

CHAPTER SIX



RUCKSACK REVOLUTION,
1945-1963

There are no rappel points, Jim, absolutely no rappel points. There's nothing to secure a rope to. So it's up and over for us today.

—WILLI UNSOELD,
SPEAKING VIA WALKIE-TALKIE
FROM HIGH ON THE WEST
RIDGE OF MOUNT EVEREST TO
JIM WHITTAKER AT BASE CAMP,
AFTERNOON OF MAY 22, 1963

More than just a climbing area, it is a way of life.

—YVON CHOUINARD,
“MODERN YOSEMITE CLIMBING,”
AMERICAN ALPINE JOURNAL, 1963

To be committed in the common sense of the term suggests dedication. In the language of climbing, “committed” takes on additional meaning. It refers to a route up a mountain or a move on a rock face from which there is no retreat; a safe descent being impos-

sible, “up and over” becomes the only option. To be committed that way is to accept risk; as Charlie Houston put it, climbers seek “the thrill of danger—but danger controlled by skill.”¹

In the second half of the twentieth century, American climbers were more committed than ever, in both senses of the term. For increasing numbers of Americans, climbing became a way of life—not without risk, but rich in satisfaction.

The notion of the brotherhood of the rope, strengthened by wartime celebration of self-sacrifice and collective endeavor, lived on in climbing circles in the decade or so following the Second World War. That spirit was particularly evident in the Himalayan mountaineering expeditions undertaken between 1953 and 1963. At the same time, a new spirit of competitiveness, bordering on a kind of hyperindividualism, was visible in the late 1950s and early 1960s in rock-climbing centers like Yosemite Valley. Both impulses, however contradictory, were examples of commitment deeply rooted in the larger American culture.

Nineteen sixty-three proved a high point in climbing achievement, and also a turning point in the history of American climbing. In the years that followed, climbing became a mass-participation activity. But what American climbing gained in popularity after 1963, it lost in cohesion and community.

COMING HOME

With the end of the war, the veterans returned from Europe and the Pacific. Climbers among them were eager to get back to the hills, following a long absence (the last Sierra Club RCS excursion to Yosemite took place over Labor Day weekend 1942). Wartime gasoline rationing (4 gallons a week for most civilian vehicles) came to an end in August 1945; the first civilian cars manufactured since 1942 rolled off assembly lines in Detroit in October 1945. The roads to Yosemite—as well as Conway, New Hampshire; Jackson, Wyoming; and Government Camp, Oregon—were soon crowded. The university climbing clubs revived, and new ones started, their ranks filled in those first postwar years with

veterans pursuing higher degrees on the GI Bill (the Stanford Alpine Club was founded in 1946 by three veterans—Al Baxter, Fritz Lippmann, and Larry Taylor; Taylor, the club's first president and a veteran of the 101st Airborne Division, came up with the SAC motto: "No Guts, No Glory").²

The regional outdoors clubs, back in business after the wartime hiatus, resumed their summer encampments. In the summer of 1946, eighty members of the Seattle Mountaineers, joined by twenty Mazamas, three Sierrans, and three Appies, headed for Mount Rainier. Sierran Louise Werner reported on the mass climb that was the traditional culminating moment of such gatherings. One feature of such climbs, both before and after the war, was the close collaboration between the clubs and the rule-enforcing park authorities:

On the day the climbers leave camp, they are served a special hot meal at noon and pack enough squirrel food (dried fruit, nuts, rye crisp, cheese, sandwiches and candy), for a snack that night and two meals the next day. The Park Ranger is on hand to check equipment which must include: nailed boots, ice-axe, crampons, ropes, extra woolen wraps, flash-light, first aid, dark glasses, face grease, wool mittens, water- and wind-resistant parka and hood, sleeping bag and food.³

If there was much that was familiar in such rituals, there was also something new. That first summer after the war, much of the equipment that was being inspected by park rangers and employed on Rainier and other peaks was made in America. Sporthaus Schuster in Munich had survived the war but no longer enjoyed its internationally commanding role in the mountain gear market. In the United States, the "Age of Army Surplus" arrived.

A young Tenth Mountain Division veteran, Dick Emerson, wrote fellow veteran Dave Brower in March 1946 with a business proposition:

There is something I would like your opinion on. If I could purchase a supply of ropes, pitons, piton hammers, snap links [carabiners],

Bramoni sol[e]d mountain boots, etc., do you think there might be enough people willing to buy to make it worth while? Maybe advertising to mountain clubs in the country. I have been told that all this equipment is being stored at the war[e]house in Ogden [Utah]. They are starting to sell much of their equipment now, but I don't know how soon the mountain stuff will be released. I can get my permits to buy it now and be all ready to grab it when it comes. What do you think? Would the Sier[r]a Club Rock Section be interested in some nylon ropes?⁴

Brower had no doubt there would be eager customers for Emerson's army surplus goods among Sierra Club members and others, writing back the very day he received the letter. "If you can get nylons [ropes], double time up there. Watch out for the pitons (as if you wouldn't)."⁵

An outdoor equipment and clothing retail infrastructure, more enduring than the ubiquitous postwar army surplus outlets, began to take form in those same years, catering to an expanding customer base with specialized tastes and disposable income. A Seattle-based cooperative, Recreational Equipment Cooperative (later changing its name to Recreational Equipment Incorporated, or REI), founded in 1938 with a few dozen members eager to acquire the latest European mountaineering gear, opened a retail outlet at 523 Pike Street in downtown Seattle in 1944. The cooperative launched its first mail-order catalogue (eight pages long) in 1948.

Another Seattle sporting goods operation, Eddie Bauer, had vastly expanded during the war through the sale of cold-weather gear (including sleeping bags and newly designed quilted down jackets) to the military. It now made its products available to civilian outdoors enthusiasts. When Charlie Houston returned to K2 in 1953 in a new attempt to reach its summit, all members were equipped in Bauer down jackets.⁶

A Tenth Mountain Division veteran named Gerry Cunningham opened a mountain equipment business in Utica, New York, in 1945, with a mail-order catalogue of climbing gear featuring rucksacks and climbing packs of his own design. The following year he relocated to Colorado,

where Gerry Mountaineering became an institution, opening its first retail outlet in Boulder in 1958, and branching out into clothing, climbing gear, and tents (Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay slept in a two-man Gerry tent the night before they reached the summit of Mount Everest in 1953).⁷

Before the war, climbing apparel was generally chosen for functionality, but it was by no means uniform (Kenneth Henderson, Robert Underhill's climbing partner, famously tackled difficult rock routes attired in business suit, necktie, fedora, and a pair of leather golf shoes). There was also a vogue in club circles for dressing like extras in the Shirley Temple musical *Heidi*: patterned sweaters, knickers, and kneesocks.

After the war, a new sartorial standard emerged, starting with the ubiquitous felt wool alpine hats of the era, adorned with club pins and badges. Many dressed in drab army surplus for their mountain outings, but rolled denim and flannel outfits were also common. Mountain-climbers could buy Vibram-soled army surplus climbing boots for five dollars a pair, which soon replaced the traditional hobnailed boots.

Only in rock-climbing footwear did the old reliance on foreign sources persist. Rock-climbers generally wore American-made sneakers, but some acquired stiffer-soled suede leather *Kletterschuhe* or rubber-soled canvas climbing shoes called "PAs" (for their designer, French climber Pierre Allain), both imported from Europe.

CHANGING OF THE GUARD

Despite Dave Brower's desire to secure a nylon rope and a collection of pitons from Dick Emerson, his own climbing days were drawing to a close, as were those of a number of leading figures in the prewar Rock Climbing Section of the Sierra Club. In the 1930s, Brower made sixteen first ascents in Yosemite Valley; no one matched that record until the late 1950s. But he racked up no more first ascents after the war, because his interests shifted to environmental activism.

Brower's personal trajectory reflected that of the Sierra Club organizationally, as it grew over the next several decades from a regional

outdoor recreation group to the nation's preeminent voice for wilderness preservation. In 1950 the Sierra Club had just under seven thousand members, organized into six regional clubs in California. That year, a group of expatriate Californians in New York established an "Atlantic chapter" of the club. Twenty years later there were tens of thousands of members in chapters across the country.⁸

Brower had much to do with the Sierra Club's phenomenal postwar growth. In 1946 he chaired the club's editorial board, and in 1952 he was appointed its first executive director. Other RCS veterans joined him in leadership positions. Bestor Robinson, conqueror of Higher Cathedral Spire in 1934, was elected Sierra Club president in 1946, succeeded (after a few years' gap) by Dick Leonard, coconqueror of the spire, in 1953. The third man on that famous climb, Jules Eichorn, was elected to the club's board of directors in 1961.

As Yosemite climbing historian Joseph Taylor notes, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the "old guard" of RCS became "the 'Young Turks' of the SC board."⁹ (That didn't mean harmony always prevailed. In 1969, Dick Leonard spearheaded the organizational revolt that led to the ejection of his old climbing partner, Dave Brower, as the club's executive director, in a confrontation over policy and personality differences.)¹⁰

ARMCHAIR MOUNTAINEERING IN POSTWAR POPULAR CULTURE

In the immediate postwar era, mountaineering remained a sport practiced by a select few, if not quite as few as before the war. But popular interest in mountaineering, at least as measured by the sale of mountaineering books, grew more quickly than the ranks of climbers. The term "armchair mountaineer," of early-twentieth-century coinage in Britain, appeared for the first time in American publications.¹¹

In 1945, James Ramsey Ullman, author of *High Conquest*, published his second best-selling mountaineering book, this time a novel entitled *The White Tower*, about the wartime climb of a Swiss peak by a downed American pilot and a German officer on leave. It sold a half million copies,

mostly to readers who had never climbed a mountain. Experienced climbers tended to be a little sniffy about the novel, since Ullman's command of mountain terminology, such as "bergschrund," proved spotty. Whatever its deficiencies in that regard, *The White Tower* nudged some readers, like California's Warren Harding, into the climbing life.¹²

Noting the success of Ullman's novel, *Life* magazine ran its first ever cover story about mountaineering in December 1945, including a six-page photo essay entitled "The White Tower's' Author Shows How to Master a Strenuous Sport," with Ullman posing on Mount Washington's Tuckerman Ravine.¹³

Another milestone in armchair mountaineering came with the publication of the first American edition of Maurice Herzog's *Annapurna* in early 1953, the French climber's best-selling book about the first ascent of an 8,000-meter peak in the Himalaya. *Annapurna* was the first account of a mountaineering expedition to win a wide readership in the United States, and it was reviewed favorably by Ullman in the *New York Times*.¹⁴

Ullman frequently received letters from his armchair-mountaineering fans. One such came from Alfred B. Fitt of Grosse Pointe, Michigan, in 1953. "Some months ago," Fitt wrote,

my wife and I read "Annapurna." That started us on a binge of reading about high climbers, and one of the books we ran across was yours about the Mt. Everest expeditions. We got to know the North Col, the first and second steps, the slabs below the ridge; we agonized and theorized over Mallory and Irvine and the ice axe found in 1933 (neither of us think they made it to the top), and in general we got about as excited about the world's highest mountain as it is possible for people who will never see the Himalayas.¹⁵

Fitt signed off with an interesting question: "What is there about mountain climbing that grips even a suburban couple in their 30's ensconced in the middle west of the United States?"

