

They Risk Their Lives for Fun

These danger-loving climbers seldom conquer lofty mountains, just "impossible" cliffs in their own neighborhoods. For extra thrills, they test their ropes by leaping into space.

By HAL BURTON

Among the more recondite methods of spending a summer weekend in Yosemite National Park, California, perhaps the ultimate was achieved last June by four young men who willingly sat out the night on a ledge eighteen inches wide, 3000 feet above the crackling campfires, the dance music and the other civilized amenities to be enjoyed with minimum effort on the grassy floor of Yosemite Valley. More comfortable accommodations are plentiful in the park, which is geared to handle 1,000,000 tourists a year, but no four visitors could have been as blissfully contented, with less obvious reason. The young men in question sat with their backs pressed against a wall of granite and

dangled their feet in space, since there was not enough room to lie down. As a sensible precaution, they were anchored to the northwest face of Half Dome by a nylon rope seven sixteenths of an inch in thickness. A sitting man may doze, even if poised halfway between heaven and earth; and to doze unprotected on so airy a perch could lead to results not pleasant to contemplate.

Had anyone spread the word, no doubt a good many of the 11,000 vacationers crowding the park would have tried, the next morning, to pick out four tiny figures crawling up a cliff that experts had dismissed as totally impossible. The back of Half Dome can be surmounted, between waist-high cables on a lad-

derway of wooden cleats, by any tourist free from vertigo and willing to essay a rock slope of moderate steepness. The northwest face is something else again. Sheared and polished by erosion, it soars 2000 feet above a mass of tumbled boulders, tilted ledges, and trees clinging to crevices in the rock. The boulder slope rises another 3000 feet. Bestor Robinson and Richard M. Leonard, who pioneered rope climbing on the Yosemite cliffs in 1931, dismissed the northwest face long ago as "so awful it might as well be forgotten." Millions of casual visitors, endowed with less precise knowledge, have looked upward from the valley floor and arrived at the same conclusion.

There are, however, stubborn people in this world who refuse to admit that anything is impossible, among them a few thousand Americans who pursue the delicate and exacting sport of rock climbing. The figure is necessarily flexible, since advancing years and increasing prudence cause a certain number of rock climbers to retire annually to less strenuous pursuits. There always are replacements, who carry on the tradition that a cliff is to be esteemed more highly than a mountain summit. Among this group, the northwest face of Half Dome is regarded as one of the most tantalizing climbing problems in the United States, demanding a respectful approach and a painstaking reconnaissance. Rock climbing, a British authority on the subject once observed, "is a game played slowly, which goes not to the swift, but to the skillful and levelheaded." The men on Half Dome, who had already scrambled up the boulder slopes now were crawling up the sheer cliffs of the northwest face at the rate of only 200 vertical feet per day, or about one seventh the height of the Empire State Building. To storm the cliff in one sublime burst of speed would have been suicidal, for the rock was far too difficult. A more sensible conclusion was reached—to search for a possible way to the top and to make the assault later, after careful planning.

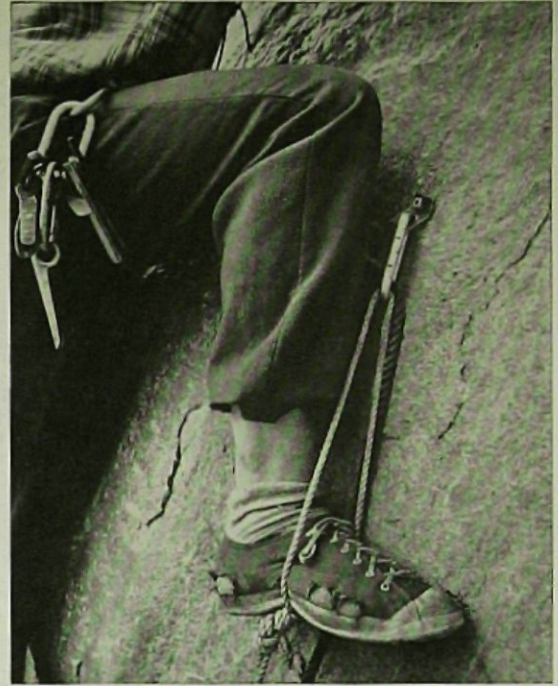
At the end of two and one half days, Royal Robbins, Warren Harding, Jerry Galwas and Don Wilson had managed to rise exactly 450 feet through a

