

August in the Arrigetch

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CLIMBING ARTICLES, obviously, should not be written in the off-season. During the sedentary winters that most of us climbers lead, a fermentation sets in in the vats of our memories. Last summer's expedition, which naturally had its downs, seems all ups: every campsite, in retrospect, looks idyllic, every climb rewarding; one remembers the flowers, but forgets the mosquitoes; one cherishes the sense of perfect comradeship gained last summer with that splendid mountaineer, X.—how was it possible, though, that the same fellow could have been such a selfish clod when it came to dividing the last box of Cheerios?

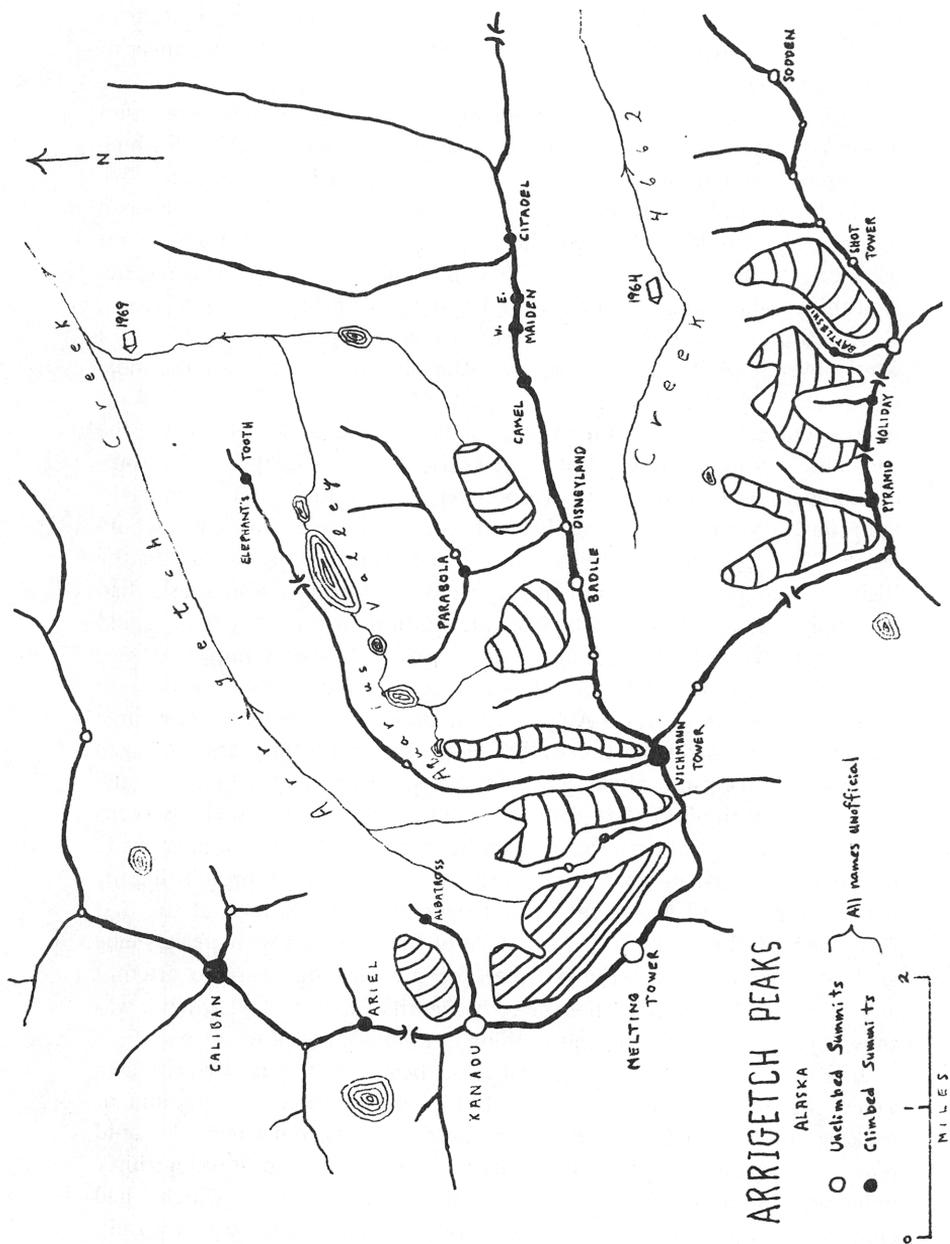
Climbing articles, it is clear, are not to be trusted. Has one ever read in any of them mention of an ugly sunset, or a boring campfire? Has one elsewhere come across such a catalogue of human virtues as seem to be the common property of every expedition's members? And where else—certainly not in life itself—can one encounter such a nonchalant disdain for falling rock, lightning storms, avalanches, and all the other nightmares that make any good climber wish he had stayed in bed. No wonder the candid diary, never intended for publication, is preferable to any retrospective account. No wonder a single one of Mallory's letters is worth the whole of the tedious official Everest book.