The Fitts' self-identification as a "suburban couple" placed them at the forefront of the postwar American social transformation. Hailed as the

fulfillment of the American dream, combining, as widely supposed, the independence of home ownership with the pastoral values of small-town life close to nature, the new suburban frontier would, in time, breed its own malaise—in particular, a sense of being cut off from real life.

What was it about mountain-climbing that gripped Mr. and Mrs. Fitt, as well as increasing numbers of Americans, in the years that followed? The authenticity of the experience (whether assimilated directly or vicariously), the element of risk and the unpredictable, the mastery of technique, the sense of commitment to the endeavor—all surely factor into the answer.

JOHN SALATHÉ AND THE REINVENTION OF YOSEMITE CLIMBING

Why, Yosemite climber and historian Steve Roper asked himself some years later, “did we spend so much time in the Valley?” The answer, he suggested, was “rebellion”:

Many of us regarded the 1950s and 1960s as a time when the world—and especially our country—had lost its way. We saw materialism and complacence during the Eisenhower years. . . . Perhaps we stayed close to the cliffs because we didn’t want to join mainstream society. We Valley cragrats of the sixties were mostly college dropouts going nowhere, fast. . . . These same rebellious eccentrics, however, were the most gifted rockclimbers in the world.¹⁶

But before Roper’s generation came to dominate the climbing scene in Yosemite, another gifted eccentric blazed the path for them. His name was John Salathé.

In the fall of 1945, Fritz Lippmann and Robin Hansen, both of them Sierra Club RCS members and Army Air Force veterans, had recently returned to the Bay Area. On an RCS outing to Eagle’s Nest on Hunter’s Hill in the Bay Area, they were joined by a forty-six-year-old novice

climber from nearby San Mateo. Lippmann and Hansen roped the newcomer, John Salathé, between them, so that they could keep an eye on him and provide a belay as necessary. Hansen recounted what happened next:

The most difficult pitch of the Eagle's Nest is a traverse secured by pitons 100 feet above the base of the rock. . . . I led the pitch and John was out of sight to both of us. After securing my belay position I called for John to climb and emphasized that he should "climb freely." This was our way of saying that neither the rope nor the pitons should be used for assistance. I felt no activity on the rope for two or three minutes, and suddenly John appeared around the corner *unroped!* He thought I had meant to climb free of the rope. Height had no meaning to John and to him fear was a stranger.¹⁷

John Salathé spent the first thirty years of his life in a center of alpine activity—from which he remained aloof. He was born near Basel, Switzerland, in 1899. A practical man, he was not interested in mountains, but instead was interested in iron and steel. He became a blacksmith. In 1929 he emigrated to the United States, settling in San Mateo, California, where he opened a blacksmith shop, the Peninsula Wrought Iron Works. Then a personal crisis arose. At the end of World War II, beset by health and marital problems, and undergoing what seems to have been a religious revelation, Salathé decided that an outdoor activity (plus a fruit diet) was the key to restoring his physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. And that led him to the newly revived Rock Climbing Section of the Sierra Club.

The climbing blacksmith soon graduated from the middle of the rope to leading climbs in Yosemite, such as Higher Cathedral Spire. On one of those climbs, on a route that others had pioneered, Salathé was dissatisfied with the soft-iron pitons he carried for protection. The European-style pitons then in general use had been designed for climbing on limestone, the kind of rock predominating in the eastern Alps. When hammered into a limestone crack, a soft-iron piton would, as designed, warp to fill

in the irregularities in limestone cracks. Once in place, it would usually be left behind because, bent out of shape, it could not be reused. That meant, for a multipitch rock wall, starting off carrying a large number of pitons. Worse, hammered into the hard granite of Yosemite cracks, soft-iron pitons would often buckle before they could be securely placed—a characteristic that made them both wasteful and dangerous.

Spying a blade of grass growing out of a tiny crack in the Yosemite granite, Salathé had a revelation of immense practical significance: inside the crack, he realized, there was room to hold a piton securely, if only he had a piton capable of withstanding a hammer's blow without bending. That meant creating a piton forged from hard steel. After it was driven deep into a crack, the piton's holding power came from retaining its shape and pressing against the fissure's side, spring-like, rather than buckling to fill the available space.

Harder pitons had the added advantage that they could be retrieved by the second climber on the rope, who would clean the pitch and pass them back to the lead climber. That meant climbers needed to carry fewer pitons as they made their way up a multipitch rock face, while making more extensive use of the few they carried. And, since the emerging climbing ethics of the 1950s and thereafter favored leaving a route as close as possible to its original condition, being able to remove pitons served that end as well.

Salathé fashioned his new piton out of high-strength carbon steel alloy (in some versions of the story, taken from the rear axle of a Model A Ford). Over the next decade his pitons, which came in a variety of sizes all marked with a "P" (for Peninsula Wrought Iron Works), became highly coveted among Sierra Club climbers. Making use of his new pitons, in the course of the next four years Salathé made a contribution to American climbing technique every bit as consequential as those achieved in the prewar years by Robert Underhill and Fritz Wiessner.¹⁸

Three of Salathé's Yosemite climbs stand out: the first ascent of the southwest face of Half Dome in 1946, the first true ascent of Lost Arrow Spire in 1947, and the first ascent of the north face of Sentinel Rock in 1950. Thereafter, Salathé drifted away from climbing and ever deeper into

mysticism, though he remained a respected elder in Yosemite climbing circles well into the 1960s.

Taken together, Salathé's three great climbs ushered in what came to be called the "golden age of Yosemite climbing," from the late 1940s to the early 1970s.¹⁹ They were all examples of what was starting to be called "big-wall climbing"—exposed multipitch climbs of rock faces a thousand feet high or more, and, at least at first, taking more than a single day to accomplish.²⁰ To succeed on a big wall, as Salathé recognized, would require a far greater reliance on hammering in pitons, or drilling holes for expansion bolts, not just for protection but for direct aid—in marked contrast to techniques that prewar Sierra Club climbers, as innovative as they were, had been prepared to accept as proper and ethical.²¹

Salathé's hard steel pitons had their first serious test on the southwest face of Yosemite's Half Dome. Half Dome had known its first ascent in 1875 when George C. Anderson drilled and hammered his way up the formation's northeast shoulder. But no new routes had been put up by climbers in the seven decades that followed, although Dick Leonard had twice attempted the southwest face before the war without success.

Salathé and frequent climbing partner Anton (Ax) Nelson spent two days in November 1946 hammering a route up a crack on the unscaled face, involving 900 feet of roped climbing all told, placing 150 pitons for direct aid and protection, and spending a night on a ledge below the summit—the first such bivouac on a very technical route, and one without good ledges, in Yosemite. It was a relatively easy climb, compared to what was to come, but still a remarkable achievement, not least because of Salathé's age and the fact that he had been climbing for little over a year.²²

Lost Arrow Spire is a rock pillar adjacent to Upper Yosemite Fall, detaching from the canyon wall below the rim surrounding Yosemite Valley. The spire tops out at a height of 6,930 feet, roughly the same height as the rim but separated from it by a 125-foot-wide chasm. Dick Leonard and Dave Brower, pushing the standard of the possible, had made the first attempt to climb it in 1937, ascending from the base. On a subsequent attempt in 1941, Brower looked at the summit of the pillar, which is all of

6 feet square, and considered that vertiginous platform “the one place I’d want most not to be.”²³

In August 1946, several months before his ascent of Half Dome, Salathé went to look at Lost Arrow Spire and perhaps do a little exploring of the climbing possibilities. He had planned to meet two friends on the canyon rim across from the spire, but they failed to show up. Undaunted, he rappelled down the 250 feet from the rim to the notch where the spire detaches from the wall. From there he began to work his way out onto a ledge that led to the east side of the spire, protected by a rope tied to a boulder in the notch—an act of radical unorthodoxy in California climbing circles, since neither solo climbing nor self-belay were on the Sierra Club’s list of safe-climbing rules.

Salathé’s climbing partner Anton Nelson likened Salathé’s action to “stepping out of a window from the hundredth floor of the Empire State Building onto a window ledge.”²⁴ The valley floor was 1,400 feet below Salathé’s exposed perch, a sheer drop should anything go wrong. He worked his way up two crack systems on the pillar’s outer face, until he reached a ledge (thereafter Salathé Ledge) 75 feet above the notch. But by then it was late afternoon, and after building a rock cairn to mark his high point, he turned back.²⁵

Salathé returned the following week, this time with a partner, John Thune, with whom he gained another 80 feet up the spire, leaving 50 more feet to go. But the cracks ran out, and without them Salathé’s pitons were useless.

Before Salathé could return, four Bay Area acquaintances—Fritz Lippmann, Robin Hansen, Jack Arnold, and Anton Nelson—decided they would make their own attempt on Lost Arrow Spire. Up on the canyon rim, where they stood facing the spire, they fixed the end of a light, weighted rope and then spent the better part of a day trying to throw it over the Lost Arrow summit so that its other end would dangle down to Salathé Ledge. After repeated misses, they finally succeeded.

