Hooker's North Face Free-Climbed

GALEN A. ROWELL

MY FASCINATION WITH THE NORTH FACE of Mount Hooker dates back to 1964. I was climbing in Yosemite that fall while Royal Robbins was preparing to attempt the North America Wall of El Capitan. A bunch of us sat around a campfire late into the night. When I commented that late October seemed awfully cold and chancy for a first ascent on El Capitan, Robbins replied that he didn't expect it to be as cold and severe as the first ascent he had made in July on an alpine face at 12,500 feet in Wyoming. His party had spent four days on the 2000-foot wall of Mount Hooker, bivouacking in hammocks and belaying in slings where there were no ledges on the first two-thirds of the climb. He left me with the impression that the wildly overhanging North America Wall was friendly in comparison.

More than a quarter of a century later, historical pieces began to fall into place for me after Todd Skinner asked me to join him and Paul Piana on an attempt to free-climb the north wall of Mount Hooker. Both Todd and Paul were natives of Wyoming. Hooker was practically in Todd's backyard behind the family ranch in Pinedale. Robbins had called Hooker one of the greatest wall climbs in America, along with El Capitan and Half Dome. Todd and Paul were on a crusade to free-climb great walls originally done with aid.

The invitation didn't really come out of the blue, although I protested that I wasn't qualified to join them. I was almost fifty and they were in their prime at thirty. That we climbed at different levels was obvious, since we had just spent an afternoon in American Fork Canyon, where I squeaked up 5.11 while Todd cruised 5.13. But Todd was insistent.

Todd and I were in Utah as speakers at the 1990 Mountain Summit Conference at Sundance. International figures such as Reinhold Messner and Catherine Destivelle had joined American climbers to discuss ethics, environmental concerns and future directions. Todd told why he had given up competitive climbing, right when he was doing well in both international events on artificial walls and in Soviet speed climbs. He wanted to get back to the roots, to what climbing had meant to him out there in the natural world when he took it up as a ranch-fed kid living where the grassy plains begin to swell upward to meet the sky in the Wind River Range.

I talked about what I felt were some of the root causes of modern ethical problems of rock climbing. In the old days, there was always a clear parallel between ethics and permanent alteration of any natural feature. Doing a climb in better style came from adapting your behavior to the natural character of the terrain, rather than adapting the mountain to the natural inclination of your behavior. This explains how bolts, aid, chipping holds, previewing, hangdogging, and all the other ethical concerns of rock climbing are linked together. It is also the essence of the global environmental message: adapt human behavior to the existing natural character of the world, not the natural character of the world to suit your immediate needs.