When he sits down to write an article, besides, the climber faces the kind of dilemma he never had to worry about on the hike in: he is not exactly sure what he is doing, or why. Most articles, I think, end up as a mongrel blend of three incompatible aims. The first aim, the one which allows us climbers to feel that what we have done really matters, is the route description — at least this is the most charitable excuse I can concoct for the kind of sentence that proliferates in journals nowadays: "From this ledge, J. led up about twenty feet to the left, using only a knifeblade for protection, and from there boldly proceeded up a right-facing inside corner . . ." The second aim explains all those beautiful climbs and campfires, for the writer seems to feel that an article demands of him some ritual exercise in nostalgia and/or self-congratulation. This sort of thing, of course, goes over well with the specialized audience that reads the article: in the melodrama world of mountain worship, we recognize our villains

(e.g. logging companies, snowmobiles) and heros (e.g. bush pilots, early Yosemite climbers). Third, and worst, is the attempt to wax rhapsodic and literary, which stems, in my case at least, from an effort to imitate in words that inimitable well-being that comes from hard work and danger of one's choosing.

Trying to write, four months afterwards, about our August expedition in the Arrigetch Peaks, in Alaska's western Brooks Range, I can tell which memories I would ordinarily resurrect, and which leave dormant. "We climbed five peaks, including the possibly highest, which we named 'Caliban'," I would write. "We should have climbed more," I would not mention, "or made a more serious try on 'Xanadu'." "It was a strong and amicable group: four climbers (besides myself, there were Art Bacon, George Ripley, and Bob Waldrop), and my wife Sharon to keep house," I would oversimplify. "But George was the strongest, or at least the most ambitious," my conscience would correct. "And Sharon didn't really want to go — you talked her into it. And the amicability degenerated toward the end: surely you remember how you grew to resent George's boisterousness, and fought so silently with Bob over — yes, nothing more important than that! — your styles of cooking and food-rationing." Normally I would write, "The cold was the most unexpected feature of the trip. On the flight in, our pilot, Daryl Morris, repeated what everyone in Alaska had been saying: that it looked like the earliest winter anybody could remember. We got five overnight snowstorms at Base Camp, a dosage unheard of in a normal Brooks Range August. The mosquitoes were dead by the time we flew in, on August 5; the berries were gone at least three weeks early. In Arrigetch Creek, the ice was slowly forming, and we began to imagine freeze-up catching us on our planned float trip down the Alatna. The turning of the leaves and the tundra, also at least three weeks early, from the usual drab green to brilliant gold and amber, almost made up for the ice that began to coat all the walls in the range, prohibiting the harder climbs." All very true — but I remember, after a look at the first forty feet of the 3000-foot north face of the Maiden's west peak, being glad for an excuse like the weather for my lack of desire to attempt anything big. And I remember the cozy security of those days when it was snowing at dawn, and there was nothing to do but go back to sleep.