The next morning, Nelson and Arnold set out from the notch, hoping to reach the rope above them. With only soft-iron pitons, their progress was slow, and it wasn’t until the second day, September 2, Labor Day, that

they reached the ledge and the rope dangling from the summit. With that in hand, and with the aid of their compatriots on the canyon rim, they could pull another fixed rope, this one heavier and nylon, over the summit and down to the ledge. And then, using Prusik knots, now part of the standard repertoire of Yosemite climbers, they worked their way up the rope to the summit, with Arnold the first to stand on top at 4:00 p.m. Rather than returning the way they came, they made a spectacular Tyrolean traverse (crossing the abyss between rim and spire on a fixed rope, gripped with hands and feet).²⁶

Nelson evoked the band-of-brothers spirit of wartime America in explaining the motives driving the conquerors of Lost Arrow Spire: "The three days of unforgettable adventure have forged a comradeship like that of a bomber crew coming through the perils of war."²⁷ Perhaps in making that comparison, Nelson was thinking of Fritz Lippmann, who had piloted bombers during the war, and Robin Hansen, who had piloted a P-38 fighter. Combat experience might have produced a greater acceptance of risk among the climbing veterans than had been the case with the prewar Sierrans.²⁸

"We Climbed the Impossible Peak," the headline proclaimed above Lippmann's subsequent account of the climb in the *Saturday Evening Post*, the point being that there no longer was such a thing as an impossible peak.²⁹ However, whether the Lost Arrow effort amounted to a legitimate first ascent or was just a clever rope stunt remained a matter of dispute in climbing circles.³⁰

What is more commonly accepted as the legitimate first ascent of Lost Arrow Spire took place a year later, in September 1947. Salathé was back, this time accompanied by Anton Nelson, his partner on Half Dome, and one of the four who had been on top of the spire the year before. The two men climbed from the spire's base up the 1,200-foot Lost Arrow chimney, reaching the notch after four days of effort, carrying a minimum of food (mostly dried fruit, Salathé's preferred diet in any case) and only enough water for each to drink about a quart a day until they reached the notch, where more water was lowered to them from supporters above on the rim. (Today, the recommendation is that climbers on big-wall climbs in

Yosemite carry a daily ration of at least a gallon of water per climber, or over 8 pounds of water per climber, per day.)³¹

No prewar Yosemite climb had ever lasted more than a single day. This kind of multiday rock-climbing, continuing without a break, dependent on what two men could haul up with them for supplies, required a willingness to suffer discomfort, as well as a high level of technical proficiency. As Nelson wrote in his account for the *Sierra Club Bulletin*: “Bivouacking on the chockstones, with our feet dangling, our backs aching where they were being nudged by granite knobs, and our shoulders tugging at their anchors, we got little sleep. . . . Food, sleep, and water can be dispensed with to a degree not appreciated until one is in a position where little can be had.”³²

They persevered, reaching the Salathé Ledge on the fifth day, and continuing above that to the last 50 feet where the cracks ran out. It took eight expansion bolts to surmount the last section and reach the summit, parched but fulfilled. They had completed the hardest rock climb achieved to that date in the United States.³³

Salathé’s third and last great climb came in 1950, although it was undertaken at another climber’s initiative. Allen Steck decided he wanted to attempt Sentinel Rock, a 7,038-foot peak across the valley floor from Yosemite Falls. Steck was part of the new generation of RCS climbers, a protégé of David Brower and Dick Leonard. He joined the group while attending UC Berkeley on the GI Bill, after navy service in World War II. (In later life he would be coeditor of *Ascent* magazine, coauthor of *Fifty Classic Climbs in North America*, as well as cofounder of the trekking company Mountain Travel, today Mountain Travel Sobek).³⁴

From the valley floor, a likely route ran up Sentinel Rock along a crack system beside a buttress that reached two-thirds of the way up the cliff. Beyond that, however, was a headwall without visible cracks, and above that a dark and inscrutable chimney leading to the summit. Steck had made several unsuccessful attempts on Sentinel Rock in the late 1940s. In May 1950, two other climbers—Bill Long and Phil Bettler—reached the top of the Flying Buttress (as it was called), but were stymied by the headwall.

Steck was scheduled to leave in midsummer for an expedition to Mount Waddington, and he feared that the prize would be snatched before his return. So with the July Fourth holiday coming up, and in the absence of any of his usual climbing partners, the twenty-four-year-old Steck called fifty-one-year-old Salathé, who readily agreed to join him in tackling the Sentinel.

The two climbers may have been separated by decades in age, but they worked together as an effective team—Steck the better free climber of the two; Salathé, the better aid climber. There was plenty of both free and aid climbing on the route. Two days brought them to the top of the buttress. Another hard day's work led them across the headwall and into the chimney. It was hot and they were thirsty; they carried only 2 gallons of water, and as they rationed their supply out over the days, they lost interest in the food they were carrying, most of which they abandoned en route.

The interior of the chimney now revealed a new obstacle, sufficiently daunting that there would have been no disgrace if they had turned back then and there. The chimney was sealed at the top by an overhanging rock; they were in a climbing cul-de-sac. But the next day, Salathé's brilliant placement of his superior pitons solved the problem, enabling him to reach the edge of the overhang and surmount it. The way to the summit was open, although they would not reach it until noon of the fifth day of their ascent.

"Ordeal by Piton," Steck famously called it in an article for *Appalachia* magazine. The "supreme climax" of the climb for him, he reported, came not atop the Sentinel, but later that day when he jumped, fully clothed, into a pool of water at the foot of a small waterfall. Salathé and Steck established a new model for big-wall climbing in Yosemite.³⁵ More than just a report on a difficult climb, "Ordeal by Piton" was a manifesto for direct-aid climbing:

Many have questioned the quality of this sort of achievement, deplored the use of pitons, tension traverses, and expansion bolts, but the record speaks for itself. This is a technical age and climbers

will continue in the future to look for new routes. There is nothing more satisfying than being a pioneer.³⁶

Others would soon follow in the path that Steck and Salathé had pioneered.

WASHBURN RETURNS TO DENALI

While John Salathé and his climbing partners were reinventing Yosemite climbing, Brad Washburn was turning to unfinished business in Alaska: finding a way to the summit of Denali via its West Buttress.

He would get his first postwar chance to return to the mountain, though not to its western approach, thanks to James Ramsey Ullman and *The White Tower*. RKO Pictures optioned Ullman's novel when it became a best seller in 1945, eventually releasing it as a feature film in 1950.³⁷ As a prerelease publicity stunt, someone at the studio came up with the idea of sponsoring an expedition to climb Mount Everest. Cameramen could accompany the climbers to the summit, and the resulting documentary would make a great lead-in, the publicist figured, to the eventual release of *The White Tower*.

Brad Washburn was approached and asked if he would like to lead the effort. He pointed out that neither Tibet nor Nepal was allowing expeditions to Everest, but he suggested a Denali expedition as an alternative. The studio agreed and, in the words of Washburn's biographer, David Roberts, "the most extravagant boondoggle of Brad's mountaineering career" was launched.³⁸

And so, in late March 1947, Washburn, accompanied by a crew of climbers who included wife Barbara, set off for Denali, to climb the mountain by the now-traditional northeast route of Muldrow Glacier to Karstens Ridge to Harper Glacier. The strong team of climbers included George Browne, son of Denali pioneer Belmore Browne. With the studio paying the bills, Washburn and his compatriots were kept well supplied by airplanes landing on the Muldrow, and a dog team that ferried sleds to an altitude of 10,000 feet. They were thus possibly the only Denali climbers ever to enjoy frozen strawberries and fresh peaches for dessert.

On June 6 they reached the summit. The following day they returned to climb the North Summit, the first time since the Sourdough Expedition of 1910 that anyone had stood there. Operation White Tower, as the expedition was dubbed by the studio's publicity department, thus accomplished the first dual summit ascent of Denali, while Barbara Washburn became the first woman ever to reach (or for that matter attempt) either peak. As for her husband, he became the first person to climb the mountain twice. In terms of the future of Alaskan climbing, the most important result of Operation White Tower was that Washburn got another look at the West Buttress. He made up his mind that, in the event of a return trip, that would be the route he would take to the summit.³⁹

Washburn was not the only climber interested in putting up a route from the west on Denali. Henry Buchtel, a Denver urologist and president of the Colorado Mountain Club, took the initiative in the fall of 1950 in organizing an expedition to attempt the West Buttress the following year. Buchtel's first recruit was a precocious eighteen-year-old undergraduate from the University of Cincinnati named Barry Bishop, who had spent childhood summers in Estes Park with his family, joining the Colorado Mountain Club by the age of ten, where he had been tutored in mountaineering skills by veterans of the Tenth Mountain Division.⁴⁰ They were joined by three Denver climbers: John Ambler, Melvin Griffiths, and Jerry More.

As a courtesy to the climber whose name had so often been linked with Denali in the past, Buchtel wrote to Washburn to let him know his plans. Washburn wrote back and essentially invited himself along on the expedition. Buchtel graciously consented, and Washburn, along with Bill Hackett and Jim Gale, both of whom had reached the summit of Denali in 1947, were added to the expedition roster. The celebrity from Boston, of course, was soon in effective command. The expedition would be sponsored jointly by the Boston Museum of Science, the University of Denver, and the University of Alaska.⁴¹

In mid-June 1951, Washburn, Gale, Buchtel, and Hackett were flown in to Kahiltna Glacier, west of the mountain, by Terris Moore, veteran of Mount Fairweather and Minya Konka. Since his climbing days, Moore

had become president of the University of Alaska and also a skilled pilot. Moore had designed a hydraulic ski wheel for his Piper 125 Super Cub, a two-seat monoplane favored by bush pilots, allowing for takeoffs and landings from either runway or glacier.

On June 20, encamped at 7,650 feet on the upper Kahiltna Glacier, Washburn wrote exultantly in his journal:

This camp & these landings mark the first time in history that anyone has ever set foot in this stupendous amphitheatre of the upper Kahiltna & seen the terrific 10,000-foot western cliffs of [Denali] at close hand. And they are some sight, towering 13,000 feet above this camp in only 6 miles to our northeast. To the west towers 17,000-foot Mt. Foraker & to the southeast is the fantastic icy spire of Mt. Hunter (14,500 ft. high).⁴²

In decades to come, Kahiltna Glacier became the staging area for many of the most daring climbs in the region, including ascents of Mounts Foraker and Hunter.⁴³

Washburn's team began survey work for a project to map the mountain, in the course of which they made the first ascent of 12,411-foot Kahiltna Dome west of Denali. They also gathered supplies air-dropped to them by an air force C-47. The rest of the team approached the mountain in more traditional fashion, with a packtrain of horses carrying their supplies via the Peters Glacier. En route, Moore and Bishop made the first ascent of 10,571-foot Peters Dome, northwest of Denali. The overland party crossed Kahiltna Pass, the col connecting Kahiltna and Peters Glaciers, on June 30, joining Washburn's team at base camp, at 10,000 feet, at the head of the Kahiltna Glacier.⁴⁴

Three days later, Bishop wrote home to his parents in Cincinnati from base camp, outlining the plan for the ascent of the mountain, and conveying his excitement at the prospects that lay before him:

The route to the top of Mt. McKinley looks good. We will occupy a camp at 13,000 feet at base of buttress as soon as possible. An

emergency igloo at 14,000 feet in that little cirque will be built. Another camp at 17,000 feet on top of West Buttress will follow. Then Denali Pass and the top! . . .

