

# Ascents in the Cathedral Spires

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ON June 26, Cliff Hudson flew Hoo-man Aprin, David Black and me from Camp Creek to the Tatina Glacier in the Kichatna Mountains. We were surprised and slightly disappointed to find a party of Alaskan climbers carrying loads to the base of the same wall that we had anticipated climbing. But eventually we appreciated their company, especially during the long, dreary days when the peaks dissolved into a patchwork of rain and gray clouds and the cold and lifeless cirques rang with the uproarious laughter from our wild, 8-man tea parties. We soon realized that a new friendship can be far more important than climbing.

The next day, under a resplendent Alaskan sky, we began climbing on the southeast face of "Tatina Spire" (P 8200+, 1½ miles northwest of the Monolith Col). We were prepared to make three bivouacs on the 2500-foot face, but after two days of climbing, including 400 feet of difficult aid, we were only 700 feet up. During the second night, a storm struck, blasting us with sleet. We were soon drenched but fortunately we stayed warm in our Polarguard parkas. In the morning it was snowing; we decided to attempt going down. The ropes were badly iced, the rock plastered, but by tying two ropes together, we reached a ledge. We left these ropes fixed over the most difficult aid sections and rappelled the lower, easier pitches with the haul rope. Once on the glacier, we groped our way back to our tent in a downpour.

It rained and snowed for the next three days. On July 3, the sky cleared partially, but a fierce gale swept the glacier. The tent frustration was too much; we had to climb. In wet boots, Dave and I reluctantly set out to climb the south ridge on P 7133. The climbing difficulties had appeared modest from the tent but below the ridge we apprehensively struggled through desperate snow while small avalanches hissed insouciantly past. The ridge, although narrow and exposed, was easier, and when the clouds lifted we were blessed with a spectacular view of the Tatina and Cool Sac Glaciers. The schizophrenic weather held long enough for us to quickly descend from the summit and as we returned to the security of the tent, it began pouring again.

On July 5, warm sunshine slowly filtered through the fog to brighten our spirits and dry our clothes. We timidly returned to Tatina Spire pre-

pared for three days of climbing. The bottom pitches were hurriedly re-led and soon we jūmared to our previous high point, "Tempest Ledge." Above the ledge, the climbing was mostly free in cracks and squeeze chimneys. Dave led the crux; an unprotected F9 off-width crack. To take advantage of the clear weather, we climbed through the night, sleeping for a few hours on top of the 13th pitch, the "Tatina-Ahwanne." Early the next morning, Hooman led a diagonal traverse to a gash which we followed for five pitches to the summit ridge. A thousand more feet of 5th-class climbing on the exposed ridge brought us to the summit. We ate the rest of our food and watched the sun melt into a distant storm front before we faced the ugly reality of finding a way back down. It took us all night and 11 rappels to descend the northwest face to a hanging glacier. Two additional rappels were needed to descend an icefall. We returned to our tent after 30 hours of continuous climbing. Inside the tent we collapsed into a narcotic sleep.

Warm sunshine and a rich, blue sky characterized the following days. Again the specious weather lured us onto the walls. After reconnoitering from the Monolith Glacier, we unanimously agreed on the west face of Sasquatch (South Triple Peak), a mixture of a steep, rock face and a long, snow and rock ridge which ended at the summit. The directness of this line brought to mind the name, "Comici Route." In the afternoon of July 10, we climbed a thin crack and then through a series of overhangs. We fixed the first 350 feet and returned to the glacier to sleep. The next morning was cool but clear and we started up the wall. The rock was superlative granite and in the warm sunlight we jokingly imagined being at Tahquitz in mountain boots and supergators. We climbed 900 feet that day, most of which was difficult free climbing, to the base of a chimney which was copiously dripping water. We decided to leave this pitch for the morning. A few hours later, a storm moved in and we remained in our bivouac sacks for 34 hours while the storm raged. The morning of the 13th gave counterfeit promises of clearing. We had climbed one pitch when a wave of clouds broke over the mountain and poured down the wall, inundating us in fog and drizzle. Climbing in parkas and cagoules, we continued up steep aid cracks.

The miserable weather didn't let up. During the night I had dreams about dry towels, after which I would wake, shivering and feeling wetter than before. Our water-soaked and wrinkled hands were abraded and numb. We were running extremely low on food. When would the wall end and the ridge begin? Dave racked the hardware and slowly led into the gloom while Hooman and I shivered continuously. Finally the angle relaxed and after 17 pitches we were off the face and on the ridge. Wearing crampons, I began leading the ridge—a nightmare of rock towers and wet slush overlying 50° water ice. Climbing in the cadaverous mist was a lonely and depressing task. The ridge narrowed and Hooman led a wet,

PLATE 16

*Photo by Michael Graber*

**David Black celebrates on the summit of Sasquatch while snow gently falls.**



F9 crack. Suddenly the gray monotone gave way to blue sky. The temperature however, dropped and with the summit in sight, our ropes (including a "waterproof" rope) became hopelessly frozen and we were forced to bivouac; our third in four days.

In the morning, high clouds filled the sky and it was snowing lightly. We drank the last of our food, an "instant breakfast" apiece, and untwisted the stiff ropes. I led through a cornice to a ledge. When Hooman reached the ledge, he decided that he wasn't climbing any higher; the summit had become "meaningless." Dave and I climbed the remaining 600 feet while Hooman waited on the ledge for us to return.

Standing on the summit wasn't much fun knowing we now faced a 3400-foot descent. The first rappel hung up on a flake and Dave magnanimously climbed up to free it. When we returned to Hooman, we began rappelling into a couloir to the south, to where we thought we would find the lower portion of the Robbins' route. The clouds returned and we were soon lost in the fog. After something like 12 rappels, the wall became vertical, the ledges disappeared and the rain turned to wet snow. We dropped from hanging rappel to hanging rappel. We were rapidly losing strength and the ability to think beyond rote behavior. Hooman rappelled leaving his pack hanging on the anchors. He was too apathetic to even unclip the pack and throw it down. More rappels. We had made about 20 already. Where was the glacier? Somewhere to our right an avalanche was pouring down the face. I began seriously wondering if we were going to live and then, meandering up through the mist came Dave's exhausted voice—he was on the glacier.

*Summary of Statistics.*

AREA: Cathedral Spires, Kichatna Mountains, Alaska.

ASCENTS: P 7133, first ascent via south ridge, July 3, 1975, NCCS III, F6 (Black, Graber).

P 8200+ ("Tatina Spire"), first ascent via southeast face; summit reached July 6, 1975; NCCS VI, F9, A4 (Aprin, Black, Graber).

Sasquatch (South Triple Peak), second ascent, first ascent of west face (Comici Route); summit reached July 15, 1975, NCCS VI, F9, A3 (Aprin, Black, Graber).

PERSONNEL: Hooman Aprin, David Black, Michael Graber.