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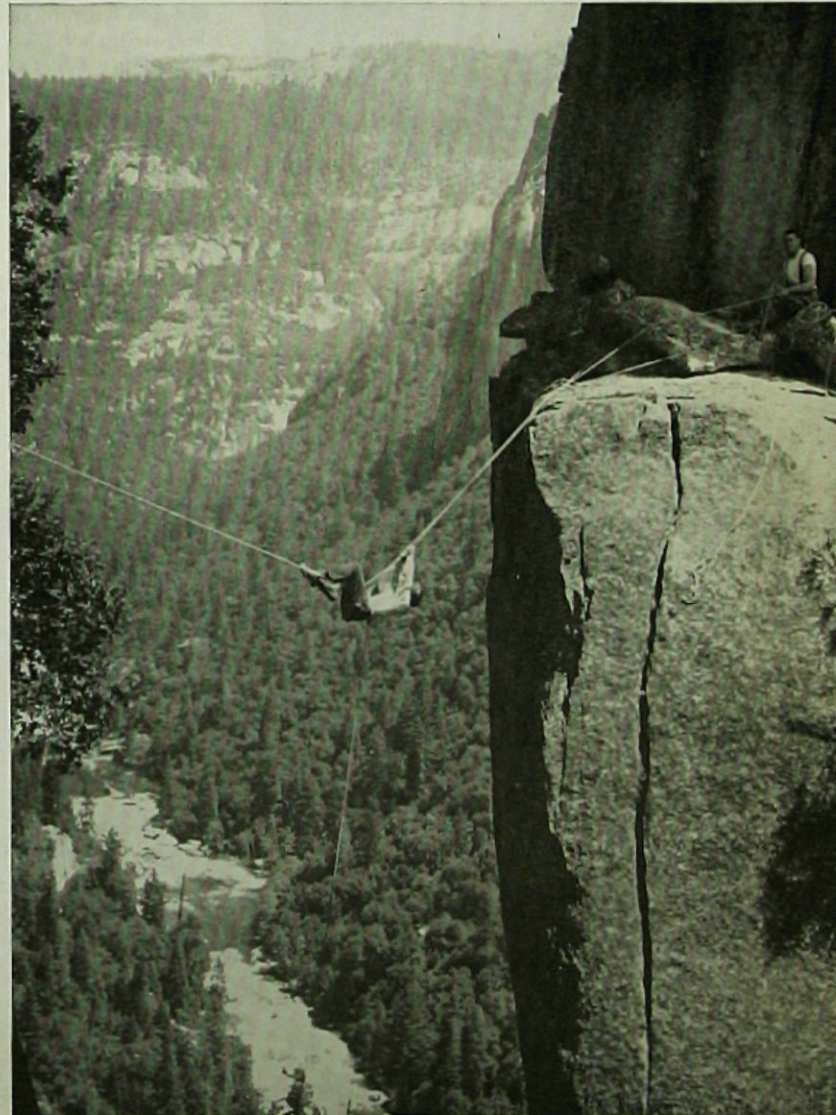
Although he is over fifty years old, businessman Fritz Wiessner finds "an escape from the pressures of the world" in rock climbing. Here, Wiessner ascends the formidable Indian Face, in New York's Adirondack Mountains.



Don Claunch (right) belays Pete Schoening as he clambers up Crooked Tower, an inhospitable little peak on the side of Cathedral Mountain, in eastern Washington.



Expansion bolts and rope slings are essential. So are pitons, carabiners (hanging from belt) and tattered tennis shoes.



Is she scared? Maybe—but she likes it that way. Mary Ann Matthews crosses a mountaineer's rope bridge in Yosemite Park. Man on ledge holds a safety line.

ford medicines. We cannot even buy milk."

I sat back. I was appalled. "Suzy, you should have told us this before. Don't you realize we can —"

"No, no," she said hastily. "Not reason I tell. I explain Miss Keller."

"Oh?"
"Miss Keller is like Occupation. Miss Keller is like America. She is new way to look at things. She is new hope."

I thought about it for a moment and then gave up; the connection was beyond me. But I realized that I had tortured Suzy long enough. "I see, Suzy," I said. "I understand. Thank you."

She returned to her desk. Again I saw that look of stoic patience come into her young face. The minutes ticked by. All at once I rose.

