

# East Face of the Moose's Tooth

## The Dance of the Woo Li Masters

JAMES D. BRIDWELL



JET. YES, I was sure it was a jet. It was only slightly different, but uniquely so, from the roar of avalanches thundering down everywhere around us. I'd only recently seen huge tongues of boiling snow flickering out from the base of the wall. The plane was probably heading for Oslo or some such place and would arrive in the morning or maybe in the evening. I could figure it out; you are never sure what time it is where they land. My thoughts raced on into relations of time and space. Suddenly my mind focused outwardly and I realized that I was looking down 3000 feet to our tent. The spacious tent looked like Heaven and we were in Hell. What in Hell were we doing here in this inhuman zone? Was it choice, happenstance or fate? Or possibly a combination of all three that brought me to meet my climbing partner, Mugs Stump? Only four months before we were strangers first meeting in an outdoor café in Grindelwald, Switzerland. We drank strong coffee and shot the bull about the Eiger and similar experiences on north faces. One cup of coffee equals one hour of bull and before three cups of coffee we were both jawing each other about the east face of the Moose's Tooth. We had both failed on the 5000-foot-high face, along with a large contingency of other climbers. At least we were in good company! In all, we figured the face had been attempted over ten times by different parties, all very good. We made plans, but *not* for the Moose's Tooth. Maybe that's where fate or coincidence comes to play its part.

In early March Doug Geeting of Talkeetna Air Taxi flew us in his powerful Cessna 185 toward the Great Gorge of the Ruth Glacier, but when we saw our original objective, it looked impossible. The conditions were indeed bad. There was no ice where we had hoped. Instead, a thin veneer of airy ice with a light dusting of spindrift powder clung

everywhere. Overhangs bulged with snow clinging incredibly to their undersides. What could we possibly do in these conditions? We had to think of something fast; Doug is a good guy but he wouldn't fly us around forever. The Moose's Tooth was so close that we decided to have a look. The east face looked equally horrendous, but we couldn't impose on Doug's patience any more. This would have to do. These were our cards; we'd have to play them.

The landing was fine, but getting Geeting aloft took some digging and pushing. As the plane sped away, we gazed in awe at the hoary specter before us. It made bones brittle and spirit fragile. Then imagination balked and we set about erecting our beautiful North Face dome tent. At least, home on the glacier would be luxurious and the ogre could wait for inspection when courage was well braced.

The next day was clear and *oh so* cold. In March Alaska still doesn't feel the sun; it passes but doesn't touch. I remembered my hand freezing white like a burn when I touched the metal of the Cessna the day before. They felt the same when I adjusted the focus ring of the spotting telescope. There was no doubt; it *was* cold! The face looked impregnable and the invaders were armed with slingshots. But maybe we could pull off the ol' David and Goliath sketch.

The previous technical-aid routes were hideously plastered with ice and out of the question. Our choice was a more perilous line but the only plausible one. A lightweight alpine-style approach might be the key. We were bluffing with only a pair. It was grabbing a tiger by the tail; you couldn't let go or you'd be eaten. The lower half of the climb consisted of avalanche chutes and faces which were fed by the whole of the upper wall. If a storm came in, retreat would be suicide. The only way down was to go up. Conquest or death, so to speak. Ridiculous but true! Retreat in good weather would be difficult at best, but we wouldn't retreat in good weather. Unless, of course, there was something up there we couldn't climb.

The barometer rose, but the storms came without caring. We didn't mind. It gave us time to psych up and sort out our gear. The minimum would be the rule: four days of food and fuel to be stretched to six or seven if need be. Food was an austere assortment of gorp and coffee with sugar plus two packets of soup. The hardware rack was skeletal. We trimmed away the fleshy bolt kit and second set of Friends, leaving the bare bones: 10 ice screws, 15 rock pitons, six wired nuts, one set of Friends and the essential Chouinard hook. Of course, we figured to rappel mainly off slings over horns on the descent. We opted for a technical yet swift descent—we hoped not too swift—down a 1500-foot rock face into the east couloir. This would be suicidal in a storm as two huge faces on either side feed the couloir lethal doses of snow. But it did lead directly to the tent, whereas the Bataan death-march down the north ridge led only to the homeless Ruth Amphitheater.