In a usual article, I would remember the beauty of the narrow, five-lake valley that we named "Aquarius," but probably forget the tedium of walking for the third time up to the head of Arrigetch Creek. I would remember my sense of accomplishment on top of Caliban, looking thirty miles west on a perfect day to the summit spire of Igikpak, which I had climbed the year before. But I might easily overlook those grouchy treks



over slimy talus piles, or the pain in my knee most of the month, or the disappointment of reaching the wrong summit of "Parabola Peak," or my retroactive envy at Art's and George's doing the better of our two routes on the "Elephant's Tooth." I would remember sleeping well, but not something so silly as staying awake the last night in Base Camp worrying about whether our eating bowls, which we had left outside, might get lost under the unexpected snowfall I could hear hitting the tent fly. I would mention wandering the hillsides in search of berries and tundra photos, but think irrelevant the number of times we preferred to stay in the Base-Camp tent playing hearts. I would build some jocular conceit around the viciousness of a game called "Neanderball" that all of us but Sharon played in the willows near Base Camp, and hence neglect the real viciousness that was released in it. I would remember a sense of isolation, and if I remembered the surprise of having two separate parties visit our Base Camp, I would probably not recall how much, at the time, despite the food and talk we shared with them, I had wished they would go away.

As long as we were there, none of us would have questioned the automatic possessiveness we felt toward the Arrigetch; we would have regarded the visitors as gloomy signs that this part of Alaska was becoming too well known — soon, we prophesied, the place would look like the Bugaboos. But it was hardly as if we were the first people to discover these granite spires: we were, in fact, not even the first climbing party there. We depended partly for our knowledge of the area on the 1964 group that had climbed out of the valley south of ours, making seven first ascents (see *A.A.J.*, 1965, 14:2, pp. 315-19), just as they, in turn, had depended on Robert Marshall's 1931 visit, described in his book, *Arctic Wilderness*. In 1969 the range was still big enough, and challenging enough, so that our paths, much less our summits, never coincided with the 1964 party's. All the same, we felt the threat of discovery. There had been earlier visitors to Arrigetch Creek, even as early as 1911, when Philip Smith searched the head of the valley in vain for an Eskimo-reported pass to the west. We found two cairns left by the geologist Tom Hamilton, to mark the spots where, in 1962, he had duplicated Smith's pioneering glacier photos. We knew that Bud and Connie Helmericks had seen the Arrigetch in 1944 on their way up the Alatna to build a winter cabin opposite Kutuk Creek (which I visited near the end of our trip, finding tacked to the open door a faded, pencilled note they had left on their departure). We knew Adolph and Olaus Murie had seen these peaks during their epic 1922 dog-sled trip through the Brooks Range. We could guess at the numbers of nameless, recordless miners and trappers, like those who built the caved-in cabin we found at the mouth of Nahtuk Creek, who must have glimpsed the

Arrigetch. And of course the Eskimo, who had given the peaks their name (translated, "fingers of the hand outstretched"), knew them.

But to most of these earlier travelers, the Arrigetch were a place to avoid, "a howling hell of winds and rock," according to the Helmericks: thus we felt the disappointment of their priority less than we did the threat of future climbers who might compete with us for these lovely mountains and campsites. Climbers, being, in a sense, explorers in the aftermath of the great ages of exploration, still dream of a kind of Ultima Thule, of which the first ascent is a compromised version. One might distinguish, among exploratory visions, between the goals of a Perfect Place and of an Always Further. The Perfect Place is the garden in the wasteland, the oasis, the Shangri-La; the Always Further is the Pole, or the West, or outer space. For me, at least, the goal of a climbing expedition is a cross between the two. Because there are no blank spots left on the map, or at least no inhabitable ones, the Perfect Place is an illusion; because there are no frontiers left but space, so is the Always Further. But it is precisely this paradox that makes a place like the Arrigetch a possible ideal. On Caliban, we met neither our hardest climb (Art and George had found that on a slender fin of rock we named "The Albatross") nor the finest rock (which Art and George had encountered on the south face of the Elephant's Tooth) nor the toughest pitch (which, in my judgment, George led on Parabola); but we climbed, on the best day in a month, up the first or second highest peak in what are probably the finest mountains in arctic Alaska — an illusion of the Always Further — and sat together in the cold air on a tiny summit no one had visited before — a glimpse of a Perfect Place. At the end of our expedition, after rafting and kayaking for seven days down the Alatna, a week of Indian Summer sun after the cold and snow at Base Camp, a week of trout and grayling fishing in lake and river, of driftwood campfires on sand bars and islands, of moose and bear and the wolves moaning at dusk in the trees — after that, we could all sense the mystery of an age when unmapped rivers were the only roads into the Always Further, and as we loafed on the grassy bench above the Alatna that was our last camp site, we could forget our civilized ambitions long enough to value an almost Perfect Place.