"Come on," I said. "We're going downstairs."

"But the office —"
"The hell with the office," I said; and locked the door behind us.

A tremendous crowd of Japanese and Americans had gathered in the lobby. Every Japanese in the building seemed to be there. The atmosphere was electric. It communicated itself to Suzy and me, and in the last few minutes, when the motorcycles on the street roared back to life, we almost held our breaths.

Then she came. I had never seen Helen Keller before, and I was totally unprepared for the experience. Guided by her companion, Polly Thompson, she came quickly out of the Public Health and Welfare offices. In her eyes was a light so bright, so happy, so radiant it took our breaths away. Without even thinking, we burst into applause.

This was not ordinary applause. This was a tribute to a moral and spiritual triumph. At once a wonderful smile spread over her face. It illuminated the heart. It was the most beautiful, heart-warming smile I had ever seen.

She looked around at all of us with joy. I couldn't believe that she could neither see our faces nor hear our spontaneous, heartfelt tribute; she could only feel it on the air. For a moment longer she smiled around at us, a loving, grateful, happy woman. Then she was gone. It was as if a light had gone out. The motorcycles roared away. We returned to our work.

Much later that afternoon, I called Suzy to my office. I had just come back from a visit to the other divisions of our section.

"Suzy, we have something for you here," I said. "I don't want you to be embarrassed about it. It's from all of us—everybody in the section. It's for your father. You understand? So he can go to the hospital."

She stared at the envelope. Though she didn't know it, it contained more than 60,000 yen—almost a year's salary. "Captain, I didn't mean —"

"I know you didn't, Suzy," I said. "You were talking about something else. But never mind that. We want you to tell us where he goes. You understand? And we want to follow it up—make sure he has medicines, X rays, milk. The things he needs."

Trembling, she took the envelope. Tears came in her eyes. She struggled to control herself. "You see?" she said. "It is same thing. Same as Miss Keller."

"What do you mean?"
"Always we accept our troubles. It is tradition. We shrug our shoulders. We say nothing can be done. Americans not the same. Americans like Miss Keller. *Wakarimaska?*"

I stared at her. And all at once I understood.

This was the one gift we could say we had brought them. All their lives, for centuries past, they had accepted their misfortunes. They had endured poverty, illness, malnutrition, famine, earthquake, typhoons and wars. They had resigned themselves; the misery of their lives was beyond remedy. Now they had a new hope. It was something that came to them from the New World. They didn't yet fully understand it. But the essence of it was this simple action by a handful of Americans to do something about her father. And the symbol of it, for Suzy and the countless millions of her countrymen, was Miss Helen Keller—who had not just accepted blindness, who had not just accepted a mute tongue, but who had learned to see, to hear, to speak, and to fill every human heart who saw her with pride in the human spirit.

"Go along with you, Suzy," I said.

She started to bow. Then, by a whisper that came to her from another way of life, she stood up straight and shook my hand.



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maze of cracks and along two ledges, each of which provided somewhat rudimentary lodging for the night. Where holds were scant for hands or feet, they hammered in thin pegs of steel, called pitons—pronounced "pee-tons"—to which the climbing rope could be attached for safety. From time to time, to the annoyance of everyone, the cracks ran out and only a smooth wall bulged above. Rock climbers have a way of dealing with such problems. When pitons are useless, there is always the expansion bolt, equipped with a ring on its outer end and a collar of lead on the inner end. Six times, standing in slings of rope, Robbins used a hammer and drill to bore into the cliff, and then hammered in bolts. The lead collar, expanding as the bolt was tightened, sealed itself solidly to the rock. The result was a virtual ladder of steel up walls so sheer and holdless that most mountaineers would have given up in disgust.

The supply of food, the water in the canteens and the time available all gave out simultaneously the third morning, but the party had found what it sought: A route that would "go," as nearly as a practiced eye could tell. A fine tracery of cracks led up to the top. The climbers turned back. This

spring, when the snows have melted from the valley floor and the nights are warm enough so that a man can sleep on a cliff, Robbins intends to lead the first complete climb of the northwest face. At best, there will be six bivouacs—now and then with space enough to sit down, but more often standing upright in rope slings. The reward, if you wish to call it that, will be the conquest of the impossible.