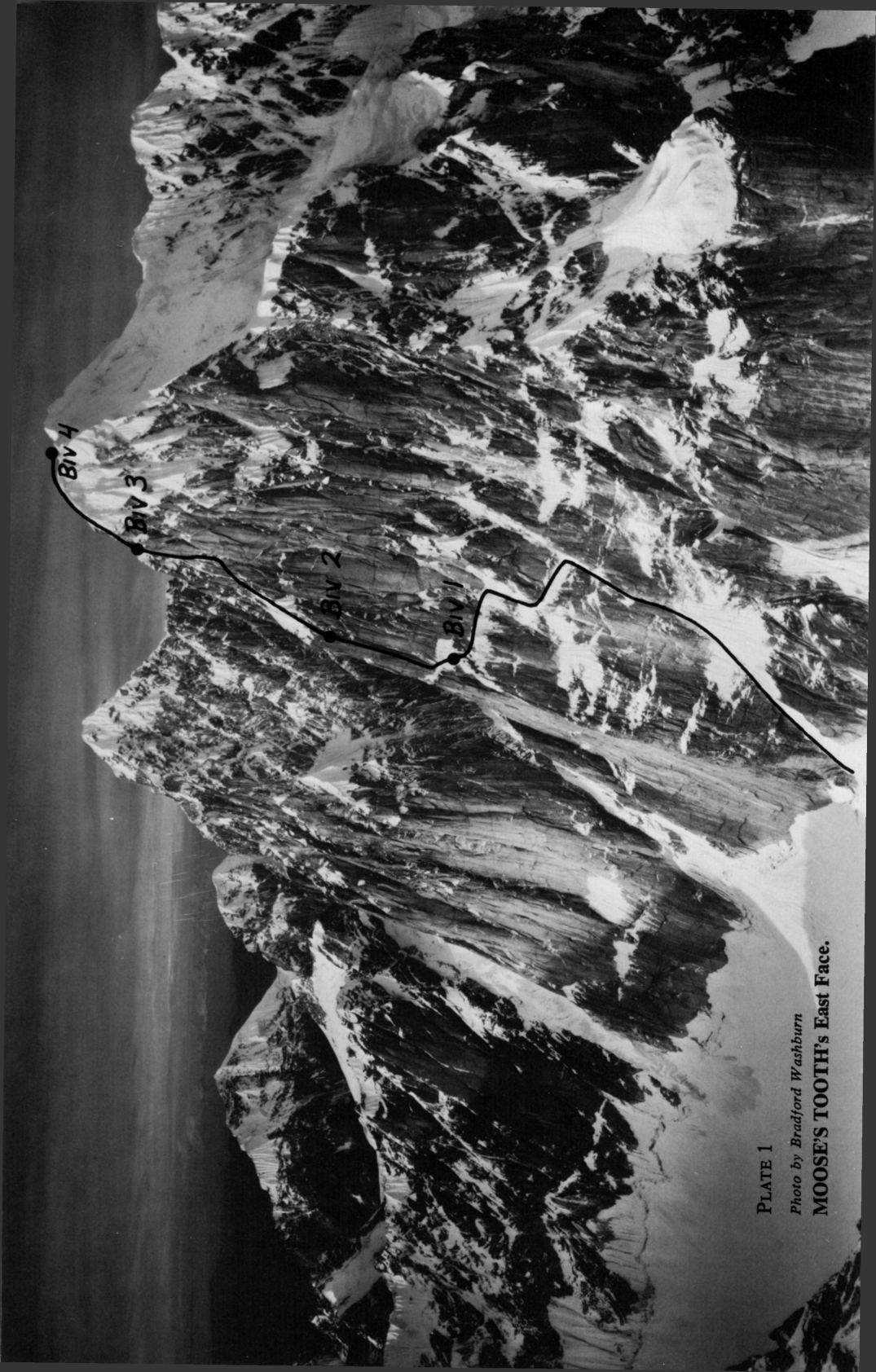


PLATE 1

*Photo by Bradford Washburn*

**MOOSE'S TOOTH'S East Face.**

Clear skies came but we spent the first day watching and timing avalanches, attempting to feel for some intuitive glimpse at the secret of its pulsating rhythms. The night was spent consuming large gulps of whisky while deliberating on whether to wait another day. Something inside me—perhaps the whisky—told me to go in the morning. It wields a strong opinion indeed!

We agreed and found ourselves trudging to the base, laboring under packs and hangovers. I didn't want to give myself a chance to know what I was doing until it was too late. Needless to say, Mugs did the leading and I the motivating.

A 55° snow slope led into the cauldron, a steep, narrow ice venturi eighty meters long which collected ever minute spindrift slough and amplified it into a blinding, freezing torrent of misery. I was appalled as Mugs without protection led difficult 75° to 80° ice in waves of gushing spindrift with a 15-kilo pack tugging at his shoulders. It was my turn. At first I thought I could wait out the rushing torrents but soon realized, like Mugs, that it was hopeless and climbed on. I was frozen when I reached the belay. My fingers were wooden. I fiddled with the camera and attempted to feed out the rope.

After one pitch we climbed together to the first traverse. It was steep powder covering sugar snow over rock. Sketchy to say the least with imaginary belay anchors. Both leader and follower were in fact leading. There was no protection and each became responsible for the other's life. The first traverse was three pitches long and led to a three-pitch, calf-burning ice face and onto another horrid traverse. This one was worse than the first traverse, and longer. Near its beginning we heard a shout. Our minds must be askew! Yet it was true. Some fellow mountaineers, ski-touring up the Buckskin Glacier to the Ruth Amphitheater, were shouting up at us. We shouted back and carried on. The climbing was tenuous. Thin powder snow