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## The Southern Californians

Three Los Angeles teenagers came to Yosemite in 1953 intent on making the second ascent of the north face of Sentinel. They met Al Steck in Camp 4 and aggressively pressed him for information about the climb. He was put off by their arrogance and, unable to remember the precise details, gave a diffident reply. The three then talked to Bob Swift, Steck's companion on the Yosemite Point Buttress climb. They posed a trap question about Sentinel, to which they already knew the answer. Swift had no idea of the answer and took a guess. It was the wrong guess. "That proves what we are thinking," one of them replied; "Steck is giving out misinformation. He doesn't want the climb repeated."

Their attitude hardly endeared the Southern Californians to the Bay Area group. Indeed, on their first visit to Yosemite Royal Robbins, the best climber and cockiest of the three had arrogantly asked the locals, "What have you guys got around here worth climbing?" In the eyes of the Bay Area group his actions marked him as an intense, humorless competitor.

The Bay Area climbers did not know that the eighteen-year-old Robbins had a reason to be cocky. He was the best rock climber in California and, although perhaps unaware of it at the time, the best in North America. On his home ground, Southern California's Tahquitz Rock, he had made climbs that far surpassed those in Yosemite for sheer technical difficulty.

When he and his pals, Jerry Gallwas and Don Wilson, came to grips with Sentinel, they brought a new level of skill to Yosemite and drastically cut the climbing time from five days to two. For Steck and Salathé Sentinel had been a tension climb with free sections. For the Southern Californians it was a free climb with sections of aid. They were nonetheless impressed by the climb and particularly by Salathé's lead on the outside wall at the Narrows, a pitch which they and later parties climbed directly. With this introduction to Yosemite we might suppose that they would soon make their own climbs in the valley, but because of the demands of jobs and school, the travel involved, and their own prefer-



ence for Tahquitz, the Southern Californians visited Yosemite infrequently.

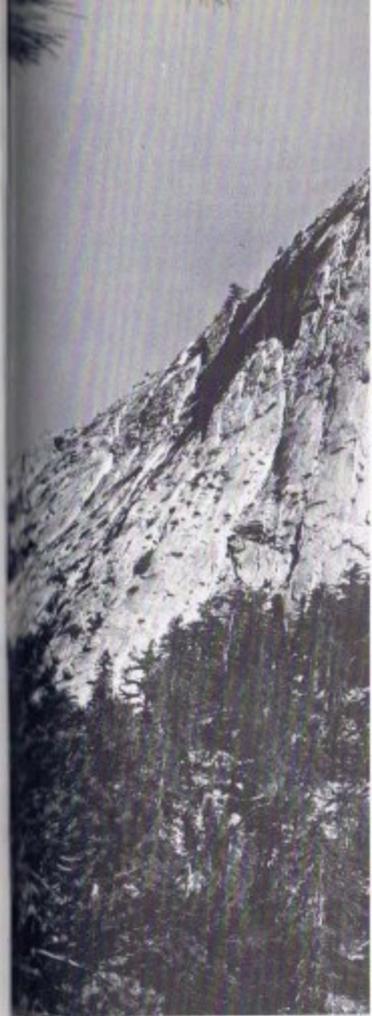
### Tahquitz Rock

In order to put their superior skills into perspective, we shall trace events on their home ground. Situated near the mountain town of Idylwild, Tahquitz Rock is a warm-looking crag of superb granite. Its southern location spared it the ice- and water-polish that characterizes Yosemite. The rock is rougher, knobbier, and so less slippery. The earliest climbs were made in the 1930s, and the emphasis was immediately different from that in Yosemite. There was just a single outcrop; ambitious pioneers had to force new routes between established lines.

Royal Robbins at Stoney Point, 1954. It was on these practice rocks that he first created a stir. *Frank Hoover.*

Under Tahquitz conditions skills rose appreciably. In fact, the hardest prewar rock climb in the country was made there. This was Glen Dawson's Mechanics Route, climbed without the bolt and angle piton commonly used on later ascents. In the postwar period the Los Angeles Sierra Club group again concentrated on the area, then only a three-hour drive from their homes. The combination of a close-knit group, excellent rock, and a friendly environment, as opposed to the forbidding walls of Yosemite, helped to raise the standards. There were so many difficult routes by the early 1950s that the locals had to devise a new system for rating them.

