

Canadian Rockies North Faces

Assiniboine and Edith Cavell

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The mystery of life is not a problem to be solved, but a reality to be experienced.

—VAN DER LEEUW

THE FOURTH OF JULY is a thin time for climbers in Yosemite, for with it come the heat and the multitudes. There was a sense of lassitude in Camp IV, and only a few of us were left. It was time to be moving on. But where? I had vague plans for the Bugaboos or Wind Rivers, but somehow they never materialized, and so, in desperation I went to the Tetons, where, I was assured, everyone would be.

Mountain areas either grip me or they don't; and the Tetons didn't, they simply were not exciting. Yet it was really pleasant to camp in the high canyons, wander through the glorious wildflowers, and let the days drift by; but after a week or so I became impatient. I planned to return at the end of the season for a rest cure; now I was looking for action.

Yvon Chouinard and Joe Faint were planning to go to Canada, and I hastily got myself invited too. Canada, to many American mountaineers, means the Bugaboos. Yes, they have heard of the Rockies, but the weather is bad and the rock is like chalk.

Anyway, rock or chalk, we eased off to the North, stopping for supposedly fantastic fishing now and then, but finding none. At the Canadian border our old Chevy and scruffy appearance were backed up by the unlikely tale that we each had a couple of hundred dollars. Canadians, it would seem, only want affluent tourists; some friends were repulsed at the checkpoint last year. Dishonest, poor, but free, we arrived in the Rockies.

The Alpine Club of Canada has a fine clubhouse in Banff—so pleasant, in fact, that it is quite an effort to do anything. As befits an organization affiliated to the Alpine Club, the sitting room walls are adorned with

venerable mountain pictures of long forgotten meaning and origin. Some half dozen of these were of Assiniboine, and if we could ever figure out which face was which, we hoped to try the north face. After much anguish and confusion we discovered that it was indeed unclimbed, and ended up with a pile of gear at the beginning of the trail.

Being a product of the modern "*téléphérique*" school of alpinism, this back packing was quite an experience for me. Some six hours and much experience later we arrived at our remote camp, to find sixty Sierra Club people already there. We peered rather apprehensively, at the face, and went to sleep with that strange mixture of calm and tension.

The north face has a well defined shoulder on the left side, at about one-third of the height, and from the glacier below we picked out the possibilities on the upper section. Starting about midday, we climbed the couloir to the right of the shoulder. Joe had recently done the Nisqually route on Mount Rainier—and been fined to boot, for going unroped on a beaten track on the glacier—and found this about the same standard. No climbing story is complete without an epic with the weather, and it looked as if ours would begin any minute. Storm clouds began heaping up to our west and covered the nearby valleys with depressing speed. I've never found a *cagoule* that was waterproof and resigned myself to a dismal night.

But next morning was beautiful; what a sunrise! Frozen boots and cold fingers also meant the hard ice we wanted to keep the mountain quiet. We began by moving together, using axe, ice dagger and front points. Personally, I find this rather unnerving. It is uncomfortably close to the popular conception of climbing: "But if one of you falls, don't you all go together?" To which, in this case, one could only give a doleful "yes." A gully led up through the prominent red rock band, and here the ice became tougher and steeper, and so we began, thankfully, to belay.

How many hours, I wonder, have we all not spent, guidebook in hand, searching for "obvious trees" and "prominent overhangs"? Anyway, this is the only red rock band, and was great climbing. We had agreed to each lead part of the climb, and on the principle of "the devil you know" I had taken the first section. I bridged up the gully with one foot on the rock, the other on the ice, while Chouinard, on the other hand, came straight up the ice—once a rock climber . . . always a rock climber! Above us the face was a uniform ice slope, with small rock outcrops now and then. If possible, we finished a lead on these, getting some useful belays from jammed nuts, whereas pitons had a tendency to shatter the rock. At a pause for food Yvon remarked that it reminded him of the

north face of the Matterhorn, which, depending on your view point, was encouraging or maybe not. I wished I had double boots; crampon straps too tight again. We cut steps across a leftward slanting gully that leads to the ridge and climbed a rock rib to its right. Success looked certain, and life felt pretty good. The rock here was poor and about midday we reached the ridge, and scrambled to the summit.

The view onto the east face was distinctly harrowing; steep, plastered in ice, and apparently unstable, a challenge for the seventies perhaps. With excessive caution we clung to the ridge, and looked at the appalling prospect.

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Chouinard had decided that it was to be an ice-climbing year, but one route we had our eye on had just been done, and others we knew of were either too far away or too hairy. Jasper has the Athabasca Hotel, a good bakery, and Mount Edith Cavell is visible from the town, so on a diet of pie and ale, we started up the north face. Beckey, Chouinard and Doody had climbed to the main summit in 1961 (*A.A.J.*, 1962, 13:1, pp. 53-56), but the east summit has a particularly fine wall and rib leading up to it which looked just right.

At a quarter of the height there is a snow patch, and we began in shattered yellow rock to the right of it, underneath the east summit. After a few hundred feet we worked left into a crack system. The strata dipped away from us, giving clear-cut holds, and the standard was fairly sustained at F7, rock made for climbing. As the light was failing, we arrived at the ledge system, which is some 1200 feet up, and cleared a protected bivouac site.

Settled into our sleeping gear and chewing salami and cheese, we turned the conversation to other bivouacs. I can clearly recall other nights on the mountains, with cold and clouds, friendship and the stars. How vivid they all were and still are—how few nights in the city stand out in my mind. The silence and the slow painful dawn that never comes. The need to start and the reluctance to move, the awesome beauty of our lifeless world. Can it be explained, this fine madness?

A golden sun warmed us as we moved left along the ledges, and then began the long haul. We rapidly scrambled up broken rock and a snow slope before meeting the buttress at about 2000 feet. The climbing was really fine, on marvellous rock; I've seldom felt so inspired. It was an infectious enthusiasm. We had that sensation of being on a big mountain and being committed to it. A steep wall made us move left into an icy scoop, but this was a definite mistake, for the wall turned out to have a

hidden jam crack. Higher we met icy conditions and put on our crampons. Snow arêtes, ice gullies, ice-plastered rock and steep walls, this was mixed climbing par excellence.

The valley below was already in shadow as we began to near the top, and it was nine P.M. when I followed the others through the summit cornice—what a day it had been! We gazed at all the peaks around us and were amazed again at the wealth of climbing in the Rockies. The golden age has hardly begun.

Summary of Statistics.

AREA: Canadian Rockies.

NEW ROUTES: Mount Assiniboine, north face, first ascent, July 23 and 24, 1967, NCCS IV, F7.

Mount Edith Cavell, east summit, north face, first ascent, July 31 and August 1, 1967, NCCS, V, F8.

PERSONNEL: Yvon Chouinard, Joe Faint, Chris Jones