Something so close to sheer misery, with such an element of calculated risk, is scarcely the average man's dish of tea. But rock climbers are a particularly tenacious breed, who get themselves into the most hair-raising predicaments in order to get out of them triumphantly. The Yosemite cliffs—smooth, spectacular and handy to the highways—have inspired some prodigious climbing, based on a lavish use of artificial aids. Purists, who refer to the Yosemite cragsmen as "rock engineers," somewhat patronizingly talk of "mechanized climbing," conducted up a ladderway of steel.

Whichever faction possesses the true gospel, both agree that Yosemite exerts an overpowering attraction for rock climbers. This is best

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(Continued from Page 99) demonstrated over the Memorial Day weekend, when hundreds of Californians show up with ropes and rucksacks for the annual rock-climbing outing of the Sierra Club, an organization of approximately 10,000 mountaineers. It is an incorrect assumption that most rock climbers are teen-age daredevils with no visible means of support. Of the men who reconnoitered Half Dome, Robbins was a banker, Harding an engineer, Wilson and Galwas graduate students. Among sedentary sports, the best counterpart is a rousing game of chess, which calls for intense cerebration and an almost psychic knowledge of what lies ahead. There is one substantial difference. A wrong move on the chessboard is seldom more than humiliating; a wrong move on a cliff may be fatal.

The point of divergence was never more clearly illustrated than in August, 1946, when Jack Arnold, Anton Nelson and Fritz Lippmann climbed the Lost Arrow, a knife blade of rock 1300 feet high, sticking out from the cliff midway between Yosemite Point and Upper Yosemite Falls. (See: WE CLIMBED THE IMPOSSIBLE PEAK, by Fritz A. Lippmann, The Saturday Evening Post, June 28, 1947.) This smooth and seemingly unattainable spire had been attempted eleven times previously. After five days, the climbers finally managed to lasso the summit from a point on the valley walls. Two of them descended to a notch 200 feet deep, separating the Lost Arrow from the main rock mass, and then up to the dangling ends of the rope, ascending it to the top. After the rope was made fast, in the manner of the circus performer staging a "slide for life," Lippmann crossed over the void and joined his companions atop the Arrow. Four years later, in June, 1950, Alan Steck and John Salathé completed what Steck calls "an ordeal by piton," spending four nights and five days on the 1500-foot north wall of Sentinel Rock. This modest project used up 156 pitons and nine expansion bolts, and "I'm still not quite sure why I did it," Steck told me recently. In terms of time spent and results achieved, Sentinel Rock was notable, but Half Dome still holds the record for the number of overnight guests accommodated.

The volume of vertical traffic in Yosemite Park forced the National Park Service to establish a rescue team of ten rangers, all of whom are trained in the most complicated rock techniques. "The experienced climbers rarely cause us much trouble," says R. N. McIntyre, administrative assistant to the park superintendent. "What gives us a headache is the lost children and the people who decide to take a short cut off the trails. They're the ones who always get themselves stuck on a cliff—can't go down; can't go up—at just about dark. It's lucky for us that this valley is so small. Anyone who hollers for help, once people have gone to bed, can be heard for six miles around." It is possible to overdo a good thing, however, as one rescue established last June. Michael Simon, sixteen, was hiking along the top of the cliffs with a group of friends when he decided—what else?—to take a short cut to the valley. He wound up in a cluster of trees and sheer ledges known as "the Jungle," in the middle of the Royal Arches, one of the most difficult cliffs in the park.

Unable to go either up or down, Simon proceeded to scream for help so long and so loudly that the rangers were unable to break in on his monologue to let him know that rescue was at hand. The cacophony lasted until midnight, when he fell into an exhausted sleep on a broad and safe ledge, but it started again in the morning. A rescue team headed by ranger John Henneberger, meanwhile, was conducting a most delicate climb of the Arches. The rangers could hear Simon, but they couldn't hear each other—a difficult situation when a

climb is being conducted in pitch-darkness with occasional aid from a flashlight. "He was in the midst of his last and biggest 'Help!'" said Henneberger, "when I finally stepped out from behind a tree and tapped him on the shoulder. We got him up to the top of the Arches and walked him down over a foot trail, but I'll bet that boy had a sore throat for a month after."