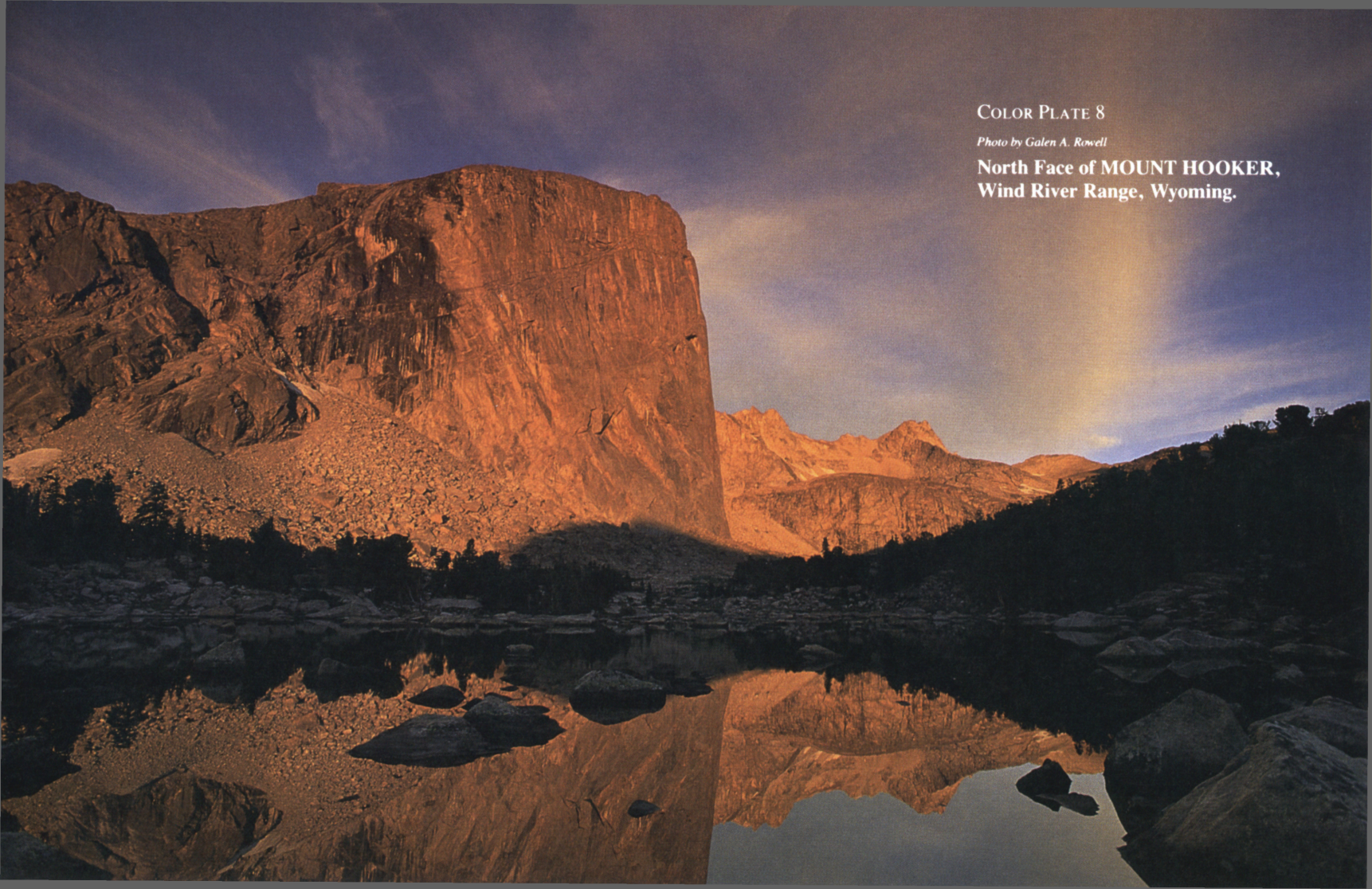
I applauded the skill level of modern climbers but deplored the fact that today's sport climbs are often just that and no more. They pursue difficulty for its own sake, often with little regard for the consequences. In the past, the most significant ascents were adventure climbs that followed eye-pleasing lines up the most sheer natural features of the planet. Today's hardest routes are more likely to pursue the *absence* of natural features.

Privately, I had been keeping track of Todd and Paul for a number of years. During the 1980s, they both entered the top rank of American free-climbers. After giving up competitions and setting their sights on free-climbing big walls, they often talked about trying to free Mount Hooker. Paul said, "There is no hurry. Nobody goes to Mount Hooker." They stunned the climbing world in 1988 by making the first free-ascent of El Capitan. After 48 days on the Salathé Wall, they had linked together more extremely difficult climbing than ever before. Fifteen out of 36 pitches were 5.12 and 5.13.

I had repeated the Salathé Wall the normal way with some direct aid earlier in 1990. I carried no pitons or hammer, because both aid- and free-climbing are now done with nuts or camming devices slipped into natural cracks with one's fingers. In the 1960s, I had also made the third continuous ascent of the Salathé Wall. I was surprised how much easier I found the climbing three decades later, both physically and technically. Thanks to modern technique and equipment, I was climbing better than I ever imagined I'd be doing in my fiftieth year. After the Mountain Summit, I began to train extra hard with Hooker in mind.