The Sierrans used a six-point scale to assess the difficulty of a route. In this scheme classes 1 through 3 denoted hiking through exposed scrambling, class 4 signified roped climbing where belays were required, class 5 denoted piton-protected climbing, and class 6 was reserved for tension climbing. Although there is a progression in difficulty from class 1 to 5, this was not necessarily the case between class 5 and 6. The top two ratings referred to different *methods* of climbing. (However, the class 6 pioneers *did* regard tension climbing as more difficult than class 5. It was on steeper rock, demanded a new technique, was thoroughly exhausting, and appeared to be dangerous.) The Tahquitz climbers subdivided their class 5 routes into easy, moderate, and difficult. This soon became inadequate, and they devised the so-called Decimal System. They selected a group of well-known routes, and several people arranged them on a scale of difficulty from 0 through 9, that is, 5.0 through 5.9. Where there was the widest agreement, routes were selected as the "standards." As

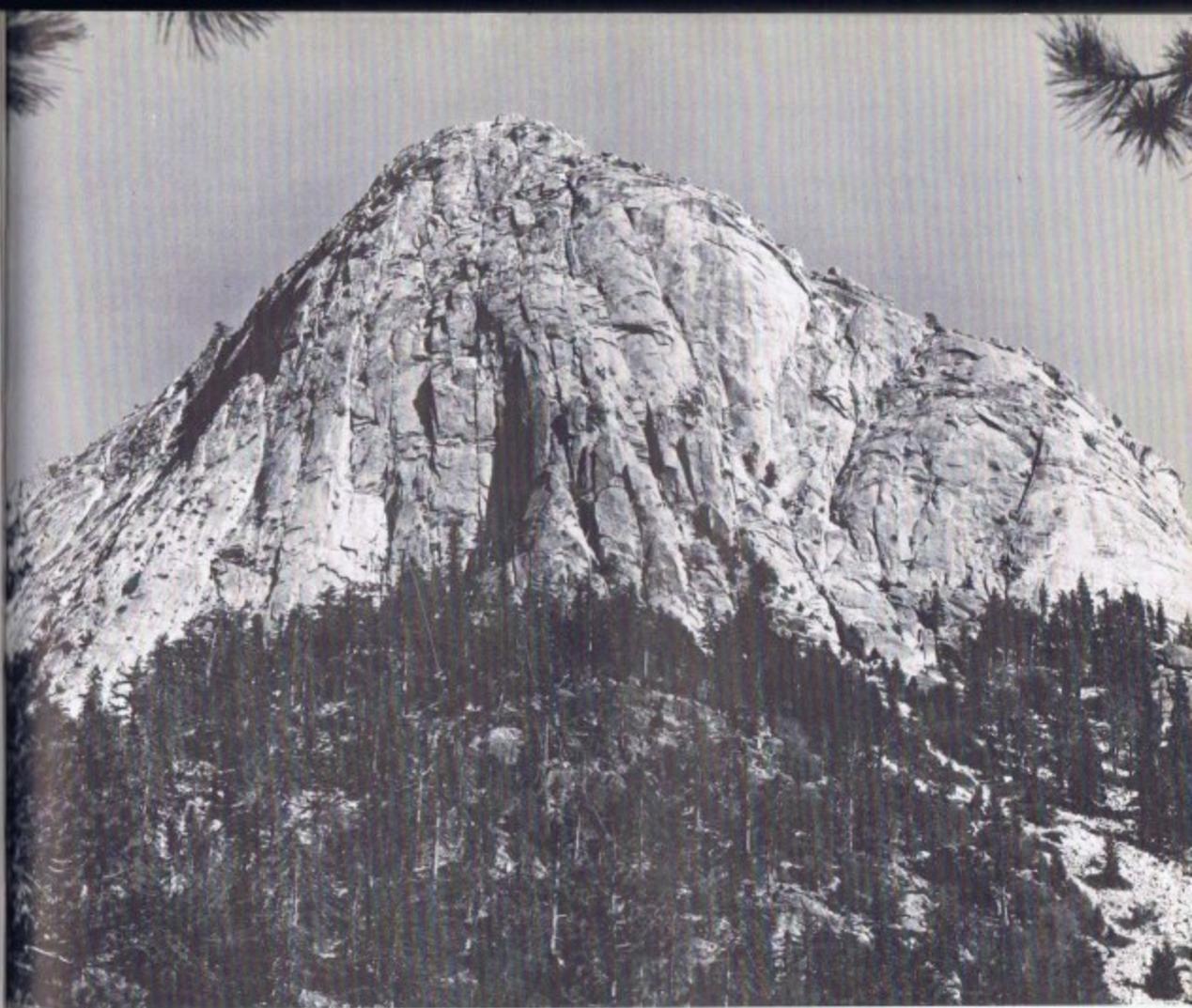


Tahquitz Rock, training ground

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Tahquitz Rock, training ground of a new generation of California climbers. Burt Turney.

new routes were climbed, they were compared with the standards and the rating decided by consensus. The Tahquitz climbers also split class 6 climbs into similar decimal categories, but by the early 1960s this nomenclature was superseded by the European designations A1 through A5.

A rating system is a valuable tool. It enables climbers to gauge whether they are up to a route and, also important, to gauge their performance against that of others. In the following years the Decimal System was applied to other areas and other situations. Thus, 5.7 at Tahquitz is theoretically similar to 5.7 in Colorado or Canada. Although climbers love to argue over the validity of the ratings in various areas, it is this author's observation that the system is fairly uniform.\* The rating of key climbs will be given in the text from this point on. The rating is that at the time of the first ascent, or shortly thereafter, and may not reflect current practice. A route that originally required aid may now be climbed free.\*\*