As for me, my lips, tongue, ears and nose are sunburned. I have lost no weight, I guess, but I have gotten solid. I never have worked physically so hard continuously in my life . . .

The silence up here is ethereal—broken only by the boom of avalanches. It's wonderful. The party as a whole can't be beaten, and I am having a wonderful time with them and am learning a great deal—a lot that can't be learned except by living with other men.⁴⁵

Washburn, Hackett, and Gale took the lead in pushing the route, establishing their first camp at 13,000 feet, on a shoulder where the glacier ran into the West Buttress. They called it Windy Corner, for reasons easily imaginable. Two additional camps went in, at 15,500 feet and at 17,200 feet (at the latter camp they built an igloo, which they found snugger than any tent). From there, on July 10, Washburn, Gale, and Hackett set off for the summit, which they reached at 5:30 that afternoon.

Apart from altitude, the route involved “no great difficulties,” as Washburn explained to readers in *American Alpine Journal*, and included some distinct advantages over the previous path to the summit, including a more direct exposure to the sun. “And last but not least,” he concluded, “the prevailing westerly winds are always behind your back as you climb instead of cutting squarely into your face.”⁴⁶ With this climb, Washburn became the first to reach Denali’s summit three times.⁴⁷

They stayed forty-five minutes before descending. “We hated to leave,” Washburn reported:

The view was marvelous: Mount Hayes, the Coast Range, Mount Marcus Baker, Mount Spurr, Mount Foraker—all cloudless; Lake Minchumina like a jewel on the plains; the hills beyond Anchorage and the grey haze over Cook Inlet; the deep green lowlands

of the Clearwater; Wonder Lake; the Tokositna; the Yentna and the Skwentna; then those endless lowlands stretching off to the westward, river after river sparkling in the sun and twisting and winding off into the distance.⁴⁸

Over the next few days, the rest of the expedition summited and returned safely. The West Buttress route thereafter became the standard route on Denali. In the 1950s, a few climbers would climb that route each year. By the early twenty-first century, that number had grown to five hundred or more climbers annually.⁴⁹

RETURN TO THE HIMALAYA, 1950–1960

With the end of the Second World War, Himalayan mountaineers hoped to return to the region. Brad Washburn's protégés Charlie Houston and Bob Bates had both served in the military during the war, and upon discharge they immediately began planning a new expedition to K2. But turmoil in India and Pakistan following independence and partition put the mountains off-limits in the late 1940s.

Another event with profound implications for Himalayan mountaineering was the Communist triumph in China in 1949, followed by the seizure of Tibet the next year. No more Western expeditions could approach Mount Everest from the north. However, fearing it might share Tibet's fate, the "hermit kingdom" of Nepal threw open its borders in 1950 to foreigners for the first time, which is how Maurice Herzog's expedition found itself climbing the central Nepalese peak of Annapurna in June of that year.

Four months later, in November, another foreign expedition crossed into Nepal, this one consisting mostly of Americans and headed for Mount Everest, intent on the first reconnaissance of Mount Everest from the south. Charlie Houston, veteran of Nanda Devi in 1936 and K2 in 1938, was its leader; and Bill Tilman, who had reached the summit of Nanda Devi in 1936, was a last-minute recruit.⁵⁰

The party's five members were the first westerners ever to explore

the Solu-Khumbu region of Nepal, home of the Sherpa people, and the gateway to the southern side of Everest. They visited Namche Bazaar, the largest community in the region, and Tengboche Monastery. While their companions remained behind as guests at Tengboche, Houston and Tilman continued alone up the Khumbu Glacier to the very foot of Everest.

Tilman knew from the British Everest expeditions of the 1930s that the approach to the mountain from the north was relatively easy; serious climbing difficulties started higher on the mountain, above the North Col. From the south, in contrast, as Tilman and Houston immediately understood, the approach itself was fraught with danger. As the Khumbu Glacier descended southward off the mountain, it was forced through a narrow chute between Everest and neighboring Nuptse, resulting in a gigantic chaotic icefall.

Tilman and Houston were appalled at the prospect of climbers threading a route upward through that jumbled mass of ice towers, blocks, debris, and crevasses to reach the enclosed valley of the Western Cwm that lay 2,000 feet above. Standing at the foot of the Khumbu Icefall, Houston concluded that while it probably "could be forced," it certainly did not offer mountaineers "a very attractive route of access" to Everest.⁵¹

Houston and Tilman had time for only a two-day reconnaissance. Before they departed, they wanted to see what lay beyond the icefall. And so, on November 18, their last day on the mountain, the two men started up 18,450-foot Kala Pattar, a peak offering a view across the Khumbu Glacier of the Everest-Lhotse-Nuptse massif. Tilman, who had spent the previous few months tramping around the Annapurna region, reaching a height of over 22,000 feet, was well acclimated, but Houston, who only three weeks earlier had left New York, was not. As a result, with Houston lagging, they halted about 300 vertical feet below Kala Pattar's summit.

They could see a terribly steep ridge dropping from the summit, which they surmised must end up on the South Col. They could not see the col itself, because it was blocked from view by a shoulder of Nuptse, as was the lower face of Lhotse. The ridge that they could see leading to the summit did not seem promising.

Their limited view led them to a misconception. The ridge visible



Houston-Tilman Everest reconnaissance party, 1950. From left to right: Anderson Bakewell, Oscar Houston, Betsy Cowles, Bill Tilman, and Charlie Houston.

COURTESY OF AMERICAN ALPINE CLUB.

to them from Kala Pattar was not linked to the South Col at all. It was Everest's Southwest Ridge, which connected to a buttress (later named the South Pillar) that fell steeply and directly to the Western Cwm. What they could not see from where they stood was that farther to the east lay another ridge, Everest's Southeast Ridge, the ridge that actually connected to the South Col, and one that was, at least relatively, less steep and forbidding. Had they been able to climb the additional 300 feet to Kala Pattar's summit, they would have found a broader vista opening up to them, in which the true nature of the route to Everest's summit would have been apparent.⁵²

In a report featured on the front page of the *New York Times*, Houston and Tilman concluded that climbing Everest from its Nepalese side "may well be impossible." They "could see no practicable climbing route."⁵³

They were certainly right about the dangers of the Khumbu Icefall, which claimed many lives in the decades to come. But they were quickly

proved wrong about the lack of a practicable climbing route to the summit. A British reconnaissance in 1951 identified the Southeast Ridge as the likely route to the summit, and a Swiss expedition in 1952 followed it to within a few hundred vertical feet of that goal. And on May 29, 1953, on a subsequent British expedition, New Zealander Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing Norgay surveyed the world from the vantage point of the top of the world's highest mountain.⁵⁴

By the time Tenzing and Hillary reached Everest's summit, another Charlie Houston-led expedition was en route to the Himalaya, this time heading for Pakistan rather than Nepal. Its goal was K2.⁵⁵

Official permission for the expedition, which Houston and Robert Bates had sought ever since 1946, was long in coming from the government of Pakistan. It did not arrive until 1952, too late to launch an expedition that year. So the expedition was put off until the following year. Houston and Bates used the interval to interview forty candidates before they decided on the five who would join them, all of whom were younger climbers just beginning to make names for themselves: George Bell, Bob Craig, Art Gilkey, Dee Molenaar, and Pete Schoening.

Despite their youth, they were a strong group: Dee Molenaar had been in the party that made the second ascent of Mount Saint Elias in Alaska in 1946, Bob Craig had made first ascents in the Alaska Coast Range in 1946 and had climbed Denali with Brad Washburn in 1947, George Bell had organized the expedition that made the first ascent of 21,769-foot Yerupajá in Peru in 1950, and Pete Schoening had led a group from the Seattle Mountaineers to make the first ascent of 14,070-foot Mount Augusta, in the Saint Elias Mountains on the border of Alaska and the Canadian Yukon in 1952. Art Gilkey, a PhD candidate in geology at Columbia University, had worked as a guide in the Tetons and had been on mountaineering expeditions in Alaska. None had previous Himalayan experience.⁵⁶

Apart from climbing credentials, Houston and Bates looked for people who could get along; what they didn't want, they later wrote, was "the brilliant climber who thinks only in terms of personal success" (a swipe at Fritz Wiessner).⁵⁷ British army captain Tony Streather served as expedition transportation officer, but he functioned on the mountain as

part of the climbing team. The expedition was larger than the 1938 party but considerably smaller than the one assembled to climb Everest that year, which numbered fourteen British and Commonwealth members (including a reporter and film cameraman) and thirty-six Sherpas.

Sherpas, as Buddhists, were not allowed in newly independent and Muslim Pakistan in 1953, so the Americans would rely on local and less skilled Hunza tribesmen, who would carry supplies up to only about 20,000 feet on K2. And unlike the Everest party (and indeed most expeditions to 8,000-meter peaks in the 1950s and 1960s), the Americans carried no bottled oxygen with them. Houston's expeditionary ideal, showing the continuing influence of Bill Tilman, was to keep things simple. And nonhierarchical. Their Pakistani liaison officer, Colonel Mohammad Ata-Ullah, noted that Houston was "determined never to be anything more than the first among equals."⁵⁸

News of the British (or New Zealand–Sherpa) triumph on Everest reached the Americans in Pakistan. Houston wrote to his father from a campsite en route to K2: "I think we are secretly a little disappointed to have the British make Everest before we could make our peak." Still, he reported, "We have high hopes and a good party."⁵⁹

Their hopes seemed vindicated by initial progress. On June 19 they established base camp at 16,250 feet. By early July they had passed through the obstacle of House's Chimney, well remembered from 1938, and established Camp 5 at 22,000 feet. In a letter written on July 18, intended for friends and supporters back in the United States, Houston predicted a summit bid sometime between August 1 and 3.

On July 31, Schoening and Gilkey led the way to what was intended as the expedition's next-to-last campsite, Camp 8, at 25,300 feet, about 500 feet above the top of the Black Pyramid, a pyramid-shaped rock buttress that required careful maneuvering on its steep icy cliffs. They were soon joined at their high camp by the other five American climbers, plus Tony Streather. They hoped for two consecutive days of good weather—one to put in an additional camp at about 27,000 feet, and the next for the summit bid. Three days of consecutive good weather would allow two parties to reach the summit.

