

# The Touchstone Wall

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ONE CLEAR cool day in 1975 Bob Denberg and I were climbing in Eldorado. Bob cruised up to the base of the Rover Dihedral and set up a belay in a hole where I passed him to enjoy the pleasures of the corner above. At the same time another party began Grand Giraffe. When I set up a belay at the Ruper traverse, the other leader, a blond, bearded fellow, did likewise. Denberg would soon smoothly follow through onto the traverse.

“Sure is a beautiful day.”

“Sure is.”

“You from around here?”

“Well, kind of; I guess I’m from Utah as much as anywhere.”

“I hear there’s some good climbing there.”

“Yeah, a bit.”

A pitch later, on the upper meadow, we continued the conversation.

“I was planning to go to Zion National Park this spring; I read about it in *Ascent*. You ever go there?”

“Yeah . . . . I wrote the article.”

Despite being hesitant to disclose any more about the area because of chidings from some of his friends who wanted to keep the “secret” to themselves, Jeff Lowe provided me with a wealth of useful information in the few minutes that we talked. My resolve to go exploring on sandstone was strengthened.

By the time that the trees had begun to turn green I had tasted many flavors of soft rock. Chinle, Cutler, Entrada, Deathrock. Beautiful but thin-layered Kayenta, delicately textured, capping the uniform, elegant Wingate formations. Dewey Bridge and Carmel, fantastic and unpredictable. But the Navaho of Zion was too enormous to comprehend. Carved by wind and water, these behemoths defy imagining climbing routes.

But they exist scrawled in invisible lines up the weaknesses of the great canyon barricades.

In April, I crossed the San Rafael Swell to Salina and continued south by southwest past Cedar until I stood at the brink of a surreal panorama. Swathed in snowstorms stood massive red walls nearly a kilometer in relief. Brilliant yellow beams of evening sunlight played about these desert El Capitans with the complementary shadows performing a menacing dance.

Thus I was introduced to the Navaho sandstone of Zion, the promised land. Vast shapes too great to appreciate with mere sight alone.

And dangerous.