Two other rescue expeditions last year were less humorous. On April eighth, Ann Pottinger, nineteen, a student at Stanford University, set out with two boys to climb the Lower Cathedral Spire. A snowstorm threatened and the rangers at park headquarters had warned the party—which registered in advance for the climb, as required by park regulations—to turn back if the weather worsened. At 10:30 that night one of the climbers staggered into headquarters again and said, "I'm afraid Ann is in trouble. We had to leave her at the foot of the Spire and come down for help." By midnight, in a blinding snowstorm, a rescue team reached the girl. She was dead from exposure—probably because her clothing consisted of cotton jeans, a cotton shirt and a light poplin jacket.

At the end of May, the rescue crew faced its most severe test. Helene von Ryckervorsel, a graduate student at the University of California, was leading a climb on the Royal Arches. This wall, rising directly above the Ahwahnee Hotel, is one vast slab of rock inclined at seventy to eighty degrees, with few places where a climber can hold on. In such a situation, an expert flattens his feet and hands on the rock and moves ahead to the nearest solid ledge. This is known as friction climbing. The pressure of rubber soles and bare palms on the rock is sufficient to prevent a slip—in most cases. But Miss von Ryckervorsel fell ninety feet. She was held by the second man on the rope, who had braced himself on one of the few available overcroppings. It took supervising ranger John Mahoney and the rescue crew of five men most of the night to reach her.

"I have never seen such injuries," said park naturalist Glenn Gallison, a member of the rescue crew. "There was a hole in the back of her head, and there were so many bones fractured that I'm surprised she didn't die right there on the cliff."

The rangers dragged a mesh-and-aluminum rescue litter up to the scene of the accident, tied themselves on to the rocks while they administered first aid, and in two and a half hours brought Miss Ryckervorsel down to the valley.

Rescues, though dramatic, intrigue the Yosemite rangers less than the case of the Two Missing Men. On July 20, 1954, Walter Gordon, a student at the University of

California, bought steaks for an outdoor picnic in one of the campgrounds, told his companions, "I'll be back before dinner," and set out on a hike from which he never returned. The result was one of the most concentrated searches the park has known. The next day, bloodhounds were put on Gordon's trail. They led the rangers up the path to Glacier Point which overlooks the valley, and down the Four Mile trail to the highway. There the scent apparently vanished. As many as thirty rangers blackened the cliffs, searching for Gordon's body, and for days a helicopter flew up and down the valley while spotters stared through field glasses. The search was hopeless; Gordon is still missing.

Three months later, on October 9, 1954, another University of California student was walking along a footpath near the Ahwahnee Hotel with his wife, father-in-law and mother-in-law. "That looks interesting up there," said Orvar von Laas, thirty, motioning to the upper part of the Royal Arches cliff. "I'll see you a little later." He walked off into the underbrush and oblivion. Within thirteen hours the bloodhounds picked up his scent at the base of the Royal Arches climb, and tried frantically to scramble up the rock. Rescue teams roped up and covered the whole cliff, with negative results. A helicopter flew alongside the Arches. Rangers searched for two solid weeks, keeping an eye peeled for a concentration of carrion birds that might pinpoint the location of a body. One climbing party discovered a bear, which departed with a startled snort, but nobody found von Laas. The FBI, called in because Yosemite is Federal property, checked every possible lead without result.

In quiet hours, which are infrequent, the rangers are apt to speculate about Gordon and von Laas. Perhaps, they think, the bodies lie somewhere on the Yosemite cliffs, wedged behind a rock which nobody will pass for 100 years. Such a time lapse is not out of the question. In September of 1932 Marjorie Farquhar, Jules Eichhorn and Richard Leonard, of the Sierra Club, made the first attempt to climb Washington Column. "Way up there on the cliffs," says Leonard, "we found part of a human skull. Our guess was that it dated from prehistoric times. But when we took it to the Department of Anthropology at the University of California, they said the skull had been there about a hundred years—just about the time the first fur trappers were exploring the High Sierra. I have often wondered who the poor fellow was who lost his footing and died, all alone, up there above Yosemite Valley." A few years later a climber found some human bones in a little

stream tumbling down the cliffs opposite Washington Column. In the same pool of water were an initialed watch and an old hat imprinted with the name of a store in Phoenix, Arizona. With the help of the FBI, the owner was established. Park headquarters called his mother in Phoenix to extend condolences.

"That's strange," she said. "He just left for school. But he did come back from Yosemite last year without his hat." The bones apparently were those of a man who had vanished twenty years earlier.