But the good weather was at an end. Snow began to fall on August 1 and continued until August 7. Had the climbers retreated to a lower camp at the start of the storm, they might have weathered it in relative comfort and avoided the physical deterioration of a prolonged stay at high altitude. But in 1953, even experienced mountaineers had yet to understand some of the basics of altitude sickness. As Molenaar recalled: "We thought that by [staying] up we were acclimatizing," when in fact he and his companions were "getting weaker and not thinking as clearly as we should."⁶⁰

On August 7 the weather improved slightly. Leaving his tent to stretch his legs, Gilkey immediately collapsed. Houston was horrified to discover that Gilkey was suffering from thrombophlebitis, a clotting of the veins in his left leg, potentially fatal. Gilkey would have to be evacuated to base camp, 9,000 feet below. But that meant descending technically challenging obstacles like the Black Pyramid and House's Chimney with an incapacitated man in tow. Houston kept his worries to himself, but he believed the effort was doomed. Still, they had to try. They set out at 10:00 that morning, Gilkey wrapped in his sleeping bag and the remains of a wrecked tent, with ropes attached to lower and slide him down. But the two feet of powder snow they encountered below their camp was unstable, and they were forced to retreat, lest they trigger an avalanche.

For three days they waited in vain for improved conditions. Houston could hear in Gilkey's cough that blood clots were settling in his lungs. He began to wonder whether any of the party would get off the mountain alive. Finally, on the morning of August 10, Houston decided they could wait no longer. Gilkey was again wrapped in tent and sleeping bag and alternately towed and lowered down the mountain by his comrades. Progress was slow, and they triggered a mini-avalanche that nearly carried away Craig and Gilkey. By midafternoon it was clear to the retreating climbers that they had no chance of reaching Camp 6 at 23,300 feet that day. They would need to traverse to their left across an icy slope to reach the tiny platform that was Camp 7, a thousand feet higher.

At about 3:00 p.m. the climbers were arrayed across the slope to the west of Camp 7, with Gilkey belayed from above by Schoening. Another rope ran from Gilkey to Molenaar. They had just succeeded in lowering

Gilkey over the edge of a rock cliff when Bell lost his footing. That set up a chain reaction of falling men. Bell was roped to Streather, who was pulled off his feet. Streather's rope became entangled with a rope linking Houston and Bates to Gilkey (and above to Schoening). The four falling men snagged the rope linking Molenaar and Gilkey. Molenaar started sliding. Craig was the only expedition member who was not roped to others, and it seemed for a moment that all seven of his companions—Bell, Streather, Houston, Bates, Molenaar, Gilkey, and Schoening—would momentarily be pulled off into space, tumbling thousands of feet to the Godwin-Austen Glacier below.

What happened next earned Schoening's ice ax an honored place in the American Alpine Club's museum. Before the calamity began, Schoening had taken the precaution of jamming the ax into the snow behind a small boulder, wrapping the rope that attached him to Gilkey around it, and then around his waist. When the others began to fall, he instantly put all his weight on the ax. The nylon rope stretched and tightened—but it held. Schoening saved the lives of six men, and likely his own, in the instinctive act thereafter known in mountaineering circles as "The Belay."

They were not out of danger. There were cracked ribs, gashed legs, frozen hands (Bell lost his mittens in the fall). Houston suffered a concussion. They needed to take shelter and, gathering their wits and scattered equipment, edged their way over to the Camp 7 site to set up the two tents they had brought with them from Camp 8. For the moment, they left Gilkey wrapped in his sleeping bag, anchored to the slope in a gulley about 150 feet west of the campsite.

They managed to set up their tents. But when Bates, Craig, and Streather returned to check on their injured teammate, they saw to their horror that the gulley was empty. Gilkey, ropes, and ice-ax anchors had all apparently been swept away by avalanche (unless, as some believed, Gilkey had released himself in an act of self-sacrifice, knowing he could not be saved and was only putting the others' lives at risk).

It took five more days for the battered survivors to reach base camp. After they had time to recover, they built a 10-foot-high cairn to honor the twenty-seven-year-old Gilkey's memory. It still stands and has accu-

mulated a large collection of plaques and tin plates stamped with the names of other climbers who have since died on K2.

Although the group failed to reach the summit, the attempt to save Gilkey's life, and the struggle for survival that followed, distinguished the 1953 K2 expedition. Charlie Houston summed up the highest ideals of the midcentury American expeditionary culture when he said of his K2 comrades, "We entered the mountain as strangers, but we left as brothers."⁶¹

Two other significant American expeditions were undertaken in the Himalaya over the next few years, both organized by Nick Clinch, a recent graduate of Stanford Law School, where he had been a member of the Stanford Alpine Club. The first, launched in 1958, tackled 26,469-foot (or 8,068-meter) Gasherbrum I, better known as Hidden Peak, in the Karakoram range. It is the eleventh-highest mountain in the world and was one of three mountains over 8,000 meters still unclimbed that year.

Clinch recruited Andy Kauffman, past president of the Harvard Mountaineering Club, and a foreign service officer stationed at the American embassy in Paris, for the expedition. Another recruit was K2 veteran Pete Schoening. They were joined by Tom McCormick, Bob Swift, Tom Nevison, Gil Roberts, and Dick Irvin, drawn mostly from the Stanford Alpine Club and the Sierra Club Rock Climbing Section. Two Pakistani climbers also joined the expedition.

They established base camp on June 6 at 17,000 feet on the Abruzzi Glacier, to the southwest of the mountain. They chose a route up a ridgeline that they called the Roch Arête, named for French climber André Roch, who had attempted the mountain by that route in 1934 (it is now known as the IHE Ridge, or International Himalayan Expedition Ridge). Using supplementary oxygen (the first American expedition to the Himalaya to do so), they made swift progress up a long but not technically challenging route.

By July 4, their high camp at 23,500 feet was in place, and at 3:00 the next morning, the summit team of Kauffman and Schoening set off. Ten hours of plodding brought them to the top, where, for the traditional victory photo, they displayed the flags of Switzerland, Britain, France, Pakistan, and the United Nations, as well as the Stars and Stripes, to

emphasize that Himalayan mountaineering was an international enterprise to which many nations had contributed. An 8,000-meter peak had been climbed for the first time by Americans, in record time, in exemplary style, and safely.⁶²

Not that anyone in the United States seemed to care. Americans were paying increasing attention to mountaineering exploits but curiously seemed more interested in the efforts of foreigners than those of their own mountaineers. Maurice Herzog's *Annapurna* had been a best seller, Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay's ascent of Everest had made the cover of *Life* magazine, but if Herzog, Hillary, and Tenzing were now well-known names, most Americans would have been hard-pressed to name a single leading US mountaineer such as Houston, Clinch, or Schoening. Press coverage of the ascent of Hidden Peak was limited in the *New York Times* to a couple of wire service stories on an inside page—the first understating the height of the mountain by 2,000 feet, and neither noting that this was the first (and, as it turned out, only) 8,000-meter peak whose first ascent was accomplished by an American team.⁶³

Clinch's second expedition to the Karakoram was an attempt on unclimbed 25,659-foot Masherbrum, whose summit fell just below the 8,000 meters that defined the world's highest mountains but was actually a more difficult and dangerous peak than Gasherbrum I. Willi Unsoeld, a Teton guide and philosophy professor, and George Bell (another K2 veteran) achieved Masherbrum's first ascent on July 6, 1960, followed two days later by Clinch and Pakistani climber Jawad Akhter Khan. Again, few Americans noticed or cared. The *New York Times* confined its coverage to a single three-paragraph wire story on page sixty, noting in passing that a "Dr. William E. Sunsoeld [sic] of Corvallis, Oregon, was in the first party to reach the top."⁶⁴

FRED BECKEY, "NOT AN EXPEDITION MAN"

No American mountaineer spent as many years climbing, or made as many first ascents, as Wolfgang Paul Heinrich Beckey, better known as

Fred Beckey, or just “Beckey”—the latter spoken by those who knew him in tones of either (sometimes both) admiration and exasperation. Like the Sierra’s Norman Clyde, who in a long climbing career also put up an impressive number of first ascents, Beckey was a lone wolf: although he sometimes climbed with others, including some leading American and European mountaineers, he neither developed nor sought lasting climbing partners. Unlike Clyde, who rarely ventured from the Sierra, Beckey, in addition to dominating climbing in his home base of the North Cascades, made his mark in many other remote and challenging mountain environments of North America and elsewhere in the world.⁶⁵

Beckey made an additional contribution to American mountaineering as the author of a collection of classic guidebooks. *A Climber’s Guide to the Cascade and Olympic Mountains of Washington*, published in 1949 by the American Alpine Club, contributed to the popularity of mountaineering in the region and also helped the AAC recruit in the Pacific Northwest, previously a place where very few climbers had signed up as club members. In the 1970s Beckey reworked and expanded the original guidebook into a three-volume series, “each one,” Northwest writer Timothy Egan noted in a portrait of Beckey, “revered by the cult of climbers who’ve followed his every handhold.”⁶⁶

Beckey was born in 1923 in Düsseldorf, Germany, and brought to the United States by his parents two years later. The family settled in Seattle, where his father practiced medicine. Fred began climbing as a teenager in Seattle in the 1930s with a Boy Scout troop, and later with the Mountaineers, instructed in mountaineering technique by Lloyd Anderson, founder of the REI coop. In 1939, at age fifteen, in company with Anderson and another climber, Beckey made the first of what eventually became hundreds of first ascents, in this case 7,296-foot Mount Despair in the North Cascades, which the cautious elders of the Mountaineers had written off as unclimbable.

The next year, at age sixteen, Beckey returned to the North Cascades, again accompanied by Anderson, as well as Beckey’s younger brother Helmy and several others, and made the first ascent of 8,815-foot Forbidden Peak. Two years later the youthful Beckey brothers, climbing and

skiing on their own, pulled off the second ascent of Mount Waddington, following the Wiessner-House route from 1935.⁶⁷

Following stateside military service in the Second World War, Beckey attended the University of Washington, where he received a master's degree in business administration and found various forms of marginal employment that made it easy to take time off for climbing. Never marrying, he won a reputation in climbing circles not only for first ascents, but for his bedroom exploits. "Beware of Beckey," an admiring T-shirt warned, "He will steal your woman, steal your route."⁶⁸ He became legendary early in life, and anecdotes, reliable or not, were passed from climber to climber, among them the existence of a little black book that Beckey was supposed to carry, in which he ticked off one by one a long list of unclimbed routes still awaiting their first ascent (asked at age ninety if that was true, he denied it).⁶⁹

In the later 1940s, Beckey began to expand his horizons beyond the North Cascades. Taking up a challenge that had defeated Fritz Wiessner, Beckey, along with Bob Craig and Cliff Schmidtke, made the first ascents in 1946 of 10,016-foot Kates Needle and 9,077-foot Devils Thumb, in the Sitkine Icecap region of the Alaska Coast Range on the border of Alaska and British Columbia.⁷⁰

Too many first ascents followed to chronicle—in the North Cascades, Alaska, British Columbia, Wind Rivers, Tetons, and other ranges. In just two months of one particularly stellar year, Beckey pulled off a "triple crown of first ascents" in Alaska, including the first ascent of the Northwest Buttress of the North Summit of Denali, plus the first ascent of Alaska's 12,339-foot Mount Deborah and 14,573-foot Mount Hunter, the latter two completed in alpine style, one continuous push each time, in the company of German climber Henry Meybohm, and Austrian climber Heinrich Harrer (of Eiger and *Seven Years in Tibet* fame).⁷¹

Despite Beckey's growing celebrity and genuine achievements, a reputation for recklessness and being a bit of a curmudgeon would make him persona non grata in establishment mountaineering circles. He was the most talented climber ever to come out of the Seattle-based

Mountaineers, but the club turned down the chance to publish his 1949 climbing guide (though a quarter century later they were happy to bring out his three-volume guide to the Cascades).