Just before we were planning to go in late August, a Colorado team made an all-out effort to free-climb the face. Stuart Richie, Mark Rolofson and Annie Whitehouse had known of our plans. They brought in 300 pounds of gear by horse and spent 21 days on their attempt, often hampered by storms and cold. After adding 16 new expansion bolts to the face and doing 5.12 climbing, they failed on one critical pitch and resorted to direct aid.

A week before our climb, I had given Todd all my climbing and camping gear to take in by horseback. On August 24, the morning after a big 50th-birthday party, I flew to Wyoming, rode four hours to the trailhead and began hiking and jogging the 17 miles to the face with only a daypack. My slick plan seemed less smart with each passing mile. Lightning struck all around me on a high pass, it began to snow, the sun was about to set and I had neither down jacket nor



COLOR PLATE 8

Photo by Galen A. Rowell

North Face of MOUNT HOOKER, Wind River Range, Wyoming.

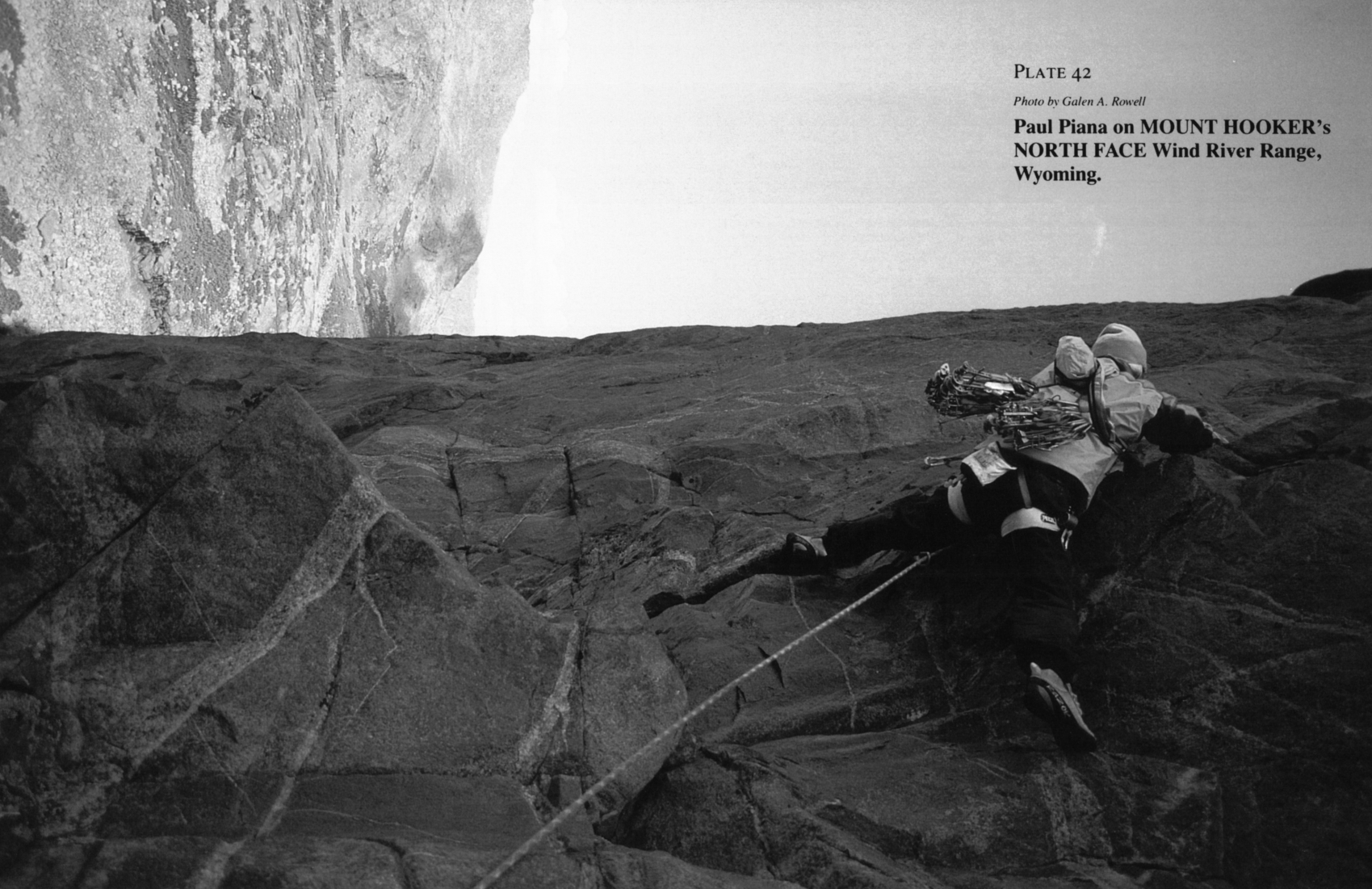


PLATE 42

Photo by Galen A. Rowell

Paul Piana on MOUNT HOOKER's NORTH FACE Wind River Range, Wyoming.

sleeping bag. I realized I didn't even know for certain that they had made it in from the road head.

Just before dark, I found Todd and Paul with Tim Toula on their way back to camp from exploring the lower face. They helped me pitch my tent in a blizzard. The next morning, the winds were gusting to 50 and the ground was frozen. Paul quipped, "If we fail, let's come back in the summer."

After spending part of the day on more lower pitches, we rappelled back down for a pasta dinner around a warm fire. On the morning of August 26, we decided to go for it with all the food, water and gear we'd need in two haul bags. Before I even left the ground, a fixed rope dislodged a melon-sized rock from 200 feet above that had my name on it. Something made me step back at the last split second. The rock glanced my stomach and knocked the wind out of me. I'm convinced that if I had been wearing a hardhat, I would not have sensed the rock coming and it would have split my head. Later, Todd was hit by a smaller rock.

