

# Kichatna Spire: East Face Prow

MICHAEL GRABER

TUCKED AWAY in a corner of the Alaskan Range lies a maze of glaciers and rock known as the Cathedral Spires. Approximately 45 miles southwest of Mount McKinley, the Spires are famous for Yosemite-like walls and terrible weather. Kichatna Spire, the highest peak in the area, towers over its neighbors like a giant, ice-encrusted tombstone in the center of a graveyard. Its honey-colored granite walls drop straight down to glaciers on all sides. So difficult is this peak that after its first ascent in 1966 (*A.A.J.*, 1967, pages 272 to 278), it took 13 years and at least seven failures before it saw a second ascent (*A.A.J.*, 1980, pages 473 to 480).

The east face of Kichatna is one of the largest, continuously steep rock walls in North America. More than a face, it is a series of three vertical to overhanging buttresses stacked side by side. The left buttress is the longest. Nearly 1000 meters from glacier to summit and practically ledgeless, this prow sweeps straight to the summit.

In June 1978, Alan Bartlett, David Black, Alan Long and I flew into the Spires to attempt this face. During the month we spent there, we had several close calls and miserable weather. The sheath on a fixed rope broke and Black slid back down the first pitch until the rope's sheath bunched up and his Jümars locked. Bartlett took a long leader fall and accidentally knocked a large block of granite loose. It fell and struck Black, knocking him off the belay stance. At the top of the eighth pitch a storm moved in and, after lying soaked and cold in our hammocks, we rappelled back down the route. The overhanging sections were technical and dangerous. Once back on the glacier, we were still forced to wait out the weather for 17 more days until we could fly out. Needless to say, we weren't anxious to return.

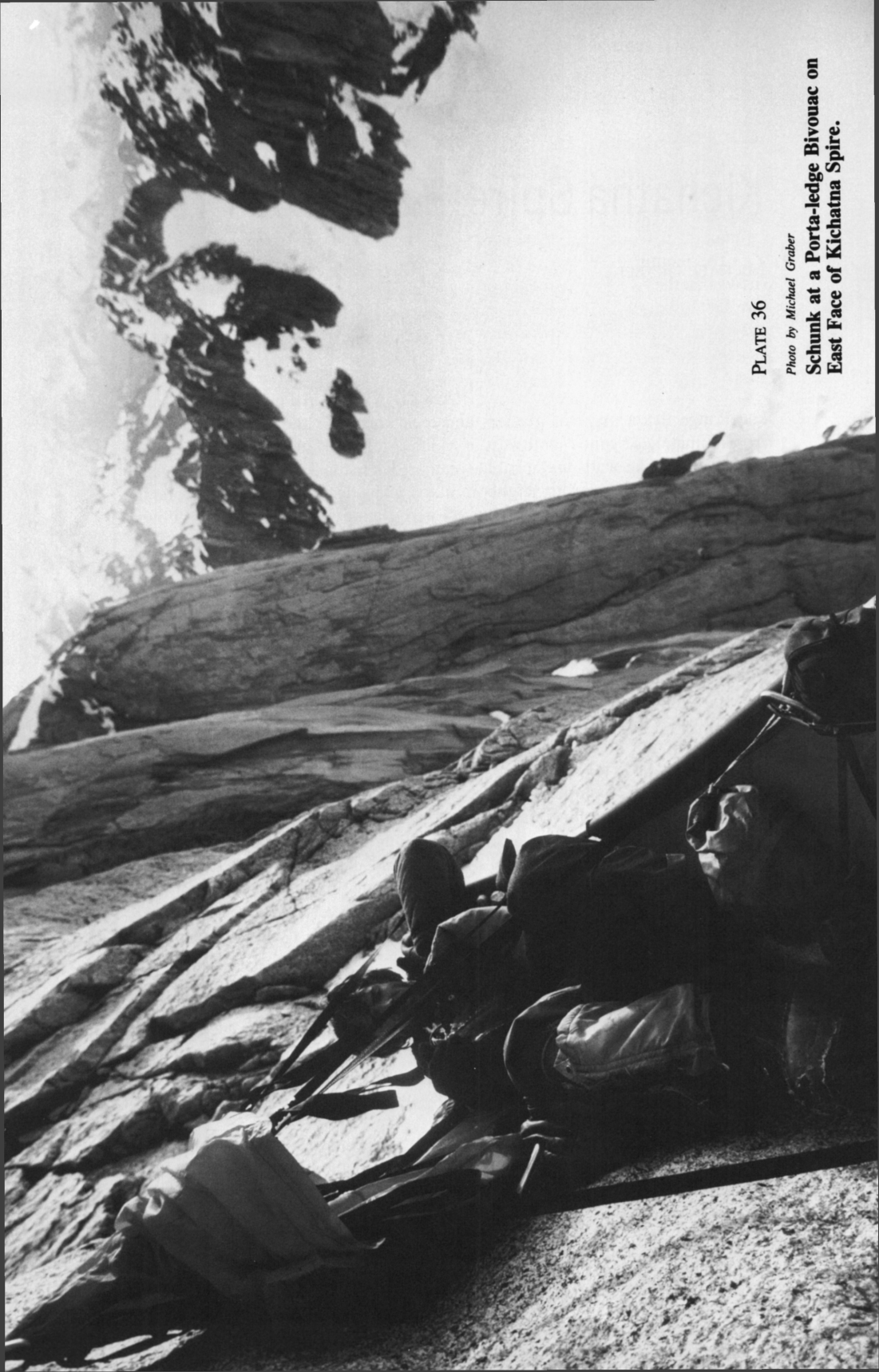
Four years later, however, the memories of our ordeal on Kichatna Spire had faded enough so that Black was able to convince me to return. We had a difficult time finding a third; the wall had a bad reputation. Although George Schunk knew the Spires and had heard the rumors, he accepted almost immediately. I often wondered about my partners; they had subjected themselves to the high-pressure brutalities of medicine and law to the point where even Kichatna Spire seemed like a vacation.