When Robbins arrived at Tahquitz in the early 1950s, the best climbers were consistent 5.8 per-

\*When Canadian Jim Baldwin returned from Yosemite in the early 1960s, he brought with him wild tales of expertise. The Vancouver climbers at Squamish Chief unknowingly set the rating system 0.2 below the actual level, thus adding to their inferiority complex. They could never seem to work up to 5.9!

\*\*Representative prewar climbs may be rated as follows: at Tahquitz, Mechanics Route (5.8); in Yosemite, Higher Cathedral Spire (5.7 A2); in the Tetons several Durrance routes at 5.7; in the East the Bradley-Gilman (5.7) on Cannon Mountain; in Canada, Snowpatch Spire (5.6 A2).

formers, whereas in the rest of the country 5.7 was about the maximum level. Yet the better climbers had not really pushed themselves. The time was ripe for an aggressive climber to break through. Robbins had already scrambled about on rocks with school friends, using a massive rope stolen from a trucking company, and he soon created a stir among the Sierrans. On small practice rocks he attempted the hardest routes without the upper belay commonly used, and he had the audacity to apply the gymnastic moves from bouldering to Tahquitz. His rapid progress was barely interrupted by a leader fall in which he broke an arm. He was soon the best climber in the area, but it was not all plain sailing. He was so far ahead of his contemporaries that some felt he was reckless, a criticism universally applied to innovators. Several of the old guard came down heavily on him, ostensibly over the safety issue and also perhaps because they found him hard to get along with. However, long-time pioneers John Mendenhall and Chuck Wilts sided with him, pointing out that what might be dangerous for an unexceptional climber was safe for Robbins.

His 1952 ascent of the Open Book was a major step. This 200-foot right-angle corner had been climbed on pitons and wood wedges, but Robbins led the route completely free and in so doing introduced the 5.9 standard to North America. Once he made the break, several others joined him in climbing at this level, including Mendenhall and

Wilts. Mendenhall's stay able. In 1930 he was perhaps consciously belay in the Sierrans. Northeast Gully on Laurel only was a strong conterer Chimney (Salathé greatly had made the first free ascent of Cathedral Spire (5.8).