The climb had a serious alpine character. Sun never touched us on the due-north vertical wall except for minutes after dawn and before dusk. We were never out of our full Goretex suits worn over pile jackets and pants with long underwear. The rock that looked like granite was actually a highly metamorphosed gneiss that had never been fully molten. Pebbles looked identical, but instead of forming the long, continuous stress cracks common in granite, the gneiss fractures into blocks and along minor irregularities. This has a profound effect on route finding.

The first part of the climb followed disconnected features, including a 70-foot pillar that wobbled as Paul climbed it and stood on top. Then came a highly polished green slab sticking out from the wall. I recognized it as an olivine slickenside caused by local movement of one surface over another under pressure. Todd face-climbed up the edge of the slab on tiny holds out over the void. The route description given us by the Ritchie-Rolofson-Whitehouse team named the slab the "Green Door." In keeping with the Hooker theme, "The Jaded Lady" was their suggested name for the free route, which varied here and there from the path Robbins had taken using direct aid.

The ninth pitch was a total departure from both the old route and the climbing up to this point. Every natural crack and seam ended above us in overhangs. To the side, however, the cliff was merely featureless and vertical, a smooth expanse I couldn't imagine anyone free-climbing. Todd took off with his fingertips locked on tiny holds like vise-grips. It was one thing to try such a continuous pitch in shorts with the sun shining on your hands, but quite another to be buffeted by freezing winds wearing full alpine clothing at high altitude as your hands went numb and you still had to keep climbing. I expected one of Todd's hands to open up at any moment, but he hung on out there for nearly an hour, ending the pitch with no whimpers, a couple of jokes and no suggestion of how hard the climbing was. When I later asked, he said, "Solid 5.12, I guess."

That night we found no good ledges. We had not brought hammocks nor portaledges, and so I sat in my sleeping bag in a crevice that only fit my backside at an oblique angle with my feet dangling in a sling attached to the rock. Todd

PLATE 43

Photo by Galen A. Rowell

Tim Toula on the North Face of HOOKER.

bridged across the chimney to make everyone cheese tacos, while he talked of his boyhood growing up in the Wind River Range.