Our strategy this time would be different. We knew that our route had at least one good ledge approximately 500 meters off the glacier. Our plan was to fix the initial 120 meters and then, when the weather appeared stable, climb day-and-night until we reached the ledge. At this point we would have two

PLATE 36

*Photo by Michael Graber*

**Schunk at a Porta-ledge Bivouac on  
East Face of Kichatna Spire.**



choices. If the weather was good, continue for the summit. If the weather was bad, face the ugly affair of rappelling back down the route. In any event, we wanted to avoid another bivouac in hammocks during bad weather.

The month before we were ready to leave, we received the disappointing news that the face had been climbed. However, their ascent was not on the line we had attempted, but on the buttress to the right of ours. Their route was a fine one. Yet we felt that the exposure and directness of our route justified a renewed effort. We didn't have the first route on the face but we felt we might have a chance at the best one. The question of disappointment quickly disappeared and we were ready to go.

In mid-June 1982, we found ourselves back on Kichatna Spire, fixing the first two pitches. The climbing seemed to go more smoothly this time—maybe it was the Friends or maybe it was the fact that we had been here before. Late in the second day, Schunk and I rappelled as the first storm moved into the range.

The next three days passed with intense inactivity. During moments of inspiration, Black lectured on mountain medicine, Schunk told us of our rights under search and seizure laws and I addressed ways to improve a parallel turn. For exercise we stepped out into the blizzard to go to the bathroom.

Avalanches roared in the distance as we jumared up the ropes and hauled the bags. Black ran out a pitch so far that we had to unclip his rope from the anchors and tie on the haul line. I jumared over an overhang on a rope that we had left during our escape four years before. After 18 hours, we reached our previous high point and found our haul bag and equipment, mysteriously just as we had left it. The side of the bag that was against the wall was bright orange. The side exposed to the sun had been bleached white.

Leading quickly, Schunk disappeared over a small roof and broke into new territory. The first rays of sunlight nicked the summits of Augustin and Gurney. Every major peak within 160 kilometers was visible. The weather was perfect.

Too perfect. Loosened by the sun's warmth, blocks of ice broke off from near the summit and like a flock of doves, flew past our belay. In a matter of minutes, our crack turned from a drip to a small waterfall. Leading as fast as possible, Black angled left toward cracks that appeared safer. A piece of ice exploded in his face and left a small cut on his cheek. Meanwhile, Schunk and I put on all our Gore-tex and scrambled to avoid getting soaked.

We traded leads up awkward, overhanging cracks. Our energy began to fade—we had been climbing continuously for over 30 hours and we were badly in need of a ledge. Using tied-off knifeblade pitons, Schunk angled a few meters across a 65° slab to a jam-crack and free climbing. Black and I were dozing when Schunk yelled down that he had reached a ledge.

When we arrived at the ledge, I saw that although not big, it had potential. While I melted snow on the stove, Black stomped and kicked away at the snow to make a suitable spot for two and Schunk arranged the third sleeping spot—a Porta-ledge hanging to the side of us. Around midnight we finished dinner and passed out.



PLATE 37

*Photo by George Schunk*

**Graber at the top of the ninth pitch  
on KICHATNA SPIRE.**



I woke three hours later from cold feet in wet socks. As the sun came up, the summits of nearby peaks turned bright orange and then immediately faded to a dull grey. High clouds were moving in from the south. The party was over. I tried to go back to sleep but ended up staring at the sky and worrying about the weather.