An engineer by profession, Robbins' concept of alloy steel pitons was a major advance. He milled "knife-blade" pitons from a molybdenum alloy steel for the first time. The new pitons were lighter and sharper than the knife blade, yet under ideal conditions they weighed only 2,000 pounds. Another major advance lay open.

The Yosemite climbers were used to overcoming the valley with their own strength. There were no such awesome routes. They became obsessed with the Decimal System and with the method of climbing. To get up a route was not enough; it had to be done with a minimum of strain. The new direction was the elimination of strain from climbing. Using nylon webbing and slings that held the foot to the rock, they found that they could easily hold on by locking one leg behind the leader, much fatiguing as a bonus put less strain on the leader.

With these advances it is no wonder that the Southern Sierrans made a fine effort on the north side of Mount Butte. But, curiously, the personal advances to pioneering new routes were not at Tahquitz specialist Jerry Gallwas in his vacation. He had the pains of climbing. M

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 Chimney (Salathé greatly admired him) but also  
 had made the first free ascent of the Higher Cath-  
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An engineer by profession, Wilts took the con-  
 cept of alloy steel pitons a step farther than Salathé.  
 He milled "knife-blade" pitons out of chromium-  
 molybdenum alloy steel for use in incipient cracks.  
 The new pitons were literally the thickness of a  
 knife blade, yet under ideal conditions they held up  
 to 2,000 pounds. Another frontier in aid climbing  
 lay open.

The Yosemite climbers of the era were occupied  
 with overcoming the valley walls. At Tahquitz there  
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 system and with the method and style of an ascent.  
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With these advances in technique, it is little  
 wonder that the Southern Californians made such  
 a fine effort on the north face of Sentinel Rock.  
 But, curiously, the person who applied these ad-  
 vances to pioneering new routes in Yosemite was  
 not a Tahquitz specialist. Over the 1954 Easter  
 vacation Jerry Gallwas introduced a newcomer to  
 the pains of climbing. Mark Powell was over-

weight and hopelessly out of condition. He trailed  
 far behind as Gallwas set a wicked pace up the  
 talus to the Lower Cathedral Spire. Gallwas  
 climbed the route free while the exhausted Powell  
 clung to aid slings and took tension from the rope  
 as he clawed his way up the rock. On the descent  
 to the valley floor Powell had visions of cold beer.  
 Gallwas considered this weakness lamentable. He



Chuck Wilts with a primitive piton-testing rig.  
 Frank Hoover.

said that beer was no food for climbers and gave his opinion that Powell would never make a climber. Perhaps this denial of Powell's ability was the spur that did the trick. He went on a starvation diet and was soon down to fighting weight. He was athletic and determined, and spent four months in Yosemite later that year. In 1955 he climbed extensively at Tahquitz and formed an alliance with Gallwas and Wilson that led to a new era of climbing in the Southwest.