Beckey was criticized for the loss of a partner who perished in a climbing accident in British Columbia in 1947, and again when another partner died in a 1952 ascent of 6,129-foot Mount Baring in the North Cascades. In 1955 he was invited on an international expedition to 27,940-foot Lhotse, organized by the Swiss-American climber Norman Dyhrenfurth. Dyhrenfurth was offered a \$10,000 contribution toward the expenses of the expedition by Henry S. Hall, president of the American Alpine Club, if he included Beckey as a member. "Why is that so important?" Dyhrenfurth recalled asking Hall:

And he said, "Well, he's such a good climber and he's never been invited on a major expedition. And I feel that he should be given the chance." I was happy to get the \$10,000. But I regretted it later, because I was forced into taking somebody who is not an expedition man.⁷²

On that expedition, Beckey descended from a high camp, leaving behind a snow-blind tentmate who was suffering from cerebral edema, whom other expedition members had to rescue. The exact circumstances of Beckey's actions remain obscure, and some felt he got a bad rap from Dyhrenfurth subsequently, but the fact remains that Beckey was never again invited on a high-profile expedition to the Himalaya or anywhere else.⁷³

Beckey ignored his critics (and outlasted them as an active climber). In time, he became an institution in the climbing world, admired for his absolute commitment to mountaineering, and for his lack of interest in profiting off his fame, apart from the limited income he gained from writing books and giving talks. He never did product endorsements. The closest he came was in the form of a distinctly inside joke: agreeing to appear in a photograph in the 2004 catalogue of Patagonia outdoor clothing, looking like anything other than a climbing fashion model.



Corey Rich's photograph of Fred Beckey for the 2004 Patagonia catalogue.

COURTESY OF COREY RICH.

RUCKSACK REVOLUTION

In the course of the 1950s, a few hundred poets, novelists, artists, and their camp followers in places like Greenwich Village, San Francisco, Berkeley, and Venice, California, established a loose community of self-described outsiders. More important, they established the myth of the Beat generation. The Beats thought of themselves as a prophetic saving remnant of cultural rebels whose ideas and way of life represented a repudiation of materialism and conformism. They hewed to a vision of radical individualism, authenticity, and self-transformation.

In the decade that followed, tens of thousands of other young Americans would aspire to pursue their own version of the beatific way of life charted in such seminal works as Jack Kerouac's 1957 novel *On the Road*. Kerouac had admirers among the young climbers gathering in Yosemite

Valley in the 1950s. One of them, Royal Robbins, referred to *On the Road* as “sort of our bible at the time.”⁷⁴

Kerouac climbed his one and only serious mountain two years before the publication of his landmark novel. In October 1955, spurred on by his Berkeley-based friend, poet Gary Snyder, the two Beats journeyed to 12,285-foot Matterhorn Peak in the Sawtooth Range at the northern boundary of Yosemite National Park. Snyder was an experienced mountaineer who had joined the Mazamas climbing club as a teenager and climbed Mount Hood, Mount Adams, and Mount Saint Helens in his high school years.⁷⁵ No longer in his prime after years of hard living, Kerouac found Matterhorn Peak a challenge, quitting a hundred or so feet below the summit, while Snyder continued to the top.⁷⁶

No matter. Kerouac may have missed the summit, but he gained some valuable material for his next novel, *The Dharma Bums*. “Dharma” has multiple meanings in Hinduism and Buddhism, among them “one’s righteous duty” and “right way of living”—concerns that Kerouac wrestled with throughout his life, without ever quite resolving. His new novel met a mixed critical reception on publication in 1958 and never obtained the popularity of *On the Road* (although a number of Yosemite climbers were among its fans).

But the book did contain a prophecy, extraordinary both for the loopy brilliance of Kerouac’s prose and the fact that within a few years’ time something not far removed from what he foresaw actually came to pass. In words Kerouac gives to the character Japhy Ryder, a stand-in in the novel for Gary Snyder, Ryder predicts the coming of a “rucksack revolution”:

See the whole thing is a world full of rucksack wanderers, Dharma Bums refusing to subscribe to the general demand that they consume production and therefore have to work for the privilege of consuming, all that crap they didn’t really want anyway such as refrigerators, TV sets, cars, at least new fancy cars . . . all of them imprisoned in a system of work, produce, consume, work, produce, consume, I see a vision of a great rucksack revolution thousands

or even millions of young Americans wandering around with rucksacks, going up to mountains to pray . . .

Why, do you realize the Jurassic pure granite of Sierra Nevada with the straggling high conifers of the last ice age and lakes we just saw is one of the greatest expressions on this earth, just think how truly great and wise America will be, with all this energy and exuberance and space focused into the Dharma.⁷⁷

Kerouac was no geologist; the granite of the Sierra Nevada extends back further than the Jurassic to the Cretaceous.⁷⁸ And there is no record that he ever read the writings of John Muir. Snyder, however, had been a fan of Muir since his high school days in Seattle. In a collection of poems published in 1960, Snyder condensed and recast Muir's 1894 account of a moment of terror and transcendence on Mount Ritter in 1872 into a twenty-four-line free-verse poem that concluded:

*I seemed suddenly to become possessed
Of a new sense. My trembling muscles
Became firm again, every rift and flaw in
The rock was seen as through a microscope,
My limbs moved with a positiveness and precision
With which I seemed to have
Nothing at all to do.⁷⁹*

In Snyder's reading, Muir had a Zen epiphany on Mount Ritter, in which he learned that by surrendering control, he would paradoxically regain control.⁸⁰

In the rucksack revolution—*Dharma Bums* manifesto of 1958, Kerouac, channeling Snyder, channeling Muir, suggests the underlying continuities of the American love affair with mountains from the 1860s to the 1960s and beyond. Mountains are places of renewal and redemption, where Americans reconnect with the values of their forebears and determine whether they measure up to their exacting standards, spiritual

and patriotic. "Had I been borne aloft upon wings," Muir wrote of his experience on Mount Ritter in 1872, "my deliverance could not have been more complete."⁸¹ The "Jurassic pure granite of Sierra Nevada," Jack Kerouac wrote in 1958, was proof of "how truly great and wise America will be."⁸² The rucksack revolution was about to begin.

YOSEMITE, 1953-1958

Yosemite's climbing history has a distinct generational cast. There was the Brower-Leonard generation of the 1930s, gone by the end of the Second World War, followed by the Salathé-Steck generation, gone in turn by the mid-1950s. A third generation began to find its way up the vertical-crack systems of the "Jurassic pure granite of Sierra Nevada" by the mid-1950s. Like their Beat contemporaries, those belonging to this newest generation of Yosemite climbers formed a loose community of self-described outsiders. And, like the Beats, they would establish their own myth—that of the free-living, risk-taking, committed Yosemite big-wall climber.

Their quest for self-transformation and authenticity, righteous duty and right way of living, bore considerable overlap with the Beats' beatific vision. "Climbing is an Art (or can be)," Yvon Chouinard wrote fellow Yosemite climber Steve Roper in the summer of 1964. "Therefore it is love (or can be). It is possible for climbing to be the highest form of art attainable because you can *combine* oneness with the medium (the mother rock), loss of the narcissistic 'I,' and oneness with fellow man."⁸³

Theirs was a powerful and prophetic vision, if not completely original (in addition to the Beats, there were echoes in it of Thoreau, and Muir, and even Charlie Houston, who spoke of mountaineering as a way to "strip off non-essentials, to come down to the core of life itself.")⁸⁴ Like the Beats, the Yosemite big-wall climbers were destined to have an outsize impact on the imagination and aspirations of the coming generation.

The Sierrans of the 1930s had been educated urbanites, mostly from middle-class backgrounds, mostly from the Bay Area, who climbed on weekends. In their weekday lives in San Francisco and Berkeley, they held to the conventional norms of their upbringing and social position, includ-

ing marriage, home ownership, and professional ambition. They were also organization builders, who poured their energies into the Sierra Club. They believed in the ideal of service, including military service, rushing to the colors in the crisis of the Second World War. They believed in cooperating with duly constituted authority, such as the National Park Service, helping the NPS to devise a registration system after World War II that was designed to screen out unqualified climbers from attempting Yosemite's walls.⁸⁵

The climbers who followed from the mid-1950s through the 1960s represented something new. They put climbing at the center of their lives, at the expense and in place of conventional careers, community, and family life. There weren't many ways to make a living as a climber in that era, except as a professional guide in a few locations like the Tetons or Mount Rainier. The new Yosemite climbers weren't professionals in that sense, but the best of them were becoming, more or less, full-time climbers.

Most were Depression babies. Too young to have served in World War II, they came of age in the prosperity of postwar America but stood at odds with what they felt was its crass materialism and smug self-satisfaction. A number of them wound up serving in the military in the late 1950s and early 1960s, but only after exhausting all efforts to avoid the draft. Some, like Steve Roper, were from middle-class backgrounds (Roper's father was a chemist whose boss at Shell Oil was none other than 1930s Sierra Club/RCS stalwart Hervey Voge), but more commonly they were from working-class backgrounds.

Many were from southern California, rather than the Bay Area. They were often very bright but not, by and large, academically inclined. And whatever their pedigree and training, few seemed to harbor the middle-class aspirations of their Sierra Club predecessors. They also had little use for what they regarded as meddling authorities, whether from the National Park Service or the Sierra Club.