The sport of rock climbing, already flourishing in the East, was introduced to California in 1931 by Robert L. M. Underhill, a professor at Harvard University and a mountaineer of distinction. The idea of tying on a rope to go up difficult cliffs had not heretofore occurred to the members of the Sierra Club, but once it caught on, the response was immediate. "The directors were horrified when we proposed that the club establish a rock-climbing section," recalls Bestor Robinson, now retired as a rock climber, who practices law in Oakland, California. "They said we'd be sued into bankruptcy in case of an accident, and added that the charter didn't make any provision for it. But six months later we had a rock-climbing section."

Robinson and friends romped joyfully over the California mountains, studied ponderous German texts explaining assorted ways of holding onto a rock or of wriggling up a crack, ordered pitons from a sporting-goods shop in Munich, and proceeded to set up a training area on Cragmont Rock, a cliff in one of the Berkeley parks. This led to some complications. A lady whose home lay directly below the rock called the park department to say, "I don't want any bodies falling in my back yard!" None ever did, but one climber took a moderate tumble, involving abrasions and contusions. Since the accident occurred on city property, Robinson had to report it to the police.

The training climbs grew more and more elaborate until the Sierra Club felt compelled to set up a system of classification, based on European standards. Class I climbs were simple hikes; Class II were rock scrambles; Class III required the occasional use of a rope; Class IV called for ropes and careful support from above; Class V required pitons, and Class VI—as on Half Dome—demanded pitons or bolts for direct aid. Some hundreds of California climbs have now been meticulously classified and bound into a guidebook.

From the experiments of the club, it may be accurately said, the United States Army developed much of its climbing equipment and a coherent doctrine for teaching green soldiers how to get up a cliff, if need be. This data was first imparted to the 10th Mountain Division, which fought brilliantly in Italy during World War II. Before the end of the war, some 25,000 other soldiers had been taught how to climb in such assorted places as Lincoln, New Hampshire; Natural Bridge, Virginia, and Mouth of Seneca, West Virginia. The old doctrines still are carried on in the canyons of Cheyenne Creek, outside Colorado Springs, Colorado, where the Army maintains a mountain-training area. One great contribution was the nylon rope for climbing. Until just before the war, no climber would consider risking his life on anything but a 120-foot hunk of Manila rope. Nylon rope, which had just come on the market, was regarded with suspicion by Eastern climbers, but the Sierra Club decided to try it out.

The method of testing was somewhat unusual. Robinson, Leonard and David R. Brower, now the club's secretary, found themselves a suitable rock, about thirty feet high, in a Berkeley park. One man would sit down, bracing himself solidly, and pass the rope around his body for a be-



"The judge meant anyone else. It's all right to discuss the case with us, Mrs. Spencer."

THE SATURDAY EVENING POST

lay—meaning a position from which he could stop the fall of another climber. The second man would tie into the rope and jump off the edge of the rock. As he fell, the rope was allowed to slide, and then gradually tightened until the second man came to a stop not far above level ground. After twenty tests, the Manila rope broke, with some discomfort to the second man. The nylon rope, however, was still going strong after 200 practice falls. The test crew grew so proficient that at the end of the experiment the second man could leap eighteen feet into space before he was halted in his flight, and then lowered slowly to earth. The nylon rope was adopted as standard by the Quartermaster Corps, in which both Robinson and Leonard served as officers. The practice fall, spectacular to watch, still popped the eyes of new recruits the last time I visited the Mountain and Cold Weather Command at Camp Carson, Colorado Springs. The sliding, or dynamic, belay has now virtually supplanted the method originated by the Swiss, which was to hook the rope firmly around a projection of rock. Too often, the rope broke.

The Army developed few new climbers of the first rank, but a good many youngsters with prior mountain experience emerged from the 10th Mountain Division as mature and keen mountaineers. The most impressive veteran is a climber in his early thirties, named Fred Beckey, who has led more than 200 first ascents of cliffs and rock spires in the Pacific Northwest. By virtue of getting there first, Beckey has been able to name a number of peaks hitherto identified only by altitude. Since thousands were already christened, he had to use ingenuity. One range in the northern Cascade Mountains, named by Beckey, reads like the wine list of a de luxe hotel. Chianti, Pernod, Burgundy, Sauterne and Chablis are among the titles to captivate a thirsty climber, though Beckey is no winebibber himself.