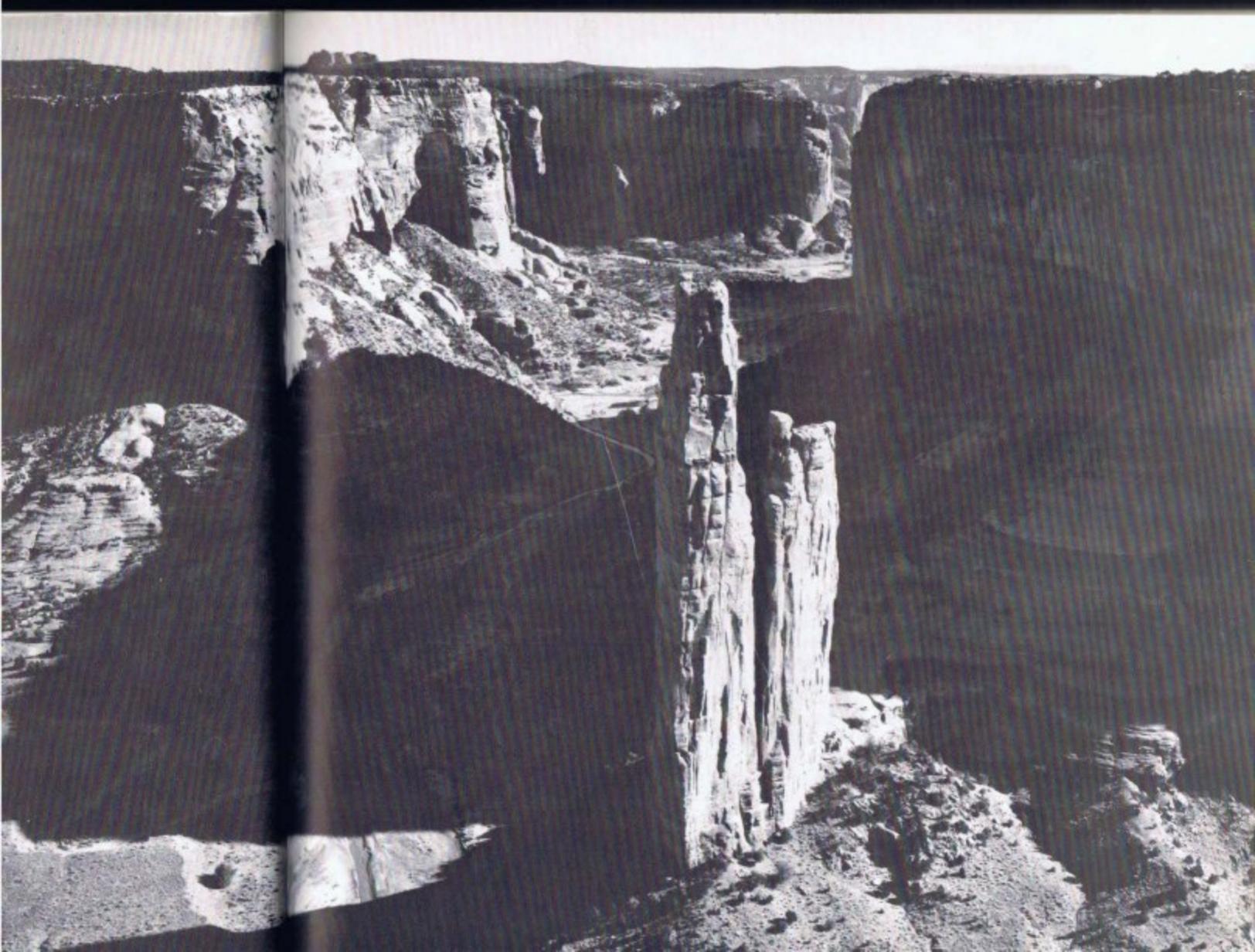
### From Spider Rock to Totem Pole

After the ascent of the volcanic plugs Shiprock and Agathlan (1949), there was almost no pioneering in the Southwestern desert. The most spectacular spires were sandstone and were thought to be hopelessly friable. However, magazine pictures of these surrealistic spires attracted Gallwas and Wilson, and in 1955 they made a scouting trip to Canyon de Chelly National Monument. Looking across the canyon from the rim, they were fascinated by the stark beauty of 800-foot Spider Rock, reputedly the highest free-standing spire in North America. It had already repulsed several attempts by Coloradans, and the Southern Californians determined to have it. When Powell saw their pictures, he needed no further convincing.

During Easter week the following year the three conspirators left Los Angeles for the desert. As they approached the canyon rim overlooking Spider Rock, Gallwas and Wilson theatrically held back so that Powell would absorb the chilling effect of the moonlit spire alone.

Spider Rock, Canyon de Chelly National Monument, Arizona. The route lies up a crack on the opposite side. Ed Cooper.





For climbing blank sections they had three-eighths-inch diameter bolts. Although these required a larger hole than the quarter-inch bolts favored for granite, they could be placed in the soft rock in a few minutes. Unhappily the climbers removed several bolts with their fingers! The first day's work went slowly. They were unprepared for the sudden cold of a spring day in the desert and spent the next day warming themselves in the sun. It was not until the fifth day that Powell made the last moves onto the summit. In the light of current climbing prohibitions in the desert areas under the jurisdiction of the Navajo people, it should be noted that the Indians were intrigued by this first ascent and often came to watch. One of them hoped to repeat the ascent and asked the climbers if they would leave their ropes.

