

A Ghost of a Chance

An account of the first ascent of Mount McKinley's Father and Son's Wall

by STEVE HOUSE

Sometimes a project lurks in a climber's mind for years. You dance with it to the beat of your ambitions and the ebb and flow of your confidence. When the project is a well-known plum you hesitate to openly plan for fear that it will spur others to action. You whisper of it only to your closest partner, the one who wouldn't do it without you. You bide your time. It is nearly ripe for the ascent, and you will be ready.

I had almost gone in to attempt the Father and Son's Wall twice before, in 1993 and 1994. I prepared and contemplated. No one had done any real serious climbing on it — or if they had, they were quiet. The first ascent of the wall had been Mugs Stump's project. In the lull of his death climbers were shy. Mugs had seemed invincible, untouchable. With his death we withdrew and reevaluated our risks.

Eli Helmuth and I had worked together as guides, but had never climbed together. We got our chance in May when we attempted the east face of Mount Barille and the south face of the Moose's Tooth. I was nervous as hell on the grainy wall of Barille. When forced out of the security of aid, a large foothold broke, spinning me back into space. Eli caught me and sealed our trust.

In June we co-led a successful ascent of Denali's West Rib for the American Alpine Institute. During the trip we discussed post-Rib climbing plans: either attempt a quick ascent of the Cassin or the first ascent of the Father and Son's Wall.

There were a lot of big guns in the range that year and they were all on Denali. Lowe, Anker, Backes, Twight. Greg Collins and Phil Powers were there expressly for the Father and Son's; lucky for us, rescues and storms kept those guys busy or pinned to camp. By the end of June the Father and Son's Wall remained unclimbed.

After five days of rain in Talkeetna we land at Kahiltna International and ski up the Kahiltna glacier to the 8000-foot camp. The next two days are stormy and we move to 11,000 feet on the West Buttress. The afternoon of June 30 is clear and from the top of Motorcycle Hill we glass the wall, thus fixing our intentions.

From the head of the Peter's Basin a snow gully leads several hundred feet to a white finger that stretches up and right to the first of three rockbands. Here a ribbon of what we hope will be climbable ice reflects from the back of a shallow chimney. The granite curtain of the second rockband stands 3,000 feet



above the Peter's Glacier and 3,000 feet below the top of the wall. It looks smooth and steep. We pin our hopes on a weakness, indicated by small patches of snow, on the left side. Above that, an exposed icy slope butts up to the third rockband which promises several narrow streamers of opaque ice. The final 2,400 feet are continuous ice slopes that appear benign in their white coat; but I have seen their blue before. That deep, hard color coats only the biggest, coldest mountains.

Back at camp we pack light but responsibly. Enough fuel to stay hydrated, enough gear to descend from high on the face, and a shovel in case weather pins us down between the top of the wall and the West Buttress route. We plan to nap in the warmth of the afternoons and climb during the bright Alaskan nights.

That evening's weather forecast is noncommittal, but does not mention any approaching storms. We dredge our intuitions for clues, eat, and watch cotton-clouds pour through Kahiltna Pass and disperse in faint wisps to the lower, warmer Peter's Basin.

At midnight we ascend Motorcycle Hill and from 12,000 feet on the West Buttress we start down into the Peter's Basin. We descend, tracing beneath cliffbands, wading through thigh-deep snow. Reaching an ice gully we down-climb 30° to 45° ice for 1,500 feet. An easy jump across the bergschrund puts us on the glacier, less than four hours after leaving camp.