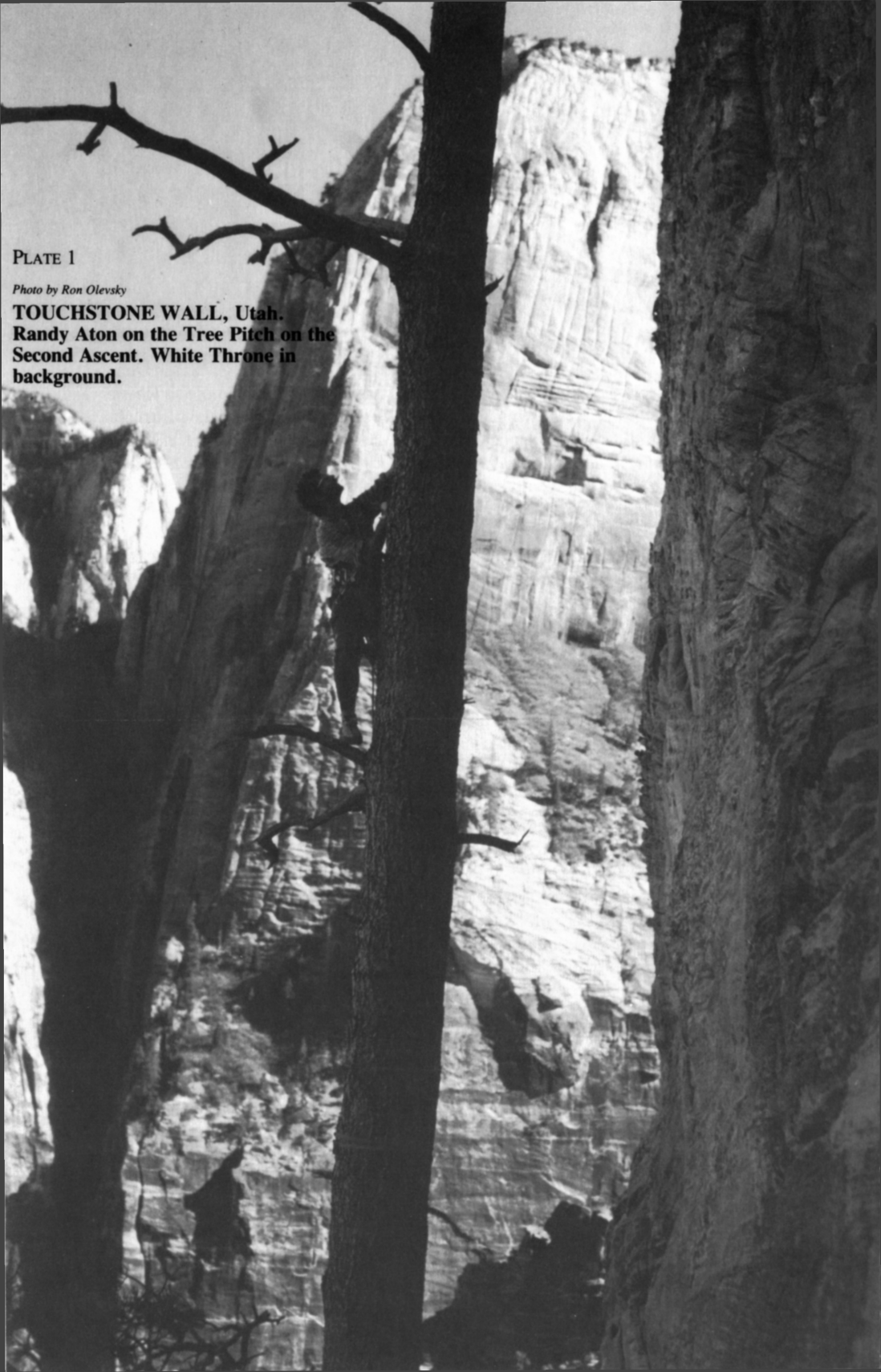


PLATE 1

*Photo by Ron Olevsky*

**TOUCHSTONE WALL, Utah.  
Randy Aton on the Tree Pitch on the  
Second Ascent. White Throne in  
background.**

Rock that varies from excellent to unclimbable by anything short of scaffolding, with a thousand textures in between, and often no visual indication of what to expect. One must attempt it to find out; desert roulette.

For eight years people had been attempting it; exploring the unexplored vertical confines of Zion in multi-day style. But always in teams.

That month I tried one of the virgin walls. I climbed for four days of heat and cold, two nights in a hammock, dirt and vegetation in my eyes, and a nine-meter fall when a hooking lip peeled away and the bolt that was to stop me sheared off of the rock.

The circus of tourists and cactus cops on the road below did little for my wilderness adventure.

“My God! Martha, that orange thing is just a bag. There’s only one of them! (louder) Hey, are you OK? (back to Martha) Look in the binoculars, Martha, he’s been eating corn.”

“Is he going up or down?”

I went down. The wall was steeper and far more committing than it had appeared from the ground. Five years later the fourth attempt on the wall proved successful. But that effort set the stage and later that year I attempted a new line on El Capitan. On the ninth day a rock came off, and this time with a bloody hand I retreated again. I already knew the feeling.

Zion is the kind of area that could never be created by even the most fertile imagination. The Kolob Terrace, a shelf of Navaho sandstone up to a kilometer in thickness and almost eighty kilometers wide, has been dramatically eroded by hundreds of drainages. The main stem of these drainages is the Virgin River which has cut Zion Canyon itself. Here alone there is more acreage of vertical rock than is found in Yosemite Valley. But rather than perfect granite which beckons the climber with long clean cracks, many of the largest walls of Zion are multi-textured affairs with dirty and discontinued weaknesses. Indeed many of Yosemite’s pioneers have departed Zion, intimidated and disappointed with their attempts at ascending the desert walls, for different route-finding techniques are required to discover the clean and aesthetic cracks of Zion. But Zion offers something that is all but gone in Yosemite.

Like many other people I have sometimes wished that I had been born in an earlier and simpler time. I have been tempted to imagine that there was more adventure and sense of discovery when man possessed less knowledge and understanding of the world around him. However, I suspect that this is not the case. Presently we stand on the razor’s edge of existence. We have demonstrated the ability to go forth and colonize the universe insuring our continued life and procreation. We have also demonstrated the ability to destroy ourselves and this beautiful green sphere that gave us life.