Encouraged by this success, the three tracked down the location of a spire they had seen featured in an advertisement, Cleopatra's Needle, New Mexico. Over the following Labor Day weekend Wilson placed a ladder of pitons up a crack in the 250-foot spire. The rock was as bad as they feared. Forty feet from the top he ran out of equipment. As he backed down, a piton shifted. Unclipping his slings, he backed down again. The next piton rotated in the crack. He quickly stepped down again, and this time he was held, his heart pounding with fear. When they returned to the final pitch the next morning, each pin had to be re-driven.

The last spire on their list of "must" desert climbs was the Totem Pole in Monument Valley, a precarious shaft of red sandstone so thin relative to its 300-foot height that the idea of its existing at all was faintly absurd. Nonetheless, two attempts had already been made on the pencil-shaped Totem Pole by Coloradans by the time the Californians turned their attention to it. They spent four days on the harrowing ascent of this most difficult of the three spires.

After this climb the companions went their separate ways. Wilson dropped out of climbing and disappeared to the East Coast. After one more major climb Gallwas also went on to other things. Powell alone remained dedicated to the sport. His contemporaries, although keen weekend climbers, never lost sight of the importance of completing college and getting a good job. Powell was different. He threw himself into climbing completely and abandoned college. He spent the entire summers of 1956 and 1957 climbing and supported himself between times by laboring and meter reading. This was a major break with the past. It marked the change from the career man who climbed on weekends to the climber who supported his habit as best he could. Several of Powell's contemporaries resented his wholesale dedication to climbing. They considered it a waste of his college potential and characterized him as a "climbing bum."



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Two of the first ascent party silhouetted against the Totem Pole, Monument Valley. *Bill Feuerer.*

During the mid-1950s the general level of Yosemite climbing was inexpert. In 1956 two unsuccessful attempts were made to repeat the southwest face of Half Dome, while such hoary favorites as the Higher and Lower Cathedral Spires counted some four ascents each. In contrast to this mediocre performance Robbins and Southern Californian Mike Sherrick made the third ascent of Sentinel's north face, and Powell established a stunning free climb, Arrowhead Arête (5.8). Powell's pace was quickening. The next summer he and Wally Reed put up several good climbs, most notably the Powell-Reed Route on the northeast face of Middle Cathedral, the first breach in that somber wall. With these ascents Powell effectively brought Tahquitz standards to Yosemite. He free-climbed to the limit, and where he had to use aid, he forced himself to move up on marginal A4 pitons. He made his climbs in a bold, forthright manner, leading them straight off without repeated reconnaissance.

Powell referred to Arrowhead Arête as "possibly the most continuous difficult fifth-class climbing in this country," and he was probably correct. He knew that in terms of absolute difficulty it fell short of several Tahquitz climbs. The key to his statement is "continuous." The decimal ratings have an inherent shortcoming. A one-pitch Tahquitz route and a two-day Yosemite route may have the same rating. The system makes no allowance for the length of a climb, the continuity of the difficulties, the commitment, the remoteness, and other quali-



Mark Powell on an early ascent of the Lost Arrow.  
Bill Feuerer.

ties. Yet it is these ingredients that make up the total climb. Powell therefore added a grade to the rating system in an attempt to give an overall assessment of a route. In this system a Grade I is a climb that takes a few hours, a Grade III takes most of a day, and a Grade V may take from one to one and a half days. The most demanding climbs of the day were the Lost Arrow Chimney and the North Face of Sentinel, both Grade V. A colloquialism that came into use later is "big wall," meaning a multiday rock climb. The Lost Arrow Chimney was the first big wall in Yosemite although today's climbers would not regard it as such because it is commonly climbed in a long day.