A man of great physical strength, Beckey decided last year to climb the west tower of Mt. Goode, a spire 8700 feet high, rising 3500 feet from its base near the head of Lake Chelan. With Don Claunch, another Seattle climber, he departed from Seattle at one P.M. of a Saturday, arriving by car at the foot of Cascade Pass at five P.M. The two climbers then walked up over the pass, down the other side, and in to the base of the peak, a distance of sixteen miles, arriving at 11:30 P.M. They slept until seven A.M., Sunday, made the first ascent of the west tower, climbed back over the pass to their car, and reached Seattle at two A.M. on Monday. Beckey then went to work in the advertising department of the Seattle Post-Intelligencer at eight A.M. On a later weekend, bored with the walk over the pass, he loaded a catamaran on a trailer, drove to the foot of Lake Chelan, and blithely sailed up to Stehekin, the starting point of his climb. The weekend finished, he sailed down the lake again to rest himself. Beckey's record of first ascents is now being challenged by Pete Schoening, another Seattle climber, who distinguished himself in an attempt on K2, in the Himalayas, a few years back.

Climbers in the Pacific Northwest are a little less scientific than those in the Sierra Nevada. The informal approach was epitomized in 1929 by Lionel Chute, who led the first climb of the North Peak of Mt. Index—elevation 5400 feet—on the interesting theory that a cash reward was involved. The rumor had long persisted that the Great Northern Railway, whose tunnel under the mountain is one of the longest in the country, was prepared to pay from \$1000 to \$5000 for the first climber to reach the top of the North Peak. Presumably, this would be profitable advertising. Chute, applying for the reward, found the railroad affable, but not prepared to dip into the

till. Now in his fifties, he has a nice letter from the Great Northern and the satisfaction of having completed one of the most difficult climbs of his era.

In the Northwest—a country of limitless forests, huge glaciers and dozens of unclimbed peaks—there are still plenty of conquests for those who have nerve and skill. The best illustration was provided, several years ago, by a Seattle chemist named David Harrah. In 1962, while climbing Mt. Yerupaja, one of the highest in Peru, Harrah's feet were frostbitten. He lost most of his toes—a disaster, it would seem, to a rock climber, who must depend so thoroughly on delicate balance. Not long after, he led a climb up the 5000-foot north-west face of Mt. Johannisberg, in the Cascades, spending one night on the cliff.

Last summer I walked from the end of the road into Cascade Pass and looked across the valley at Johannisberg. The "easy" route leads up an almost vertical gully of snow, with no sound place for a belay. Harrah's route zigzagged up a buttress to the left, high into the clouds, so sheer that I had to crane my neck. I have rock-climbed in my time, but this cliff was too rich for my blood. Not too rich for a man with abundant will power, however.

The tenacity displayed by Harrah is to be found, to a greater or less degree, in every rock climber. Perhaps this explains why a climbing club in Iowa will spend its weekends on fifty-foot cliffs along the Mississippi River or why some thousands of cragsmen in the East will work happily on rock faces ranging in height from 100 to 800 vertical feet.

The most notable and most populated area is a wall of cliffs in the Shawangunk Mountains, about 100 miles north of New York City, on the west side of the Hudson River. Here the New York Chapter of the Appalachian Mountain Club has developed fifty separate routes rising a maximum of 200 feet, but embodying the most hair-raising dilemmas to be encountered in the Rockies, the Sierra Nevada and the Dolomites of Italy. If regulations did not forbid it, New York mountaineers would do their climbing on the Palisades, which rise majestically just across the Hudson in New Jersey. Too many loose rocks, rolling down on strollers along the riverside, caused the authorities of Palisades Interstate Park to close the area to rock climbers years ago.

The Shawangunk climbs were developed by Fritz H. Wiessner, now president of a chemical company in Stowe, Vermont. A short and balding man in his early fifties, Wiessner was—until he began to slow his pace—the best rock climber this country ever has known. As a young man in Germany, he led—without pitons—some of the classic rock climbs in the Alps. Rock climbing in Europe and England, as distinct from the ascent of great snow-and-ice mountains, began in the 1890's, but the sport of scaling cliffs did not become a science until 1910, when the piton was invented by an Austrian climber named Hannes Fiechl. As a young man in Dresden, Wiessner absorbed the fine points of the sport, and brought to America in 1930 an entirely new technique, involving delicate and rhythmic movement on cliffs with no visible holds for the hands and feet. A man who believes in "clean" climbing as a greater test than the lavish use of pitons, he made the first ascent of Devil's Tower, in Wyoming, with only one piton, where later climbers used them by the dozen. He also climbed 13,260-foot Mt. Waddington, in British Columbia, which had been attempted fourteen times previously. Wiessner is that rare being, an articulate climber.