Nonetheless I wish that I could have participated in the golden age of Yosemite. On my El Cap attempt I was soloing on virgin rock, but I was only a short distance from the Muir and Magic Mushroom routes. It was a contrived adventure because much of the risk of being where I was had been lessened.



PLATE 2

*Photo by Ron Olevsky*

**TOUCHSTONE WALL, Zion  
National Park. Ken Trout leading  
Pitch Three.**

Friends watched me from the meadow ready to call for rescue should I be unable to extract myself from a predicament. As it turned out, I did extract myself and was able to descend sixteen rappels on my own with a relatively minor injury. Twenty years earlier it would have been high adventure, but to a seasoned El Cap climber it was merely a foray into the gaps between established lines, for the golden age of Yosemite is over.

I went back to Zion where the golden age has just begun, and a little bird told me a secret.

It flew about the entrance to the Hallway of the Walls, where the canyon becomes deeper than it is wide. I followed the bird's motion with binoculars from a spot north of the Organ. Eventually it dove into a crack on a south-facing cylindrical wall and I ceased to be interested in the bird. The crack was two-hundred meters long leading nearly to the top of a huge prow-tipped gendarme on the stubby southwest ridge of Observation Point. It began at a bulge line about fifty meters off the deck, and right away I knew that it would be hard to reach.

But worth the effort.

I had already reached one virgin summit solo in Colorado, a squat fifty-meter rock called Chimney Tower, but this gendarme was a totally new experience. Winding its way up surprisingly good rock, the crack provided a wealth of fine climbing without the loose or rotten passages that appeared to be so obligatory to the big sandstone walls. In retrospect no pitch comes to mind that stands out as being either more or less difficult than any of the others, although they each involve different kinds of problems. Steep aid gave way to jamming and lie-backing and even some face climbing, a rarity on most desert rock.

On January 16, with several ropes fixed, I began the final assault. I hauled a bag with three days' worth of provisions, and bivouacked at the top of the fifth lead. Not one car drove through the canyon that night, and though I was filled with anticipation of finally succeeding on a Zion wall, I was also very much at peace with myself in such a serene and beautiful situation. It snowed lightly, but shortly the sky cleared. The temperature dropped rapidly and I huddled in my half sack and haul bag to keep from shivering. I had built a small fire from a dead bush and a branch that had fallen from above onto my ledge. This is sometimes a privilege only afforded to a first ascent in Zion, and despite my existential nature I paid homage to providence by hovering over the small flames.

When the flames turned to embers, I settled back to view the stars above Angel's Landing and catch limited sleep. Early in the morning I was roused by a magnificent rock avalanche on Cable Mountain. Ice had formed and pried off a huge slab resulting in a shower of sparks that bathed the canyon with a strange brief glow. As the thunderous reverberations faded, I watched the dust cloud drift across the river by starlight.

Soon I was climbing the crack again until it ended on a large ledge still thirty meters below the summit prow. Here a great ponderosa pine reared upward next to the crackless wall. The tree appeared to be the only possible route so using all of my slings girth-hitched together I began to actually prusik up the wide limb-

less trunk. Eventually the tree narrowed and sprouted branches and I climbed more rapidly as far as I dared. At a point about twenty-five meters up the tree a runner looped about the trunk served as a pendulum anchor. There was a strong breeze blowing and the tree swayed as I lowered myself a few meters. It was an unlikely setting to act out my tarzan fantasy, but I kicked hard and swung out to the summit prow grabbing hold of a perfect jug. The tree, however, swayed back in the wind as if resisting my final effort toward reaching the summit ridge plucking me off of the wall in an unforgiving manner.

The resulting collision with the tree did little damage, but it prompted me to reconsider the seriousness of my position. In the event of an injury the only help available would be my own, so before trying again I spent time considering the ballistical problem before me. Letting out an extra half-meter of rope I waited for the tree to sway out from the wall. Kicking off even harder I was able to reach the same jug and this time there was enough slack for me to be able to clamber up onto the prow. Certainly an outstanding pitch bearing witness to the sublime forces of nature.