Powell combined an athletic asceticism with a robust liking for women and booze, and he found the Southern Californians a bunch of prudes. More to his liking were a group that surrounded civil engineer Warren Harding, who, already an avid sports car driver, in the early 1950s became a climber after he read a book about a ferocious alpine climb, the West Face of the Dru. Harding sensibly decided that he would never go to the extremes of the West Face of the Dru and therefore would never get into real trouble. Little did he know how the future would turn out.

One May morning in 1954 Harding was roused from his bed on top of a boulder by stranger Frank Tarver and talked into trying the imposing, unclimbed north face of Middle Cathedral Rock. Tarver knew others were already ahead of them on

the rock, but climbing r caught up. It was perhaps combined. Harding and T whereas the others were on experience. The coir setting out for the same underlines the fact that was a period of little act was a definite rivalry amo the outstanding problems has intensified over the y

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the rock, but climbing rapidly, they eventually caught up. It was perhaps fortunate the two ropes combined. Harding and Tarver were short on gear, whereas the others were heavy on gear but light on experience. The coincidence of two parties setting out for the same route on the same day underlines the fact that although the mid-1950s was a period of little activity in Yosemite, there was a definite rivalry among the better climbers for the outstanding problems of the time, a rivalry that has intensified over the years.

In 1954 Harding teamed up with Bob Swift and Tarver to make the second ascent of Lost Arrow Chimney. Concerned that his beloved Jaguar would not get enough exercise while he was on the climb, Harding arranged for a woman friend to give it a daily spin. Each day during the climb he paused and smiled when he heard the car winding up through the gears. One day, instead of the throaty roar of shifting into a higher gear, there was a grinding crash. Harding's smile vanished. "Oh no," he cried, burying his face in his hands. After the epic four-day climb he learned that his car was intact; the crash had been a garbage truck dumping a load of trash.

Slight and wiry, Harding was able to worm inside cracks where bulkier climbers had to flail away on the outside. On the Lost Arrow Chimney he worked out a new pitch, the Harding Slot, while his lead of the Worst Error, a dark 300-foot crack on the imposing Elephant Rock, helped establish him as the most daring crack climber of the day.

Harding also gathered a reputation as a wine lover. Once, after a bout of drinking in Camp 4, he and his comrades gently faded into oblivion. When they woke in the morning, Swift had an empty wine jug for a pillow and Tarver was lying

face down in the dirt. Both had killing hangovers. Harding shot out of his sleeping bag and with a glint in his eye proudly announced to his miserable companions, "Passed the sustained drinking test. Not a trace of a hangover!"

By the mid-1950s technique and confidence advanced to the stage where another step forward in climbing the big walls of Yosemite was possible. The next challenge was obvious, the 2,000-foot northwest face of Half Dome. Perhaps because of its height and its commanding position at the far end of Yosemite Valley, Half Dome has a uniquely aloof and mysterious air about it. Although the north west face appeared hopelessly bald in the center, there was a definite weakness on the left side.

Several parties sniffed around the base of the route, climbed a few pitches, and declared that it



The great days in Yosemite. Warren Harding, center, in his Jaguar with Mark Powell and Bea Vogel, 1957. Frank Hoover.



The northwest face of Half Dome began on the far left side, tra follow the line between sun a once more at the summit ove

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Harding and Robbins h at Tahquitz. Harding w Yosemite and Robbins the After making a lead, Har a succession of aid pins. V ing the last pin, two of suddenly popped out. E mered on the remaining it was moving, and Robbi he had just removed. It v the precise moment that l the rock, a friend on the ; was getting late. When Without a trace of emot replied that everything almost up. Harding was absolute control in a tigl made of hard stuff. Robl ed by Harding's apparen belaying and safety. He Harding must be made were right.

On the joint Half Dome went slowly, and after



The northwest face of Half Dome. The 1957 climb began on the far left side, traversed in at mid-height to follow the line between sun and shade and moved left once more at the summit overhang. *Tom Gerughty.*

would "go." After a similar preliminary scouting of the Lost Arrow Chimney and Sentinel Rock, the tactic had been to make successive probes up to around midheight. By the time Half Dome was actively under consideration, a team came forward ready to go all-out from the start: Southern Californians Robbins, Gallwas, and Wilson, and another climber with a big reputation, Harding.