It was, then, all that I ask of an expedition. We left the finest peaks unclimbed — Xanadu, the Badile, and the complicated monolith that the 1964 party had called the "Melting Tower." We did not float the whole of the Alatna, as we had hoped, but only reached an arbitrary gravel bar on which Morris landed to pick us up. We did not, of course, make all the far-ranging side-trips that my February enthusiasm has promised us. More important, we did not quite reach that level of friendship that transforms a

shared experience into its own end: somewhere in the little things, the day-to-day pettinesses, the resentments and the distractions, we lost the chance for it.

But I have been on expeditions when there never was a chance for it, and even on the best of them, I think I have never found it. Nor is it fair for me to evaluate the others' experience in my own terms. How can I say – how can I ever know? – how George felt about it, for whom it was a first expedition, one that perhaps achieved too little; or Art, who hobbled on an injured foot around the range the whole month, but led the frigid F7 pitch on the north side of Xanadu that topped our only attempt on that baffling mountain; or Bob, who had canoed similar country, but had climbed at all only a year, who loved every weed and icicle as much as the mountains the rest of us set our sights on? How can I judge whether it was worth it to Sharon, who stayed in camp or at the bottoms of climbs worrying about us when we were worried only about pitons and foot-holds?

Because it was my seventh Alaskan expedition, I began to feel that I had done it all before, that by not finding something essentially new I was avoiding, on this adventure, more important adventures. I began to grow aware of the futility of an ideal of partnership that had, as much as anything, motivated my expeditions when I was capable of being more intense and single-minded about them. George, the youngest of us, believed in that ideal, I think, but I know that he, too, failed to find it on this trip. Art and Bob shared it, though how much of it they looked for in the Arrigetch, I cannot say. And Sharon understood it. But in the long run it may be an adolescent ideal, unrealizable in a society in which we must get along not only with rope- and tent-mates, but with those who cannot share our passions and illusions, even with those we do not know. About its impossibility, however, I could still feel sorrow.

On the night before we set off down the Alatna, we had a moose rib barbecue on the gravel bar with three people whom accident had placed near us, three hippies who were building a cabin for the winter at the mouth of Arrigetch Creek, and planning, as we had not, to live off the land. The sun set above the river in the northwest; we crowded around the fire, cooking the meat; there was not much talk, for we all felt a cozy loneliness together. The stars came out as we had not seen them all summer, and around midnight the aurora began to sweep eerily across the sky. It was almost there, the ideal companionship: yet I doubt that the eight of us could have preserved such an illusion even for a few days, considering our diverse aims and characters. But it was almost there – and

I will remember the moment after I have forgotten the people. In W.H. Auden's words,

*though one cannot always
Remember exactly why one has been happy,
There is no forgetting that one was.*

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Arrigetch Peaks, Western Brooks Range, Alaska.

FIRST ASCENTS: "Caliban," c. 7200 feet, August 14, 1969 (Bacon, Ripley, D. Roberts, Waldrop).
 "Ariel," c. 6600 feet, August 17, 1969 (Bacon, Ripley), August 18, 1969 (D. Roberts, Waldrop).
 "Parabola Peak" (west summit), c. 5900 feet, August 10, 1969 (Bacon, Ripley, D. Roberts, Waldrop).
 "The Albatross," c. 5400 feet, August 18, 1969 (Bacon, Ripley).
 "The Elephant's Tooth," c. 4300 feet, August 11, 1969 (Bacon, Ripley by south face; D. Roberts, Waldrop by east ridge).

PERSONNEL: Arthur Bacon, George Ripley, David Roberts, Sharon Roberts, Robert Waldrop.

