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 ladderway 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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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.
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mazzed by telephone

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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. Ute von Rixkver- vorel, 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 slipping in most cases. But Miss von Rixkvervorel fell ninety feet. She was held by the second man on the rope, who had braced himself on one of the few available outcroppings. 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 Gallow, a member of the rescue crew. "There was a hole in the back of her head, and there were so many cuts and bruises that 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. They then administered first aid, and in two and a half hours brought Miss Rixkvervorel down to the valley. A rescue duffel bag was used as a litter, and the party made their way down 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 cliff, and tried frantically to scramble up the rock. Rescue teams roped up and covered the whole cliff, with negative results. A helicopter flew along the top of the Arches and 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 von Laas 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 Margaric Evarugh, 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, they said the skull was over a hundred years old, or maybe a thousand years old, because the first fur trappers were there about the time when the beaver population was up."

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"The judge meant anyone else. It's all right to discuss the case with us, Mrs. Spencer."
lay—meaning a position from which he could stop the fall of another climber. The second man then had to jump on the first and try to jump off the edge of the rock. As he fell, the rope was allowed to slide, and then gradually tightened until the second man cleared the ledge behind him.

After twenty tests, the Manila rope broke, with some discomfort to the second man. The nylon rope, however, was still going strong after a dozen falls. The test crew decided last year to climb the 100-foot tower of the Cascades, named by Beckey, reads in its virtues of getting there first, Beckey has been a classic rock climber in the Pacific Northwest. By his early thirties, named Fred Beckey, who has emerced from the 10th Mountain Division, is the most impressive veteran is a climber in his prime, able to name a number of peaks hither and yon, only his enthusiasm for pitons and dynamos 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 new climbers of the first rank, but a good many youngsters with prior mountain experience emerged as competitors as nature and keen mountaineers. In the eigheart of the eastern states, 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 hither and yon, only his enthusiasm for pitons and dynamos 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.

A man of great physical strength, Beckey decided last year to climb the west tower of Mount Goode, a spire 1000 feet high, rising sheer thai I had to crane my neck. I had to use ingenuity. One range in the northern Cascades, named by Beckey, reads like the St. Bernard, the Pernod, Burgundy, Saffron and Chablis are among the tithe a climber to capture a thorny climber, but Beckey is no winebibber himself.

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"The man who leads a rock climb must recognize that there is danger involved, but he must also see that there is a limit to 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 and the ability to know when to give up. I have seen a man a few times, always a little bit higher until he knows how he can safely get through. Many men, not strong or particularly skilled, yet the ability to climb the big faces or who hunt for no-