

Rock Climbing in 1984

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IN retrospect the winter of 70-71 was a very desperate time for it was then that most climbers realized that rock climbing in this country was in a very bad way and liable to get much worse. For people accustomed by the last twenty years to thinking only in terms of progress, it was a bitter realization. Everything that had gone before was false. All of our rock from the largest down to the smallest faces would almost certainly be subjected to horizontal and vertical rows of bolts. Crowds of people would come to the bases of climbs, there to wait with their chrome moly for a chance to do what had to be done until the rock was no more and they could go away. Few things are either so bad or so good as they seem. The very bleakness of the outlook that winter was the key to the future. It was clear to nearly everyone that the practices and the attitudes of the past had to be changed, and since that time a spontaneous and drastic change has taken place in nearly all parts of the country. The external manifestations of this include radical changes in climbing techniques in order to preserve the rock, an appreciable shift away from sixth class and toward fifth class climbing as the American self-image, and a relaxation of the already low level of interpersonal competition in this country. These are in fact only symptoms. The source of all this change is actually the increasingly wide-spread rejection of the old fallacy that a true climber must be entirely egocentric in his behavior merely because some aspects of climbing are self-oriented. In the 70's and the 80's such a concept is untenable as there are simply too many climbers and to an increasing degree one must interact with them.

Without question the future promises increased numbers of people, more contact between people, and personal prerogatives that decrease in proportion to the decrease in the amount of physical space available to each person. Clearly our old image of a climber as a completely egocentric explorer-adventurer is totally inadequate and if continued would produce untold frustration and destruction. At the present time people are more receptive to new ideas than they have been in many years. The existence of this new mood (for however long it lasts) makes this period very important in determining what climbing will be like in the future, for the habits and attitudes that are adopted now—are the future.

Climbing will be just as rewarding in 1984 as it has been in the past if the climbers of today look at the future realistically and alter consciously their attitudes in a way that will allow climbing to satisfy the

basic needs climbers will have in the future. In our increasingly dense society, people seem to lack more than anything else a sense of identity and a sense of community.

Identity is the paramount psychological crisis today not because there are so many people but because our life is physically too easy to promote self-realization. It is another common fallacy that one's identity is secured when the people around you know who you are. It in fact has nothing to do with other people and instead is simply the full knowledge of one's strengths and capacities that is gained by frequent testing of one's self over a long period of time. In an easy urban life the opportunities for testing one's self at least on a physical level are rare. It is clear that climbing will always offer great opportunity for testing, but this process will be rewarding in a dense society only if people fully accept the fact that identity is an internal thing that is not obtained by taking something from someone else. Acceptance is already occurring and it portends great changes in climbing. First of all there will be large reductions in competition on an interpersonal level because each climber will know that no one wishes him anything other than the success that he needs. Also the reporting of first ascents will disappear because it serves no real purpose, other than to hinder the process of testing by telling climbers exactly what a climb will demand of them. To one who climbs for purely intrinsic reasons it makes no difference whether it is the first ascent or not. Hopefully this state will be reached before all the routes in all climbing areas are fully cataloged, codified and prepared for the museum. This indeed would be a desperate end for a rewarding pursuit. Guides have their place in heavily climbed areas but newly discovered and remote areas should now be purposely left unrecorded. This approach is already being tried to a certain extent in Tuolumne Meadows and also the Shawangunks.

In a time when human communities tend only to become ever larger, no matter how well a person has realized himself he still despairs of ever having a measurable effect on his future. This need not be an element in climbing communities that are centered on the various climbing areas. The size of a climbing area is naturally limited and so its population is naturally limited. Furthermore the population is limited at a small enough level so that the opinion of each climber can and should be fully considered. It seems clear that even in the future climbing should offer its people a sense of community provided that the people who are climbing now realize that the communities already exist and that the only asset of the community is the climbing area itself. If this is not realized and the areas are not protected against encroachment and deterioration, then and only then will the full potential of the future be lost.

Climbing can continue to be the satisfying pursuit that it has been if today's climbers recognize the present that exists and the need for increasing commitment to the concept that there must be a future. This is being done now. And it must be done now.