lay over hidden patches of ice and steep rock. Protection was nearly non-existent and belays were the same. We had to have confidence in each other. In places we were climbing on three to five inches of snow over 60° to 65° rock. Often, to my distress, these pitches would start with a downward traverse of 40 to 50 feet before going horizontal or upward.

Near the end of the day we reached a steep snow slope on which it was just possible to dig a platform to sleep. Mugs fixed a pitch above for better anchors and we precariously settled in. The North Face Company had supplied me with a space-age sleeping system which I was testing for them. I was warm and toasty, sub-zero temperatures, spindrift and all.

The morning was supremely frigid and we did not dare to move from our cocoons until the sun's rays gave us hope for life. Frostbite was our eminent host if we dared to break the house rules and so we regulated our desires accordingly.



A steep, ice-choked chimney which rose up and out of our field of vision tested our abilities for the rest of the next day. From below I had judged it to be about five pitches long, but it turned out to be seven instead. This chimney and the headwall above would constitute the main difficulties.

I led the first and least steep rope-length. Mugs pressed the attack up the 80° to 85° gouge. In places he encountered overhanging bulges which the dry, cold winter had turned into airy, unconsolidated granola. Ice axes and hammers became useless weapons. Crampon points barely held, scraping on tiny edges, and we used shaky pitons for handholds. My ice-tool picks served as cliff hangers on rock edges or wedged in cracks, nut-fashion. The Forrest saber hammer was especially useful. The assault continued through the day and into the failing light of the evening. I became weak and nauseous from dehydration. In the frigid cold, man's devices cease to function efficiently. The ineffectual stove would boil water only after an hour of coaxing. We were paying for having penetrated into the inhuman zone.