There were no budding Dave Browers in their ranks. Organizations didn't inspire their affections or loyalties. Their "club," as it took form in the later 1950s, required no dues but rather was measured by length of

residence in a National Park Service campground located in the northern end of Yosemite Valley directly across the Merced River from Sentinel Rock, a dusty field dotted with pines and cedars and boulders officially known as Camp 4.⁸⁶

In 1955, a climber named Mark Powell became the first long-term resident of Camp 4, moving in for the entire summer.⁸⁷ Over the next two summers of full-time climbing in the valley, he racked up an impressive list of first ascents—fifteen in all. He was known for using minimal aid in these attempts, which included a free climb of the Arrowhead Arête in October 1956 that secured his reputation as one of the boldest climbers of the new generation.⁸⁸

Powell became a role model—as much for his lifestyle choices as for his climbing accomplishments. Over the next few years he was joined by a cohort of a half dozen or so like-minded, long-staying campers. By the early 1960s there would be dozens. At that moment, the height of the golden age of Yosemite climbing, climbers occupied perhaps a fifth of the fifty-odd campsites in Camp 4. The presence of nonclimbing tourists, with expensive tents, coolers, and gas stoves, reminded the climbers of an outside world and culture from which they felt they were refugees.

As the number of climbers grew in the early 1960s, and competition increased in the high tourist season for camping spaces, the rangers were under more pressure to actually enforce the rules. “We called ourselves the Valley Cong,” one of the Camp 4 climbers, Yvon Chouinard, recalled. “We hid out from the rangers in nooks and crannies behind Camp 4 when we overstayed the two-week camping limit. We took special pride in the fact that climbing rocks and icefalls had no economic value in society. We were rebels from the consumer culture.”⁸⁹

Few Americans before the 1950s had climbed on a full-time basis. No one was paying Powell to do so. His choice to lead a hand-to-mouth existence in support of a full-time commitment to the climbing life became the hallmark of what came to be called “dirtbag climbers”—a name that, depending on point of view, could be an insult or an honorific.⁹⁰ The dirtbag climber lived to climb, scorned respectability, scrounged for meals, bathed infrequently.

The original dirtbag climber, it has been said, was Fred Beckey, but he was essentially a loner who moved around a lot, rarely staying in one place longer than it took to pull off a first ascent or two. The climbers of Yosemite stayed put long enough to form a kind of dirtbag community.⁹¹

Another characteristic of the dirtbag climber was that the species was largely male. The women who showed up in Camp 4 usually did so in the capacity of girlfriend—unlike the Sierra Club RCS in the 1930s, in which women were well integrated, and the Stanford Alpine Club, which in the course of the 1940s and 1950s produced some outstanding female climbers. There were few married Camp 4 climbers, and those who did attempt matrimony were soon divorced.⁹²

Camp 4 was for men, a few of them straight arrows in outlook and behavior, but a larger contingent cultivating an air of the rowdy and the disreputable. Somehow, it all paid off in climbing accomplishments. Constant climbing through the warmer months in the valley meant that Camp 4 pioneers built the strength and skills to push rock-climbing to a new level, far above those of most of the “weekenders” from the Sierra Club and the university climbing clubs who they looked down upon—although in the mid-1950s some of the latter, like the SAC’s Tom Frost, were every bit as competitive and skilled as the Camp 4 denizens.⁹³

From the late 1940s through the mid-1960s, park rangers in Yosemite maintained a sign-out system, requiring climbing parties to be approved before heading to the cliffs. The RCS and SAC provided the Park Service with lists of members they regarded as “qualified leaders,” and rangers would check the lists to make sure that parties of climbers were accompanied by one so designated. As Joseph Taylor notes in his history of valley climbing, the RCS thus “became the de facto gatekeeper to Yosemite.”⁹⁴

Most of the original Camp 4 climbers, in their younger pre-Yosemite days, had picked up the essentials of their craft in one Sierra Club chapter or another, and could thus pass as officially qualified climbers. Most, but not all. As with the two-week camping limit, the rules could be bent, and Camp 4 climbers who came from outside the club system climbed anyway, despite the lack of formal affiliation.⁹⁵

If the golden age of Yosemite climbing began with John Salathé in the late 1940s, it was refined into its purest form in the late 1950s and early 1960s.⁹⁶ While scores of climbers made their own contribution to that moment, three of them—Warren Harding, Yvon Chouinard, and Royal Robbins—emerged as the era's representative figures.

Warren Harding was simultaneously the old man and the bad boy of the golden age. Born in 1924 in Oakland, California, he worked as a propeller mechanic in Sacramento during the war (a heart murmur kept him out of the military but didn't impinge on his later climbing exploits). After the war he supported himself as a surveyor with the California Department of Highways and was proud to carry a union card. He began climbing in the late 1940s, inspired by Ullman's *The White Tower*, tackling conventional routes on mountain peaks in the southern Sierra. Not until 1953, at age twenty-nine, did he finally find his way to Yosemite.

Within a year he was making first ascents in the valley, eventually adding up to more than two dozen all told. Like many climbers new to Yosemite, he also repeated the now-classic Salathé routes, including a second ascent of Lost Arrow Chimney, adding a variation near the top immortalized as the Harding Hole.

Short and wiry, known to friends as "Batso" for hanging on to sheer rock like a bat, Harding was ambitious and fearless. He was equally legendary for his lifestyle (the purple Jaguar that he raced between the Bay Area and Yosemite, the jugs of cheap red wine that he constantly swigged, the beautiful girlfriends who shared his tent). Steve Roper was a novice teenage climber when he first encountered Harding in Yosemite Valley in 1957. Harding struck an awed Roper as "a handsome, devilish fellow" far removed from the traditional-minded Sierra Club climbers that Roper had grown up around, "staid folks who would never have dreamed of wheeling up to a rock with a sports car and a jug and a flashy dame."⁹⁷

No one would confuse Harding for a role model or mentor along the lines of a Robert Underhill or Brad Washburn. Nonetheless, he was responsible for pushing a number of aspiring Yosemite climbers to tackle some very hard climbs. He was not particular about his partners, casually picking them from among whoever was available in Camp 4. As Glen

Denny, who arrived at Camp 4, at age nineteen, in the summer of 1958 recalled:

I was a rank beginner and Warren was introducing me to 5th class [protected] climbing. After I followed the first pitch he asked if I liked it. I said yes. Unfortunately, he suggested I take the next lead and offered me the sling of hardware. I had never placed a piton, but I didn't want to tell Warren because this seemed like my big chance. I struggled up the pitch, hammering in three pitons for protection. The first one seemed good, the next two didn't. On a delicate traverse my worn-out hiking boots slipped off the small holds and I plummeted toward the ground. On the way down I felt the first two pitons pull out. The last one held, and Warren stopped me a few feet above the ground.⁹⁸

After that rough initiation, Denny became the unofficial photographer of record for Camp 4 and its resident climbers, as well as achieving a number of classic first ascents in Yosemite, and elsewhere in the world.⁹⁹

Yvon Chouinard moved to southern California with his family at age seven. He was born in 1938 in Maine, the son of French Canadian immigrants, like his fellow New Englander Jack Kerouac. And, like Kerouac, he did not learn to speak English until he attended public school, in his case in Burbank, California, which gave him a sense, as he told an interviewer years later "of how Puerto Ricans and Chicanos feel about going to an English-speaking school."¹⁰⁰

Chouinard's sense of outsider status was common to many leading climbers of the golden age in Yosemite. Before he became a climber, he developed a fascination for another outdoor avocation, falconry. Which, by an indirect route, led him to rock faces, because he would rappel down the cliffs where falcons made their nests to tag the chicks for a government study. After a while, instead of rappelling down, he began to climb up to the nests.

Chouinard took up with the Rock Climbing Section of the Los Angeles chapter of the Sierra Club, and went on its excursions to Tahquitz Rock



Glen Denny photograph of Tom Frost (left) and Yvon Chouinard in Camp 4, 1969.

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where, among others, he met Mark Powell, not yet in residence at Camp 4. And then he began going farther afield; at sixteen he soloed a new route up the west face of 13,804-foot Gannett Peak, the highest mountain in Wyoming. From there he moved on to the Tetons, where, over the next several summers, he began to live the life of a dirtbag climber.

In the 1950s the Tetons developed its own version of Yosemite's Camp 4, an abandoned Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp at the south end of Jenny Lake, popularly known as the "C-Camp." Chouinard learned to eat squirrel meat, porcupine, and wild grouse on those summer climbing trips. As another C-Camp veteran, John Gill, remembered: Chouinard "was living on ten cents a day [while] I was luxuriating with fifty cents a day."¹⁰¹

Chouinard decided at age eighteen to find a way to make a living related

to his climbing interests. With money lent by his parents, he established a small business called Chouinard Equipment (which, a decade and a half later, spun off the outdoor clothing behemoth Patagonia). As he recalled of the humble origins of his company:

In 1957, when I started my equipment business, Salathé had almost quit climbing, and his pitons were not available anyway. So I bought myself a little hand forge—a coal forge—and an anvil and some hammers and some tongs. I got some books and learned blacksmithing, and started making pitons out of chromolybdenum steel. All my machinery was portable, so I just loaded it all in my car and made the stuff wherever I was. I'd sell it directly to climbers.¹⁰²

Chouinard's artisanal pitons were five times the cost of the European ones available at the time, but since they were made of hard steel and could be reused, they were the better bargain. Within a year he branched out to manufacturing aluminum carabiners, soon supplanting Raffi Bedayn as the supplier of choice for that item. Yosemite climbers were eager to purchase Chouinard equipment, and by the late 1950s, when he wasn't surfing or visiting other climbing centers, Yvon Chouinard was a regular at Camp 4.¹⁰³

Royal Robbins was introduced to climbing in southern California by his scout troop in the late 1940s. Born in 1935, he grew up in Los Angeles as a loner, from a difficult family background, occasionally in trouble with the law, and a high school dropout by age sixteen. Climbing was his salvation, and he made it his cause. Inspired by Ullman's *High Conquest*, he found his way to the Sierra Club's Rock Climbing Section in 1950 and honed his skills at Tahquitz Rock, where, in 1954, he met Warren Harding. "I could see that Harding felt about climbing the way I did," Robbins recalled: "It wasn't a pastime, it was a lifetime."¹⁰⁴

In the early 1950s, Robbins was mentored by southern California rock-climbing stalwarts John Mendenhall and Chuck Wilts.¹⁰⁵ Mendenhall and Wilts taught Robbins valuable lessons in rope and piton technique, but he soon found himself chafing at the conservative climbing

style and techniques favored by the RCS leaders. "It was simply that we brought a different attitude to the game," he recalled. "We had faith in our equipment and we were up there willing to fall."¹⁰⁶ His elders, in turn, were appalled by his rashness. "He'll be a great climber," one observed sourly, "if he lives past 20."¹⁰⁷

Still a teenager, Robbins had indeed established an impressive climbing record, including the first free ascent of a difficult corner route on Tahquitz called Open Book, along with climbing partner Don Wilson. In his first big-wall achievement, Robbins made the second ascent of Salathé and Steck's route on Yosemite's Sentinel Rock, along with Wilson and Jerry Gallwas. Planning on taking five days for the climb, the three young climbers blazed up the route in just two.¹⁰⁸

The climb that marked the beginning of this latest golden age came in 1957, on the northwest face of Half Dome, among the best-known and most distinctive formations in the valley, presenting would-be climbers with the prospect of scaling nearly 2,000 feet of sheer, steep granite to reach the summit.

