

Roaming the Chuska

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MY KNEES KNOCKED TOGETHER. I gazed up at the tattered and torn rope. It had dangled in the elements for a whopping twelve months. My knees knocked louder as I eyed one particular section of the used rope—its sheath had slumped off about 40 feet up, leaving a five-foot section of white core spinning in the autumn wind.

Certainly the sight of core pushed my heart rate up, but, the truth be known, that was just one of many scars the rope had from a winter left outside. Swallowing deeply, I forced a Jümar onto the rope and grimaced. It looked as if I was about to perform the ultimate rope test.

Just as I clamped the second ascender down, Luke Laeser, my partner of many misadventures, mentioned that he was willing to jümar first. My heart skipped a beat. Was this talented 19-year-old nuts . . . like me? Hadn't he read any scary climbing stories? Apparently not.

Stepping aside, I eagerly gave Laeser the rope. Within 15 minutes, he was sitting comfortably at our hanging belay, two leads up the tower, telling me to hurry. My ultimate rope test had blown away in the western wind, and Laeser, who thought the whole process casual, gazed at the pitch above with curiosity.

That worried me. We'd already decided the upper lead, which appeared to overhang for all its 160 feet—something rare in a desert tower—would be mine. But with Luke gazing up at it lovingly, especially after his amazing boldness on the Jümar, I reluctantly handed him over the sharp end. The upper pitches of the "Tombstone," I conceded, Luke had earned.

Laeser and I were on the remote eastern side of the northern end of the Chuska Mountains, which lie on the Arizona-New Mexico border. The area had never seen exploration by climbers. We had gained permission from local grazing-permit holders for several climbs in the area and were midway through a first ascent that would likely become one of our finest ever.

The eastern slope of the Chuskas differs remarkably from the western, which is best known for its early desert-climbing history. In the late 1950s, Mark Powell, Jerry Gallwas, Don Wilson and Bill Feuerer explored the area, picking off two of the most famous spires in North America, one of which, Spider Rock, is off-limits to climbers today. Layton Kor, Harvey Carter, Art Howells, Don Doucette and other Coloradans followed in the 1960s, climbing Venus Needle, Angel Wing and Navajo Needle. Although trained on the granite and bushwhacks of the Northwest, Fred Beckey, Eric Bjørnstad and various

partners were also very active in the area in the 1960s and 1970s, as were Bill Forrest, Jimmy Dunn and Todd Gordon; Kyle Copeland, Alison Sheets and the Bandidos in the 1980s; and John Middendorf, Rob Slater, Jim Bodenhammer and various partners in the 1990s.

But the eastern side is different. There, the world sits on a high, parched, gray-brown volcanic plateau. Numerous basalt and tuff-brecchia plugs dominate the landscape, many of which are uncharted. And, more importantly for us, unclimbed.

The biggest unclimbed plug, Bennett Peak, I ascended with Laeser in 1992, as well as the northern peak of Ford Butte with Mike Baker in 1990. (The main peak of Ford Butte was first climbed by Mark Dalen and David Nordstrom in the early 1970s.) I had also made the first ascent of the classic Church Rock at the extreme southern end of the range with Bob Rosebrough and Baker in 1990.

Yet, the climbs Laeser and I undertook in 1993 were far finer than anything I'd done in the region previously. (I knew this to be true when I received an endless flow of messages on my answering machine from Fred Beckey. I had sent Beckey a photo of the "Tombstone" in July. He had demanded to climb the tower with me at once, or at least to be told where it was so that he could list it in his little black book.) Fred is an unsinkable climber, but he was too late. Before I even got Fred's call, Laeser and I were on the "Tombstone."

Laeser led upwards from the second belay station, using nuts and Friends. He climbed about a foot to the side for every foot vertically. After 40 feet, protected by wobbly pins, he decided the rock was junk and that it was time to hand the lead back to me. He lowered off, dangling 25 feet out from the belay. I threw him a rope and hauled him in. This was a steep lead!

I yarded up, only to be confronted by a collection of abandoned pins, loose blocks and crumbling sand. Much to Laeser's chagrin—and with the lack of style I've always professed—I placed five bolts to the side of the vertical sandbox. The moves quickly resolved what was more a question of time than anything else.

I followed a splitter crack above that for several placements, then nailed a beautiful, thin seam with baby angles, reaching the sunlight that blasted my face from over the top of the tower. Two more very short traversing pitches put us on the summit, easily the finest virgin summit I've ever stood upon. We rappelled to the delighted whoop of a sightseer who had witnessed the climb.

In November, we were back. Luke led us up "Down Tower," one of two spectacular pinnacles we had sighted from the "Tombstone." Local residents Curtis and Marty Benally and John Butler joined us for the climb and pointed out the magnificent towers and canyons that lay all around us. They invited us to stay at their home, where we feasted on fried bread and chili. After attending a rare Yei-Bi-Chei ceremony with Curtis, we slept late.

With a winter wind picking up, we coiled our ropes. There was, Curtis told us, the spring. We agreed and signed a pact to return.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Northern End of the Chuska Mountains, Arizona

FIRST ASCENTS: "Tombstone," IV, 5.6, A2+, August 29, 1993 (Cameron Burns, Luke Laeser).

"Down Tower," III, 5.7, A2, November 20, 1993 (Burns, Laeser, Curtis Benally, Marty Benally, John Butler).

PLATE 18

Photo by Cameron Burns

**The TOMBSTONE (left) and DOWN
AND OUT TOWERS (center),
Chuska Mountains, Arizona.**