Mugs had fixed the last pitch and I had swung around a corner onto a small 65° ice slope, the only possibility for a bivouac. It took hours to sculpture a precarious perch in the dark. It was nearly one A.M. before we collapsed exhausted in our sleeping bags.

The morning of the third day started with a tedious struggle for liquids before we ascended the fixed rope to our high point. Vertical ice soared upward. Once again Mugs valiantly met the challenge, leading two pitches up the icy serpent. The twisting, curving corridor exited onto an easy 100-meter snow slope which extended to a formidable headwall. Even with the telescope, we hadn't been able to probe the secrets of this section of the climb. Intuition lured us to the right, up an ice runnel and onto a snow rib. I poked my head around the corner to be confronted by a steep rock wall. Its thin cracks were well armored with ice and presented a chilling specter. I tensioned off a nut for which I had chopped a slot in the rock. Thinly gloved fingers searched for usable rugosities, while crampon claws scratched at scaly granite. I lay-backed up a steep flake to find its top closed with ice. In desperation I clung on with one hand while I perforated the ice overhead with an ice hammer, hoping it would stick securely. Standing on a shelf of ice, I caught my breath and looked for a possible route up the wall. I moved right to a groove which I climbed on aid and free to where it was possible to swing left onto my ice axe and climb to a small ice ledge. I got some anchors in and brought Mugs up.

Only a portion of the next lead disclosed itself to the eye, but it didn't look promising. Mugs moved off of hooks onto the fragile thinness of precipitous ice. After forty feet of begrudging difficulties, he shouted down that it was blank above. The sky had clouded and snow began to fall. We needed a bivouac site. A night spent exposed and

standing would be devastating. He moved only occasionally but made some progress. What was he doing? I could imagine only the worst. He called down for a #3 Friend, and so I climbed up, took out the belay anchor and sent it up. I hung in slings from a tie-off draped over a nub of rock and continued my frigid vigil. The Friend went into a shallow hole, then a hook to a knife-blade behind a half-inch flake and it worked out. Several more technical aid moves, and after two hours of nerve-grinding climbing, Mugs reached an ice tongue that led to easier ground.

I got to Mugs at the belay and started the next pitch as quickly as possible. It was already late in the day and we had to find a place to bivvy soon. The snow was coming down heavily, now causing cascading spindrift avalanches. A traverse crossed a slab covered with four inches of snow. I hoped there would be some ice beneath the snow, but no such luck! I splayed my feet duck-style to attain the most surface area. I could not believe they held! It was like climbing on a slate roof thinly covered with snow. I entered a trough filled with bulletproof ice. Mugs came up and found me slumped over; I was weak and nauseous from dehydration. He led the next two pitches of steep mixed ice and rock. It was all I could do to follow in the dark. Fortunately we found a place where we could dig a snow cave. A gift from Heaven!

After two hours the cave was completed and we began brewing tea and coffee, two of the worst drinks possible for dehydration. At 1:30 A.M. we collapsed in our sleeping bags, secure from the storm.

Life came slowly in the morning. From my vantage point near the cave entrance, I could see the storm was breaking up. Sunshine seeped through the thin clouds, but I kept the vision secret from Mugs, as I just wanted to rest a little longer. When the sun shone into the cave, I could no longer hide the obvious fact that the weather was turning beautiful. We crawled out at 11:30 and commenced climbing. The problems were mainly in route-finding, picking the easiest but not always obvious way, with a talent born of experience and often luck. We were lucky and by 3:30 we stood on top of the Moose's Tooth.

The vantage point was spectacular. The weather was clear in all directions. I took one photograph after another until two rolls had disappeared. Soon it was 4:30 P.M., and Mugs coyly asked if I wanted to start down. In reply to Mugs, I said a quick, "No!" I felt a possible ordeal ahead and wanted a full day to cope with any eventuality. It would be a technical and potentially difficult descent and we should give ourselves a full day because once we had started, there would be no place to stop. We agreed and I returned to photography.