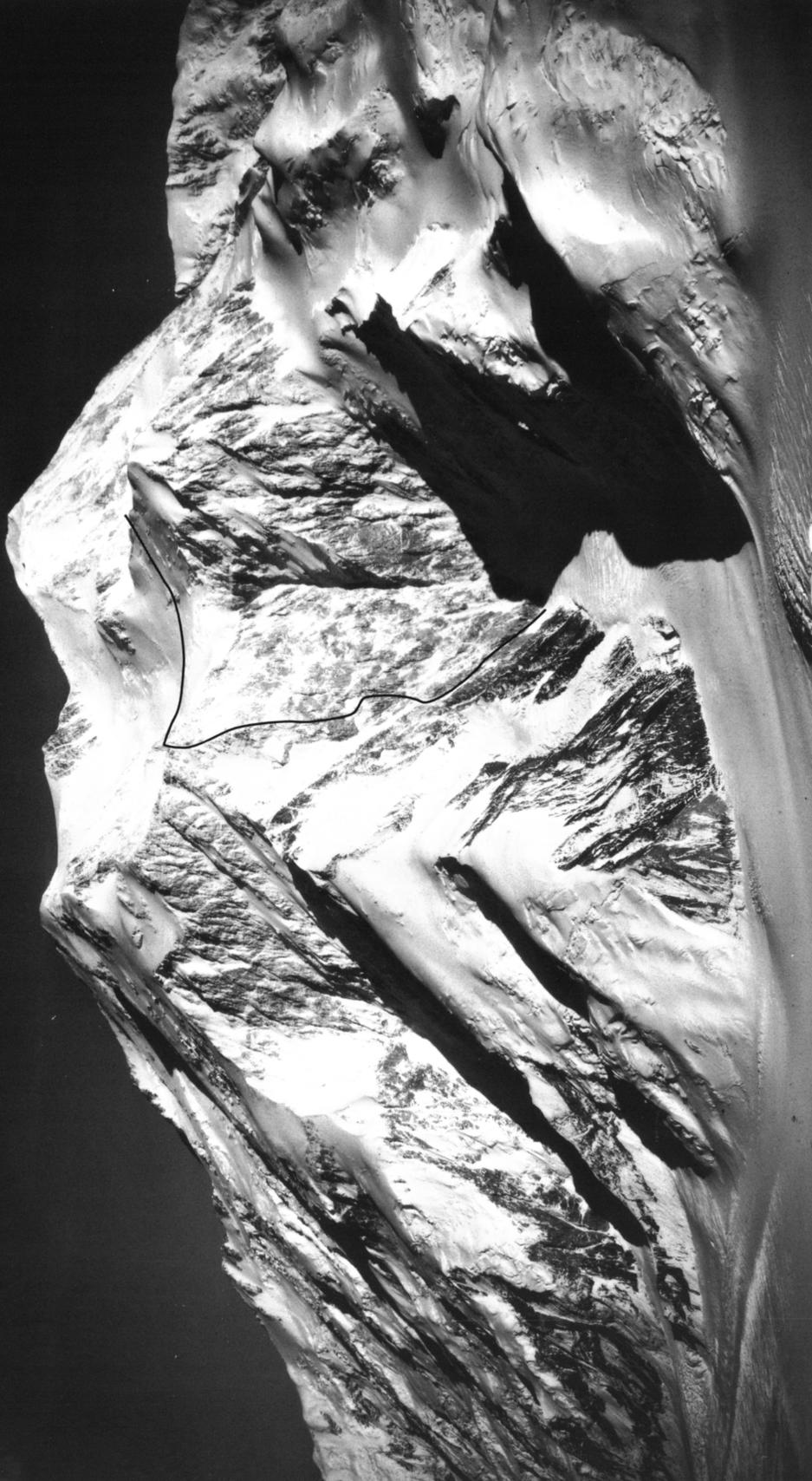
Our first rest break gives us a decidedly different view of the wall. A small cloud hangs in the middle of the face, and with the foreshortened affect it doesn't look so big. It looks possible. The approach has gone well, it's early, and we stash our excitement deep within us, knowing that we will call upon its energy later.

Eli kick-steps up the cone of the snow gully; it steepens and when we stop to put on crampons running water below us is the only sound we hear. Where the snow finger breaks right from the gully I swing through and work toward the first rockband.

There is no ice here, yet. I climb on square-cut rock edges and the gully steepens. The push and pull of the crux moves focus me and I'm dancing upward. I roll my axe in a soft arc above my head and pull onto a drum-hollow veneer of ice; I delicately stretch the rope to reach a belay of tied-off screws. Moderate ice fills the upper gully and we swap two more leads. I holler with joy at the crest of the rockband.

Across the snowslope stands the mystery revealed. The same geology that allowed the last gully created a chimney in the second rockband. It is narrow and deep but can no longer keep its white secret to itself.

Eli gets out the camera for the first time as I move up steep waves of untouched ice. We swing, set, and pull on our ice tools for two excellent steep pitches. The first is the steepest, with 30 feet of vertical climbing. A third, mod-



erate pitch puts us onto unexpectedly steep and slabby climbing.

The seriousness of the climbing between the second and third rockbands surprises us and makes us more than a little nervous. With nowhere to belay we simul-climb on 45° ice that is one-half to two inches thick. We move carefully and ferret out the thickest ice patches and place tied-off screws in them. Several rope lengths of this and the ice gets thicker. We head toward the fattest of the icicles which cascade over the last rockband.