"Rock climbing," he feels, "is the most satisfying and fascinating sport in the world. The landscape of mountains, the architecture of mountains, is something too few of us know. It is a sport and not a competition—matching yourself against something much bigger than any human being, against nature. It is a way of enjoying what one's own body can do, much as our ancestors who lived in trees must have enjoyed the easy movement of swinging from limb to limb. You are away from everything mechanical, and it makes you feel like a king, perched on a little spot up in the sky. You have overcome physical as well as mental difficulties.

"To be a good rock climber, you have to put everything into it—to figure out your moves as you would in chess, except that on a cliff you are playing with the biggest queens, bishops, rooks and pawns on the planet. Even on the smallest cliff, there is something sophisticated about the delicate movements imposed on a climber. The mechanical stuff—the pitons and bolts—you can enjoy for a while, but in the long run you get your values from your close-

ness to nature, the realization how small we humans are compared to the big mountains. It is something you can enjoy with the eye, the brain and the whole body. And it is an escape from the pressures of the world. When those great walls of rock arch out above you, it is like sitting in the quiet and calm of a Gothic cathedral.

"The man who leads a rock climb must recognize that there is danger involved, and he must keep it in mind, but if he has the talent, he can win through. He needs judgment as well—the ability to know what one ought to be able to do in a difficult spot. A good man climbs up and down such a spot a few times, always a little bit higher, until he knows how he can safely get through it. Many men, not strong or patient enough, try to rush a cliff, and those are the ones who fall. They take chances, and they lose. A leader has to be able to fight against his own ambitions; be able to turn around and to go home if the climb is too much for him. There are those who race to climb the big faces or who hunt for notoriety, but in five or six years you don't see them around any more. Most of them quit. The real climber sticks with it all his life. When the big ones are too difficult for him—well, he always can do the smaller cliffs and be just as happy."

It was on one of these smaller cliffs, a few days later, that I saw this philosophy put to the test. Wiessner and I had met in Chapel Pond Pass, near Keene Valley, in the Adirondack Mountains of New York State. Above us, fissured and seamed, rose a rock wall 400 feet high. No one had climbed it, but Wiessner was ready to do so. We tied in to the rope, and Wiessner started swiftly up through a narrow crack, the classic rock climber in action. Above him the wall leaned outward, for a space of perhaps fifteen vertical feet. I could see a few tiny handholds, but no easy way past this obstacle.

With the utmost preciseness, Wiessner worked his way upward, paused for a moment, leaned out from the rock and craned his neck. There was something about the route he didn't like. Silently, he came down again to a wide ledge, thought for a moment, and started up again, this time selecting a slightly different collection of holds. Again, he paused to study the problem, and again came carefully down. "It will go now," he called cheerily to me. So rapidly my eye could not follow his movements, he flickered up the ledge, hooked three fingers over a thin flake of rock and disappeared over the ledge above.

I followed, but not with such ease. From his stance above, Wiessner was exerting a firm but steady pull on the rope. With this assurance of safety, I managed to claw my way through a maze of totally inadequate holds and to crawl on my belly over the top of the ledge. Off to the right a second wall led up to a projecting piece of rock broad enough for a man to sit on. How to get there? This one was easy for Wiessner. He moved upward on scant foot- and handholds, turned his right hand so that it rested palm down on the projecting rock, fingers facing outward and wrist facing inward. Then he gently swung out over space, reversing his body, and sat comfortably down. When I followed, it was the triumph of brute strength over an obstacle that deserved more gentle treatment. I made a lunge for the rock, hung on for dear life and hauled myself up.

The rest was easy. A few more ledges, a few cracks to be climbed by jamming most of the body into them and inching upward, and we were on top of the cliff, with the Adirondacks spread out in front of us—range after range of hills dark with spruce and pine.

"Look, Hal," said Wiessner, sweeping his arm to encompass the horizon. "Doesn't it make you feel like a king?" THE END



"Offhand, I'd say it was the mainspring."

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