

Climbing in the Toulumne Meadows

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"HOW ABOUT *The Coming*?" I waited for a reaction. "That's pretty good." "See, it's near *Chartres* and sorta fits with the spiritual connotations of the cathedral. How about it? Isn't 'coming' spiritual?"

Toulumne Meadows is one of the better places to play the route-naming game, and Bob Kamps is one of the better people to play the game with. He is good because he has had practice: practice at Yosemite, Tahquitz, the Needles in South Dakota, Toulumne Meadows and elsewhere. So much practice in fact, that one wonders if he climbs new routes only to name them; especially when he suggests names before the climb is done! We were trying to decide on a name for a new route we had just completed on a dome in Toulumne. We finally decided on *The Coming*. This was a typical name for a rock-climbing route in the sixties—a name with a double meaning and provocative connotations. And not only was the name fashionable, so was the climb. The route had been hard and entirely without aid. Of the many new climbs in Toulumne Meadows, only one is not free.

While Yosemite Valley is undoubtedly the finest area for rock climbing in all of Yosemite Park, the climbs in nearby Toulumne Meadows have certain advantages over those in the Valley. For one thing, Toulumne is at least 10° to 20° cooler in the summer. There are very few climbers who do not consider this an advantage. (Chuck Pratt is perhaps the sole exception. Some climbers contend that Chuck is so fond of hot weather that he has never seen snow and knows what ice looks like only because it comes with cokes.)

Another advantage to climbs in Toulumne has to do with the rock. The granite is generally not smooth or polished like Yosemite granite. Often,

one finds the rock studded with knobs and crystals; and, because the climbs are on domes rather than nearly vertical cliffs, slippery and strenuous crack climbing is a rarity. With such assets, one would expect that Toulumne would be "climbed out." It is not, and perhaps this is its main attraction. Of the eight or ten domes close to the road (the Tioga Pass road, one-and-a-half hours from Yosemite), only one, Fairview Dome, is approaching saturation. Five routes have been done on the dome, and there seems to be room for only two more significant lines.

Because the domes in Toulumne are susceptible to free climbing, climbers have always enjoyed "pushing" aid routes free and doing all-free first ascents. In late June, Royal Robbins, Pat Ament and I stood at the bottom of an arch on Daff Dome (dome across from Fairview) which Pat aptly described as "the end." This 400-foot right-facing arch (The Kor Book) had been done all free by Bob Kamps and TM Herbert a year or so earlier, though none of us could quite see how. Ament led off, rubbed his hands in the new fad—chalk—and rapidly vanished into a white cloud. After being deceived about precisely where the route should go, he returned to us rather wide-eyed. Royal also got off route but soon committed himself to some odd motions in the proper crack. Shortly, we were all committed to similar contortions until the beginning of the final lead. This pitch was a 150-foot layback. No resting, just laybacking. I led off while Royal snapped pictures from below (these would show nothing but butt). No single move seemed to be over 5.7 or 5.8, but very few seemed to be under that difficulty. Finally it was over and Ament came up removing the pins. Royal followed, claiming he was a bit "flamed-out" (from the solo ascent of the Muir Wall perhaps?) but showing no signs of it.

Climbers interested in free climbs such as those in Toulumne are also interested in ratings, and climbers are by no means agreed on how to rate climbs. Where does 5.10 end and 5.11 begin? Is a given *pitch* 5.9 even if there are ten *moves* of 5.9? These are questions sometimes debated in Toulumne. After completing various climbs, Royal, Steve Roper, Bob Kamps, Pat Ament and I gently discussed a few such minor points. Royal was for including the sustained aspect of difficulty in the number rating: a continuous pitch of many 5.8 moves, like the final pitch of the Kor Book, should be rated 5.9 or 5.10. Bob was for using the number only to indicate the maximum move difficulty on a pitch: a pitch with many moves of 5.8 should be rated 5.8, as is a pitch with one or two such moves. Bob felt that the route description should include the informa-

tion that the pitch is sustained; this was not the job of the number. Ament and I looked on as people began waving wine bottles. "Grown men," whispered Ament.