We munched granola and Black took the lead while Schunk and I packed the bags. The right-facing corner required our largest pitons lengthwise and all of our tube chocks. Schunk and I were singing Jackson Browne songs when we heard the telltale "pop" and the jingle of weightless hardware. We looked up and saw Black in the middle of a backwards swan dive. The rope came tight and he pendulumed into the wall, head first.

Unhurt but shaken, Black came down to gather his wits and Schunk went up to finish the pitch. Above Schunk's belay was another wide chimney, full of ice and ominously dripping. Doing anything to avoid this chimney, I aided up cracks to its left and then stemmed across the chimney to cracks on the right. I was in the chimney only a few moments, but this was sufficient time to be struck by a sizeable piece of ice.

The sky grew darker, the cloud ceiling got lower, but we were moving well. It was going to be tight but I felt we had a good chance in our race against the weather. Besides, the quickest and safest way down from where we were then might well have been from the summit and down the north ridge. There was no question of retreating.

Finishing the sixteenth pitch, Schunk mantled onto a ledge, only the second such refuge we had thus far found. A stiff wind brought spindrift down on us as Black rapidly aided up another leaning dihedral. At the top of the dihedral, a large icicle loomed perilously, forcing Black to the left to avoid it. Above his belay we found a steep gully which allowed easier climbing. Expecting more of the same, Schunk charged around a corner but there found one of the climb's more difficult pitches; a F10 offwidth. The next pitch was ice. Hanging from Jümars, I strapped on our only pair of crampons, pulled out our only ice-axe and led what we hoped was the last hard pitch. My only thought was to get the hell out of this icy chimney. The rock was crumbly but the ice was good and I climbed to a keyhole underneath a large chockstone. As I poked my head through the window, I could see the summit only a pitch away.

I found a sheltered ledge on the lee side of the ridge and belayed the others up to discuss our next move. We felt like zombies as we tried to talk, spent from 75 hours of climbing with very little rest. Embick, who had done the second ascent, had told us that the summit ridge would be tricky and we could see that he was right. Everything that we no longer needed was tossed back down toward the start of the route. We climbed simultaneously, I with the axe in one hand and a haul bag in the other and Black and Schunk with monstrous loads. Feeling the press of time even stronger, we had sacrificed safety for speed. More than on the steeper climbing below, there was no room for the slightest error as we threaded our way around rock towers on the narrow ridge to the top.

One by one, we arrived at the summit and collapsed. A mixture of feelings flowed through us from exuberance to a nervous concern over the descent. The summit had been reached, but our race with the weather was not over.

We gathered our gear and carefully traversed the corniced north ridge, Black and Schunk without crampons. The ridge widened and we moved together until an icy section and strong winds forced us onto the north face. The wind continued to trouble us for the entire ten rappels. Even so, we were so exhausted that while waiting our turns to rappel, each of us kept falling asleep. Obviously concerned with this potentially dangerous state, we passed around a bottle of amphetamines and faced the last few rappels.

We kicked steps down the Secret Passage and walked out onto the glacier. After 90 hours of climbing with only five of rest, we felt safe at last. Jabbering and laughing, we skied back to camp for a celebration of warm food and hot tea. After our energy finally fizzled and we fell into a long and badly needed sleep, our victory was made even more poignant by the storm which settled in and kept us tentbound for the next six days.

#### *Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Cathedral Spires, Kichatna Mountains, Alaska Range.

ASCENTS: Kichatna Spire, 8985 feet, fourth ascent, new route on east face, June 23-27, 1982, (NCCS VI, F10, A5).

“Kathryn Minaret,” 6300 feet (½ m. north of P6847), first ascent via south ridge, June 4, 1982, (NCCS III, F9).

“Whale’s Back Peak,” 6500 feet, third ascent, first descent of north ridge on skis, June 7, 1982 (Graber) (Listed fifth in Embick’s list on p18, A.A.J., 1982 as P c6500).

“Sequel Spire,” 6400 feet (½ m. south of P6847), first ascent via southeast face, June 7, 1982, (NCCS II, F9) (Black, Schunk).

PERSONNEL: David Black, M.D., Michael Graber, George Schunk.

*Mountaineers who wish to keep up with climbing history as it is being made will want to subscribe to IWA TO YUKI, Japan's foremost climbing magazine. Articles in Japanese about climbing in all parts of the world are summarized in English. There are numerous photographs, many in color, valuable maps, diagrams and topos with English captions. There are six regular issues and one special mountaineering issue each year. Annual subscription: 7600 yen. IWA TO YUKI, Yama To Keikoku Sha Co. Ltd., 1-3-33 Shiba Daimon, Minato-ku, Tokyo 105, Japan.*