Harding and Robbins had first climbed together at Tahquitz. Harding was the hard man from Yosemite and Robbins the local expert of Tahquitz. After making a lead, Harding belayed Robbins up a succession of aid pins. While Robbins was cleaning the last pin, two of the three belay anchors suddenly popped out. Harding frantically hammered on the remaining pin, which looked like it it was moving, and Robbins hastily redrove the pin he had just removed. It was a close call. At almost the precise moment that they were re-anchoring to the rock, a friend on the ground shouted up that it was getting late. When would they be down? Without a trace of emotion in his voice Robbins replied that everything was just fine; they were almost up. Harding was impressed by Robbins's absolute control in a tight situation; he had to be made of hard stuff. Robbins was equally impressed by Harding's apparently casual attitude toward belaying and safety. He thought to himself that Harding must be made of hard stuff. Both men were right.

On the joint Half Dome attempt the early pitches went slowly, and after three days the climbers

came down. Significantly, Harding and Robbins had wanted to press on. Following this rebuff, plans were made to return the following year, but they never materialized.

Powell was also interested in Half Dome. He hoped his desert companions, who had already been up on the climb, would invite him along, but they remained noncommittal and seemed to exclude him from their plans. The answer was to form a separate team. He joined Harding and aircraft engineer Bill Feuerer for the attempt. They assembled their gear in late June 1957, but in vain. When they reached Yosemite, Robbins, Gallwas, and Sherrick were already established on the route.

The Southern Californians had made thorough preparations. Gallwas forged some ten hard-steel pitons patterned after Salathé's as well as angle pitons that would span cracks up to three inches. They crammed their extra gear into a mail bag and carried a total of 1,200 feet of rope in case of a forced retreat.

Late on the second day Robbins was hard at work completing the rightward traverse onto the main part of the face. He placed a piton, called for slack, and descended fifty feet on the rope. Then he pendulumed back and forth across the sheer wall until on his fourth attempt he was able to grasp a good handhold. He left a fixed rope and rejoined his companions. The key section of the climb was made. When they crossed the "Robbins Traverse" the next morning, they left the fixed rope to insure the possibility of a retreat. (There is a strong tradition of "irreversible" traverses in climbing, most notably the Hinterstoisser Traverse on the Eiger. Although the idea is no longer a strong one, it once was a potent fear.)

The constant mental strain, the uncertainty of the outcome, and the fear that they would have to

Jerry Gallwas on Half Dome. *Mike Sherrick.*



Mike Sherrick in Yosemite, 1956. He was recovering from a broken leg sustained in a ski accident. *Frank Hoover.*



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go directly over the summit overhangs tolled heavily on the three climbers. They were psyched by the scale of the climb. Robbins, who had borne the brunt of the leading, was mentally exhausted on the fourth day and took a complete rest while Gallwas eked out 300 feet of progress. Sherrick was shattered and did no leading during the final two days.

After their fourth night on the wall they crammed all their excess gear into the hauling bag and cast it into space. They watched fascinated as the bag cartwheeled and plunged down. Without once touching the wall, it smashed into the ground they had left five days earlier.

Not far above their bivouac rose the dread summit overhangs. Fortune was with them; a fifty-foot "Thank God" ledge led off to the left. Leaving a relatively secure stance, the leader worked out over one of the most appalling voids in climbing. It was like stepping out of a skyscraper onto a one-foot ledge. Eventually, the impending wall pressed him off balance, and he had to continue by hanging from his arms, his hands gripping the crack behind the ledge.

After five tense days the three climbers reached the summit, their hands scarred and grimy, their faces drawn and lined with dirt, their mouths and throats tormented by the ever-present thirst. It was a hard-won victory, the most demanding big

wall climb in North America and the first Grade VI on the continent. Waiting to greet them on top with beer and sandwiches was Harding, whose own team, bitterly disappointed, had arrived just too late to take the prize.

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