As a teenager, Todd had spent his summers on horseback and his winters on skis. Each year when the snows melted back, he worked for his family's horse-packing business, taking gear into the Winds for campers, hunters, fishermen and the occasional climber. "I didn't know much about climbing then," Todd recalls, "But I had a notion to free-climb the north face of Mount Hooker. No one had ever climbed at that standard in high mountains anywhere. I'd read that the face had been climbed once in 1964 by a party led by Royal Robbins. I knew they had free-climbed about half the distance. Good style for their era, but it never held any attraction for me. I didn't want to go on the big faces until I was good enough to try free-climbing all the way."

At the University of Wyoming during the late 1970s, Todd met a like-minded soul trying to scale the wall of the cafeteria. Paul Piana, also from a small Wyoming town, was a more experienced free-climber. Paul remembers Todd wearing "blue Royal Robbins boots five sizes too big," quite unlike modern soft, sleek rock shoes. Paul found Todd eager and enthusiastic, but as a climber, pathetic. "I knew I had found the perfect belay slave." Soon after Todd had switched shoes and learned footwork, Paul fought to maintain supremacy by sabotaging boulder problems he'd spent lots of time working out by hiding little pebbles on key holds to keep Todd from making it on the first try. Todd and Paul became inseparable climbing partners, united by their Wyoming background, wicked sense of humor and philosophy of searching out difficulty.

Paul, too, had thought about climbing Hooker as a teenager, but at the time he dismissed it as out of his realm. A guide to the mountains of Wyoming indicated that the climb required 207 piton placements. "You'd have to be rich to own 207 pitons," Paul recalls thinking. "They cost *dollars* apiece. I'd never be able to afford to own that many, much less to abandon such a fortune on one climb."

I told Todd and Paul that this was the coldest climb I'd ever done in North America. I'd seen much lower temperatures, but even on Mount McKinley, where the mercury had dropped to $-35°$ F, I'd had hours of sun when I could climb without a jacket. Here we were relentlessly cold in wind and shadow and because of the necessary touch of bare flesh to cold rock when leading. Gloves worked for jümaring, hauling or belaying, but leading pitches required a hands-on approach. Our feet, too, required light, tight shoes for the hardest moves.

Dawn arrived on the second morning amidst a freezing wind. We continued uneventfully to the 14th pitch, the crux where the previous group had resorted to direct aid. A thin crack on another polished slickenside led to a ceiling with no good foot- or handholds. The only hope was to hang the first joint of a finger in the seam under the overhang and make a bionic move into a long layback up an equally thin crack.

I knew I couldn't do it free, and so I led the pitch with direct aid and set myself up on a rope to the side for a photo opportunity. Tim Toula tried first,

PLATE 44

Photo by Galen A. Rowell

Todd Skinner belaying Tim Toula on MOUNT HOOKER.

made it to the overhang, cased out the thin crack above, played with the sequence and gave it his all. Somehow, he stuck to the cliff when it seemed that his fingers could no longer hold him. After he made the 5.12 pitch on the lead, Todd and Paul smoothly followed.

By evening, we were all together on a broad ledge about 400 feet below the summit. Just being able to stand in a level place and walk back and forth was a tremendous luxury. I slept a solid eight hours, wearing my down jacket inside the sleeping bag.

On the third morning,Tim and Todd packed up the gear, while Paul and I began switching leads toward the summit. By noon we clambered over the top onto a vast plateau of meadows and wildflowers, suspended above the rest of the world. The wind had died down, the pressure to perform was gone, and as Todd bent over to drink from a snow-fed rivulet, he looked around and said, "This is what it is all about. This is why I took up climbing."

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Wind River Range, Wyoming.

FIRST FREE ASCENT: Mount Hooker, 3811 meters, 12,504 feet, via North Face, August 24-29, 1990 (Paul Piana, Galen Rowell, Todd Skinner, Tim Toula).

TECHNICAL DATA: Grade VI, 5.12.