Darkness was sneaking over the mountains when our stove begrudgingly produced two cups of sugarless tea. We burrowed deep into our survival cells as the temperatures plummeted to  $-30^{\circ}$  in the night and the wind howled.

It was truly torturous getting ourselves ready to go the next day. All man-made gadgets ceased to work in this inhuman zone; the stove did manage a cupful of cold water each before it died. We climbed down a snow slope and began rappelling over discontinuous snow and rock bands. As we descended rappel after rappel, the snow disappeared, leaving bare, flaking rock, the kind for which the Moose's Tooth is famous. Crumbling and rotten, the face steepened so that it receded below us, making it impossible to see where we were going or what we were coming to. I kept angling left because the couloir we were heading for came up toward our left.

The rock had become blank of cracks but there were a few scabs of very flexible rotten flakes. Survival alarms went off in my head. I rappelled past an overhang and tension traversed left to a flakelike ledge, pounded two pitons into compressed gavel behind it and wondered what to do next. Looking down I could see nothing to go for. I wished I had brought the bolt kit. I felt like a cat cornered by salivating Alsations. Then, computerlike, I made a decision and yelled up instructions to Mugs. I asked him to tie off one rope to his anchors and to send the other rope down so that I could see what was below. If I could see nothing, I would have to jumar back up 300 feet to Mugs. Then we would have to climb back to the summit, ten pitches or more, and look for another way down. It would be a devastating course, requiring the rest of the day and part of the next.

I tensioned left again and then climbed up and left. My crampons clawed on the rotten granite, screeching and snarling as I searched for tiny holds. I put in a #3 stopper in the only available place, clipped the rope through and continued rappelling. Near the end of the rope, a small but solitary flake came into view. I stopped and stared at it. Emotions washed over me, visions of people I loved and owed love to. It's sad that we often don't appreciate the commonplace yet wonderful trivial duties of life, like saying hello or washing dishes. I guess you don't miss the water till your well runs dry.

We had to meet our ordeal. I started back up the rope but stopped automatically and turned to take one last look at the flake. Reaching the nut I had placed, I unclipped, swung back right and continued up to the two-piton anchors. I yelled to Mugs to come down. I woke him, as he had fallen asleep, but he could tell that there was uncertainty in my voice. When he reached me, I explained the situation before we pulled the rope so that he could share in the decision. Once we pulled the rope, there would be no choice. He had an easy way of boosting my confidence while accepting my course of action, whatever I might choose.

Casino time; one roll of the dice for all the marbles. I said a prayer and started down. Retracing my traverse, I reached the single stopper I had previously fixed and brought Mugs down to a minimal stance.

He surveyed the anchor briefly and then looked at me with wonder. I shrugged my shoulders and said, "That's it!" My heart was trying to escape from my mouth during the 150-foot rappel off the flake until I secured a #1 Friend behind a small flake I had seen from above. I placed another nut while Mugs duplicated the rappel. Mugs later told me that he had almost unclipped from the anchor but quickly realized that a fast death was no more appealing than a slow and agonizing yet inevitable one. After descending half the rope, I gave thanks to the merciful one. Wonder of wonders! The ropes had reached a snow-covered ramp. The chilling grip of death relaxed and a calming peace soothed my quaking soul. The descent became routine and within two hours we were galloping down steep snow toward the security of our tent.

Everything in the tent was frozen. We immediately fired up the stove and began guzzling brew after brew of hot liquids. We laughed and joked until late in the night. We had had five days of intense experience; it takes time to unwind. The cards were played and we had drawn aces. Finally I collapsed into prone paralysis. Just before unconsciousness, the memorable words of the French climber, Jean Afanassieff, came to mind. "This is the — life! No?"

#### *Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Alaska Range, south of Mount McKinley

NEW ROUTE: Moose's Tooth, via East Face, March 17 to 21, 1981 by James D. Bridwell and Terry (Mugs) Stump.

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