system at dusk, he rappelled down to join us at the bolts. Since he placed several in a horizontal row, it was ideal for hanging our bivouac hammocks. The wind died by evening, but as the night wore on, I wished that I had an elephant's foot to supplement my down jacket.

Starting in the morning from the hanging bivouac was chaotic. Ropes and slings ran everywhere in a tangled spiderweb. Pitons hung in clumps here and there, and everything was suspended on the bolts in the wrong order. Whatever carabiner you wanted to unclip was always on the bottom with ten others clipped on top of it. We finally untangled the whole mess and began climbing. Much of the chimney system was fifth class, as we had anticipated, and the direct aid was fairly easy, but there was unsound rock. On one pitch Charlie had to lead past a large, detached flake using it as a part of a jam-crack and finally did a mantel-shelf move on top of it. Belaying was comfortable as there were usually ledges to sit where it was tempting to doze in the warm afternoon sun. We tension-climbed to the right to a large dihedral with an overhang part way up and hurried in the waning hours of the afternoon to make Der Minor Ledge by nightfall. The dihedral was mostly direct aid but had some beautiful free climbing near the top of it. We were benighted 30 feet below Der Minor Ledge but found another ledge big enough to lie down on.

The fourth morning began with a short but spectacular traverse, a perfect example of extremes. One minute we were sitting on a relatively spacious ledge eating breakfast and sipping tea and the next we were traversing above a 1500-foot drop. Once on Der Minor Ledge, we

walked along it to a steep crack. Both pitches of this were very difficult free climbing and the first one was complicated by icy water running down the rock. We followed the crack to Der Main Ledge along which we walked to the right for 200 yards. Then we were on top and before us lay a broad rocky meadow full of green grass and yellow wild flowers. Down the middle ran a small stream. Beyond stood the summit a few hundred feet higher, but it was hand-in-the-pocket walking all the way.

Summary of Statistics.

AREA: Wind River Range, Wyoming.

ASCENT: First ascent of north face, Mount Hooker, July 22 to 25, 1964.

TECHNICAL DATA: NCCS VI, F9, A4; 19 pitches, 6 sling belays; 207 pitons, 13 bolts, 8 fifi-hooks.

PERSONNEL: Richard K. McCracken, Charles Raymond, Royal Robbins.