Before the evening was over, everyone said far too much about much too much and drank even more. Royal soared into a peculiar orbit of overblown description and logic. In this state, "days *slowly* explode into being," and TM Herbert is both pop artist and laxative.¹ I countered the expansive flight with the stifling philosophy of idealization: whenever the conversation hit on ratings, I argued for some supreme system free of any consideration but move difficulty and claimed that climbers should never include exposure, protection or continuity in the numerical rating. "But they already do" was someone's reasonable reply.

Upon hearing such a conversation as this one, TM Herbert would probably have said, "All right, to your corners. At the sound of the bong you'll have one minute. Bottles and logs permitted." But TM didn't arrive in Toulumne until a week or so later. When he did, we set out to do a new route on a dome near Medlicott (the dome is tentatively called The Lamb, and the new route, *Lament*, III, 5.10). TM is the only climber who is an expert at both whimpering and karate. One section of the new route was 5.10 smallholds climbing and TM began his mind-blowing moans at the sight of the tiny crystals. After various pops, whistles and screams, he managed the section and calmly claimed that the climb was one of the nicest he had done. Apparently even 5.10 can be kicks in Toulumne.

By the end of the summer, various climbers had completed numerous new routes in the Meadows. Nearly all the routes had offered excellent one-day climbing on sound rock. While the routes are sometimes hard, climbers characterize them as "neat" or "wild," but rarely as "horrifying" or "grim."

From north to south on the western side of the Tioga Pass Road lie first Dog Dome and Lambert Dome, then (opposite Fairview Dome) North and South Cottage Domes and Daff Dome, next North and South Whiz Domes and finally Polly Dome. On the eastern side of the road south from Fairview Dome lie The Lamb, then Marioulumne Dome and Medlicott Dome (sometimes called the Schooner) and finally Murphy Dome. The following new routes were made in 1968: Dog Dome, *North Face*, by Larry Malliet, Dick Erb, Steve Roper (II, 5.7); North Cottage Dome, *West Face*, by Ben Borrison, Tom Higgins (III, 5.8); South Cottage Dome, *West Face*, by Borrison, Higgins (II, 5.10); Daff

1. "The West Face," Royal Robbins, *Ascent*, Sierra Club, 1968.

Dome, *Glee*, by Bud Couch, Borrison, Higgins (I, 5.0); The Lamb, *Lament*, by TM Herbert, Higgins (III, 5.10); North Whiz Dome, *North Face*, by Steve Thompson (I, 5.7); South Whiz Dome, *Deception*, by Thompson, Higgins (II, 5.10); Marioulumne Dome, *Left of Hobbit*, by Erb, Roper (III, 5.8); Medlicott Dome, *West Face*, by Bob Kamps, Higgins (III, 5.7); *The Coming*, by Kamps, Higgins (IV, 5.9); *Middling*, by Kamps, Higgins (III, 5.6); *Chartres*, by Kamps, Higgins, (IV, 5.9).

On our last day in Toulumne, Bob Kamps and I attempted what looked like the "all-time" route in the Meadows—the very center of Fairview's west face. Starting below a conspicuous roof and a series of small arches, we hoped to climb a steep crack system to the summit bowl. After four full pitches of fantastic climbing on flakes and knobs, we encountered an utterly blank 85° headwall. Utterly blank? As unlikely as this seems for Toulumne, the wall would simply not go free. We had already used four bolts to protect 5.9 and 5.10 climbing immediately below, would four or five aid bolts now be appropriate? We pondered the situation and finally decided to go down. Here was a route more resistant than any we had previously encountered. Once on the ground, we discussed the free climbing tradition being established in Toulumne and speculated that perhaps someday the headwall *would* go free. Then, to the car. Bob wondered if he had lost his camera, whether he would then be camera-shy. I ignored him and suggested we call our half-a-route *The Abortion*. He suggested we go home.