Following an exposed jump between ledges, a narrow passageway led out to the airy summit ridge. After a short scramble to the summit, I was greeted with an invigorating panorama. Throughout the climb my view had steadily increased pitch by pitch until it was possible to see past the confluence of Parunaweap and Zion Canyons, but abruptly I was able to see up-canyon as well from a point that allowed an unparalleled view down into the Narrows where the canyon was dozens of times deeper than it was across. I was also given an interesting perspective of the wall that I had attempted the previous year.

In my mind I named the gendarme Cerberus; the labor that became the final challenge of King Eurystheus.

I sat on the once virgin summit and attempted to take it all in before rappelling back to the bivouac with firewood, and to the ground the following morning.

A number of solo first ascents have since been done on the major desert walls. Cerberus was not a fluke, and certainly not the hardest, but it is very special to me. I have climbed the route many times since, and it has taken on symbolical proportions now that the difficulties have been seen to.

Soloing is an appropriate and valid method with which to approach an unclimbed wall. There are always those that will claim that soloing is more dangerous and places additional risks on would-be rescuers, but there have been no wall rescues in Zion. It is an unusual area with a strong tradition of self-reliance and challenge. Indeed many of the major summits of Zion were first reached from their steepest rather than their easiest faces. There are also those that spurn the tedious nature of the additional burdens that are placed upon the wall soloist; but few will deny that success in such a venture breeds a kind of self-reliance that is an asset to any individual member of a team, especially when the possibility for a rescue doesn't exist.

There will always be the challenge for the individual to go beyond where others have gone. In my own experience Cerberus was the touchstone of such a challenge.

## Postscript

In late spring 1981 I completed the second solo ascent (seventh overall) of Cerberus by the same route with the distinction of being completely without a hammer. This ascent was the result of extensive effort on the route using constructive scarring technique. I had prefixed and even glued in situ pitons in the initial section of the climb to deter the devastating results of continued hammering on the soft rock. In the process of this, it was very disheartening to note that other climbers had placed pitons very heavy handedly in places where originally chocks were used. Most of the two-hundred-meter crack was relatively straightforward without pitons, and of course the tree pitch didn't require a hammer. I had even found a better rappel route that would avoid leaving unsightly rappel slings on the wall.

The ascent and its peculiar nature was documented by KUTV news of Salt Lake City. However, only a few weeks later three Salt Lake climbers took to hammering on and even helping to break in situ pitons (and a few of their own). Fortunately the ascent proceeded only as far as the first belay stance. But others were to follow in even poorer style. In January 1984, Ken Trout and Brian Hansen made the fourth hammerless ascent of the route and discovered that someone with the initials SHD had bolted a 5.6 mantle. Originally this move had been "protected" by a string of A4 pins but since had become fixed A1. The bolt was soon removed and the hole was camouflaged with glue and sand. Two months later the bolt had reappeared, with a rappel sling only a meter higher.

Despite the fact that many competent climbers have completed the route without a hammer and found it to be just as safe, there seems to persist an attitude among Zion neophytes that even glued-fixed pins should be tested with a hammer. As a result many obviously strong placements were loosened and some even broken or removed.

I am loathe to dictate how others should climb, but in such a case their actions are detrimental to others. Climbers on hammerless routes should exercise one of three options; inspect a pin and use it without hitting it, use something else, or back off. Although I have installed cheap railroad spikes in some of the scars where the fixed pins were continuously removed by greedy ironmongers, I am beginning to see an alarmingly selfish trend. Perhaps Hammerabic measures are justifiable for those who would not only destroy the artistic efforts of those before them but also prevent those to follow from appreciating those efforts.

Although the golden age of Zion climbing has just begun and hammerless climbing is well established in other areas, the Navaho sandstone of Zion is too soft and delicate to tolerate poor stewardship by the present generation of climbers. Maybe Jeff Lowe's elitist friends were right. Maybe we have to keep quiet about the most beautiful places to keep them from the few inconsiderate people who could destroy them. Maybe this should never be published.

I certainly hope that they are wrong.