

# Ghost Riders

JACK LEWIS, *Unaffiliated*

TOM BAUMAN AND I WOVE through the high desert shrubbery with pointed caution, making our way back down into Black Velvet Canyon. Occasionally the distant glitzy city of Lost Wages would catch our eye and interrupt our descent and conversation. It was still early and so I let images of Alaska and our planned return to the Eye Tooth fleck my vision. Red Rocks was our Alaskan tune-up. We really should have been wearing double boots and been carrying heavy packs, but then you don't really have to get in shape for that sort of thing. You just have to curl your lip.

As we talked, a sinking feeling came over us. We had just recently found out that there was competition for the Eye Tooth and now I realized how much information I had given our would-be competitors, not only about the quality of the route but also about the crystals. You see, not only was there the fame and glory riding on this one; there was the wealth.

## *Months later—the Coffee Glacier*

After the obligatory hiatus in Talkeetna, we finally sat once again at the base of the Eye Tooth, gazing up at this southeast facet of the Mooses Tooth, known as the Ghost Wall. We were the first in line, although our competitors had nearly outmaneuvered us at the last minute, and we still weren't sure they wouldn't fly in anyway. Throughout that day of carrying loads, every plane that neared caused us to stomp and swear and wish for a battery of sleet-seeking missiles. But no one came . . . for three weeks.

We were already familiar from 1987 with the first twelve pitches and though the year's heavy snowpack had turned the first two easy pitches into difficult mixed climbing, we were thankful for the steepness of the wall. Pitches 3 through 18 did not catch snow and neither of us could think of a better route in the range for the conditions we had and the weather we were to get.

In 1987, prior to our attempt, Tom and I had climbed the neighboring Broken Tooth by a route different and easier than planned. Therefore our cup was still filled with desire when we had started up the Ghost Wall. Excellent climbing on good rock had gotten us quickly up ten pitches. Freeze-thaw cycles had brought melt from a large snow ledge above and left the steep chimney and off-width Pitches 11 through 13 with a veneer of ice. Two days of mostly aid climbing had put us at the base of Pitch 13, 100 feet of glazed off-width. This and the sight of the continuing awesome wall above drained our cup and we had retreated.

PLATE 36

*Photo by Tom Bauman*

**Jack Lewis on the Upper Red  
Dihedral on Pitch 16 of EYE  
TOOTH.**



PLATE 37

*Photo by Tom Bauman*

**Jack Lewis on Second Pitch of EYE  
TOOTH.**



During those last pitches, we had come across a deep pocket lined with large dark crystals. Those in the back had a frosting of fine white crystals. Although this was an amazing sight, at the time we focused on the climb and its difficulties. As we contemplated a return in 1988, we couldn't think of the Ghost Wall without envisioning the secret treasure of that recess.

In 1988, we again fixed the first five pitches. We then weathered the first of numerous storms at Base Camp before taking off capsule-style for eight days. We moved steadily to the previous high point, pausing only briefly to gaze into the crystal recess just to confirm its existence. We would deal with it on the way down. This time Pitch 13 was dry and with great luck our only tube chock fitted perfectly and allowed the placement of two protection bolts. The snow ledge above gave us deluxe and safe portaledge accommodations.

We fixed our four ropes over the next couple of days, mostly in unstable weather. We turned the corner from the steep face into a deep gash that slit the top of the wall. Our estimates of the number of remaining pitches differed greatly. We impatiently sat out day six in the security of the ledge while yet another storm came in. Even though my estimate of the number of pitches remaining was the more optimistic, my attitude wasn't. We were down to one day's worth of food. The summit gash would be safe only if there was no snowfall. Our chances of getting to the top suddenly looked slim. I screamed out into the storm.

I like to believe that there is some connection between our good fortune, not only the next day but also on the entire trip, with that little recess halfway up the wall. Since both Tom and I are approaching 40 years of age, we needed all the black magic we could get.

On the seventh day, as we entered the gash, we found another crystal, this one minute but perfect, alone in a finger pocket. Four frigid mixed pitches later we were climbing sun-lit snow slopes to the summit. The next day we descended the route. Out of food, we were very slow. When we came to the recess and tried to extract some of its treasures, we found that it required more than we had left. We descended. The wealth is still there.

#### *Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Alaska Range above the Coffee Glacier.

FIRST ASCENT: Eye Tooth via Southeast Face, a Subpeak on the South Ridge of the Mooses Tooth, May 9-16, 1988 (Thomas Bauman, Jack Lewis).