This rockband is the shortest, but it produces the physical crux of the route. The ice is formed by melt-water seeping from the upper icefields and lies in a slight left-facing corner, which provides some relief from the strain of 80 feet of vertical ice, none of which is more than three inches thick. Most of it is less. Despite an attempt at delicacy my ascent doesn't leave much for Eli to climb, but he manages with style.

Eli leads past and when the rope is tight he places a screw and we begin the running belays that we will utilize for the remaining 2,400 feet of the wall. With most of the technical difficulties behind us, fatigue rears its head. We search for a place to sit down, brew up, and nap. It has been 14 hours since we left our camp at 11,000 feet on the West Buttress.

We climb farther than we want to before we find a small perch on top of a boulder. 20 minutes of chopping allows us to get into our down jackets and bivy sacks. We drink, eat cookies, ramen, and Stoker bars, and try to let the day's only direct sunlight warm and relax us. I look across the face and down at climbers on the West Buttress. They gaze back, but the massiveness of the wall disguises us. The stove churns out water, then is quiet. Just as I arrive at a deep sleep my subconscious jerks me awake, preventing me from letting down my guard. I ignore my intuition and doze off.

After sleeping for two hours, we traverse back toward the center of the icefields. Each ropelength I place a screw, then one of my tools when I'm out of screws. Every seven ropelengths we swap leads. The ice is only 40° to 45° but it demands the utmost attention to keep our crampons secure in its unyielding skin. Trance-like, we move together and the features we memorized at the top of Motorcycle Hill come into place and into scale. A couloir that we thought would be two feet wide is 30 feet wide. Aspects we thought were flush angle off sharply to the side.

Only 200 feet below the top of the northwest buttress we stop. We have been climbing for several hundred feet without a running belay on the premise that we were only moments away from topping out. I am chilled and thirsty, Eli has stomach cramps — symptoms of dehydration and fatigue — but it seems too cold to stop in the middle of this night and wait for the stove. We take the luxury of nursing our ills for a few minutes and then make for the top.

The apex of the Father and Son's Wall is at 15,400 feet. The northwest buttress's ridge crest curls in a lazy design to Denali's north summit, exactly 4,000



feet above us. It looks close in the still, half-light of Alaskan midnight, but we know better. We are tempted by the romance of climbing all the way to the summit, but only very briefly. Our goal is ascending the wall, not climbing to the summit, and planning otherwise would have sacrificed our 20-pound packs. Perhaps some will argue that we did not complete the ascent. If so, it remains for them to come and climb it that way. Eli and I stand on the summit of the Father and Son's Wall at half-past midnight.

We stumble down through snowdrifts and crevasses, unaccustomed to the flatness. The upper Peter's Glacier is windblown and we walk across bare ice, jumping thinly-veiled crevasses. None too soon we start up the snow-laden northern slope of the West Buttress. We have 1,200 feet to ascend but it goes slowly. The snow is waist deep. We shovel and collapse the snow above us by hand and move up two steps. Switching leads and resting for brief moments are all that interrupt our stupor. The temperature drops and a slight breeze trickles down from the upper mountain. When we finally arrive at 16,200 feet there is a great relief. On familiar ground, people snore, their tents flapping gently. We know we've made it.

I know that I was not ready for the Father and Son's Wall until this season. The broad, chaotic rhythms of the Alaska Range hadn't begun to be revealed to me. In 150 collective days on attempts and ascents of eight different Alaska Range peaks, Eli and I have sampled the winds that tear away at old tent flies, the seeping nature of high-altitude cold, and the unexpected crevasses that form even along narrow ridge crests. These seeds of experience have given depth to our judgments and lent tenor to our skills.

We could not have broken through the psychological barriers of going so light and so hard by ourselves. It had been done by others before us and so we stood on the shoulders of these giants. And yet we each knew, in a personal way, that we would be able to keep going, that we would still have it together after 24 nonstop hours. And that, if necessary, we could have stretched it into 48.

Mugs Stump had been ready in 1991, but something hadn't been quite right that season, so he soloed the Cassin ridge in 15 hours. It took us a while to catch up. Although we didn't solo as he wanted to, I've got a good feeling that he would have approved.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Denali National Park and Preserve, Alaska.

NEW ROUTE: *First Born* (Alaska Grade V, 33 hours round-trip from camp at 11,000 feet on the West Buttress) on the northwest face ("Father and Son's Wall") of Mount McKinley, July 1-2, 1995 (Eli Helmuth and Steve House).