In John Muir's writings, Yosemite's pillars and domes took on living and endearing qualities, "dear friends" that "seemed to have warm blood gushing through their granite veins."¹⁰⁹ But then Muir never contemplated climbing the intimidating northwest face of his old friend "Tissiack" (the Indian name for Half Dome, meaning "cleft rock"). He reached the summit of Half Dome by the tamer cable route laid out in 1875 on the east slope.

For Camp 4 residents contemplating the next great problem in Yosemite climbing, thoughts of "warm blood gushing" on the great rock face were not so comforting; it would be their blood, not Tissiack's, if anything went wrong. There were only two routes to Half Dome's summit in the mid-1950s: the cable route and Salathé's 1946 route on the southwest face. The latter had represented a significant advance in climbing technique, the first demonstration of the utility of Salathé's hard alloy pitons, but the rounded southwest face involved less than half the 2,000-foot altitude gain of the sheer and vertical northwest face. A reconnaissance of the northwest face in 1954 had made it less than 200 feet up from the base,

and an attempt by Royal Robbins, Warren Harding, Jerry Gallwas, and Don Wilson in 1955 stopped 1,500 feet short of the summit.

Robbins and Gallwas were back in June 1957, this time joined by Michael Sherrick; all three were southern Californians who had learned their rock-climbing on Tahquitz granite. Robbins and Harding had originally planned to join forces in a renewed assault on Half Dome, but for whatever reason, perhaps an emerging personal rivalry, that collaboration faltered. Harding, Mark Powell, and Bill Feuerer had separately planned their own attempt on Half Dome for that summer, but they were beaten to the punch by Robbins's party.¹¹⁰

It was not a climb to undertake lightly. "We feared the enormity of the wall," Robbins recalled. "We were awestruck by it—and we were very aware that no one had ever ventured a wall so steep and so vast."¹¹¹

Robbins set the pace and, more important, the style for the climb. Style was a concept much on the minds of Yosemite climbers in the 1950s and 1960s. Getting to the top was a question subordinate to how one reached that goal. New techniques and equipment threatened to drain the adventure and uncertainty from climbing. To restore the challenge, Robbins determined that his party would attempt to make the climb in one nearly continuous push. They would use pitons and bolts (Gallwas forged some specially designed extra-wide chrome-molybdenum horizontal pitons for the wide cracks they had spotted from the ground), but only within limits; they had no intention of nailing their way up the face. Robbins wished make a statement about the ethics of big-wall climbing, what might be called an aesthetic of restraint.¹¹²

They set out on the afternoon of June 23, making 150 feet that day, placing a fixed rope to descend to the base to spend the night. On the morning of June 24, they returned to their high point from the previous day, with no intent of departing from their vertical perches again until they reached the summit. They made rapid progress up the section that Robbins and Gallwas were already familiar with from their 1955 attempt. For the next four days they worked their way up tiny crack systems and the occasional chimney, placing pitons and expansion bolts for protection and aid, catching what sleep they could while hunched up on small ledges.

Key to the climb was surmounting a large blank section about half-way up, which they encountered on the afternoon of the second day. Robbins spotted a chimney system to the right that bypassed the blank wall and that he hoped might provide access to the summit. But how to get there? Natural traverses are not a feature of Yosemite granite; routes tend to go up, rather than sideways. Robbins got across the blank space with a pendulum maneuver, swinging from his bolted pivot point far enough to grab a ledge on the other end, thereafter known as the Robbins Traverse. By June 26 they were three-quarters of the way to the summit, at 1,500 feet.

They sought to climb safely (they left a rope stretched across the Robbins Traverse in the event they would need to retreat) but were not averse to risk. They knew that if one of their party was injured, it might be difficult, if not impossible, to get him safely off the wall. So they were committed to getting up and over. At two points the climbers had to trust that flakes (semidetached rocks protruding from the rock wall) would hold their weight. Undercling Flake (named for the climbing technique Robbins used to work his way to its top) and Psych Flake (named for more obvious reasons) held for them, but in later years, both detached and fell to the base, fortunately in neither case with a climber clinging to them.¹¹³

As on so many Yosemite climbs over the preceding decade, heat and thirst were as much the climbers' adversaries as the unrelentingly steep rock face. By the fourth day they were suffering from lack of food, water, and sleep. Above them they could see an overhanging ceiling, dubbed the Visor, which they dreaded tackling. But, unexpectedly, on the fifth day they came upon a ledge (thereafter "Thank God Ledge") that led to a vertical crack, taking them to another ledge, around the overhang, and leaving two easy pitches to the summit. They stepped out on top of Half Dome shortly before sunset. They could now view Tissiack with the same detached benevolence that John Muir had decades before. Sherrick concluded his report for the *American Alpine Journal*:

Some have said that we did the "impossible," and it is unfortunate that for decades the word *impossible* has been such a

common term in the mountaineers' vocabulary, being applied to that part of a mountain which presents an extreme in difficulty usually too demanding for the equipment and technique of the day. But improvements in technique and equipment just keep on happening.¹¹⁴

In the years that followed, when more than a dozen new routes were put up the northwest face (two by Robbins), the original route took on the humdrum name of the "Regular Northwest Face of Half Dome," commonly climbed in two days, sometimes in under two hours.¹¹⁵

The climb attracted little public attention, but other climbers knew what had been accomplished. Warren Harding was on the summit to greet Robbins and his comrades as they topped out, bringing them sandwiches and, even more welcome, a gallon of water (their own supply was down to a few ounces). It was a gracious gesture. It was also prelude to an attempt to solve whatever it was that Harding decided would be the next great problem in Yosemite climbing. "Warren was a serious competitor," Robbins remembered thinking, "and as I watched him start down the cables, I wondered what he would attempt next."¹¹⁶

For Harding, there was no doubt that the only prize left in the valley equivalent to Robbins's success on the northwest face of Half Dome was the first ascent of El Capitan.¹¹⁷ Named by the Mariposa Battalion when they stumbled into Yosemite in 1851, the valley's preeminent granite monolith a century later had become known familiarly to local climbers as "El Cap." Nearly 2,900 feet high, its summit was reachable by trail from the valley rim, but it had never been climbed by its faces. Even in a region where glaciers had polished away most protuberances on rock walls, El Cap offered a particularly unpromising prospect to would-be climbers. Steve Roper once commented that "the cliff face looks scrubbed, as if cleansed daily by the gods."¹¹⁸

A few days after Robbins, Gallwas, and Sherrick's victory on Half Dome, the rival trio of Harding, Mark Powell, and Bill "Dolt" Feuerer studied El Capitan from the valley floor, lying on their backs and passing a pair of binoculars among them.¹¹⁹ After considering various routes, they

settled on one that ran up the south buttress where El Cap's two great rock faces, the southwest and the southeast, came together. In a few years that line came to be called the Nose.

There were, they could see, crack systems along the way, if by no means continuous—some to one side, some to the other side of the buttress. If they could be linked, by pendulum swing, or by bolting the blank spaces, they might provide a way to the top. And there were also some small ledges that potentially could be used for bivouacs. And the route just looked good to the three climbers. As Harding recalled: "We chose the Nose as much for its aesthetic appeal as for its practical features."¹²⁰

But they knew they couldn't climb it in the continuous upward push that had characterized the great Yosemite climbs of the past decade, from the five days that Salathé and Steck had spent on the Sentinel in 1950 to the recent five-day ascent of Half Dome by Robbins, Gallwas, and Sherrick. Of necessity, they would need to apply and adapt some of the tactics of the great Himalayan expeditions to big-wall climbing. As Harding recorded:

We agreed unanimously that the only feasible plan of attack would be to establish a succession of camps up the face, linking them with fixed ropes. Supplies would be hauled up from the ground as needed. . . . Our technique was similar to that used in ascending high mountains, with prusiking and rappelling gear replacing ice axe and crampons as aids for climbing, and winch and hauling lines instead of Sherpas.¹²¹

The fixed lines they placed and left on El Cap's granite rib served a dual function: a way to move supplies up the route, and a way to move climbers off the route (both for rest and refitting below or, in the event of mishap, rescue). They expected to make no more than 100–200 feet a day, which, given the 2,900 feet in elevation they needed to gain, meant that the climb would take weeks, not days.

Since the 1930s, climbs on Yosemite Valley walls had attracted spectators—but usually only a few close friends and fellow climbers. First ascents were written up—but usually only in the pages of the *Sierra Club*

Bulletin. This time, because of the duration of the climb, the permanently dangling fixed ropes, and the physical and symbolic prominence of El Capitan, Harding and his party were going to attract the attention of nonclimbers visiting the valley, as well as the national media.

On July 4, 1957, Harding, Powell, and Feuerer began their climb. For the first three days they worked their way up toward a wide ledge they had spotted from below, dubbed Sickle Ledge, about 550 feet up the face. They used nylon ropes for climbing and, initially, as shuttle lines from their high point to the ground (the fixed lines were later replaced with manila rope). Each night they rappelled down to the valley floor. Once they reached Sickle Ledge, they ferried supplies up to establish a camp (the equivalent of Camp 1 in Himalayan terms). They spent the next four nights bivouacked on the ledge as they worked their way progressively higher on the stretch of wall above them, using direct aid for most of the climbing.

They reached another feature they had spotted from the ground, 300 or so feet of rock face lined by cracks too wide to hold conventional pitons. Here they protected themselves with an unusual piece of mountain gear: three 9-inch-long metal stove legs scrounged from a dump, each retrofitted with a hole and a ring to which a carabiner could be clipped.¹²² They supplemented their pitons and stove legs by drilling holes for expansion bolts.

By their seventh day on the Nose, July 11, they were a third of the way up, over a thousand feet above the ground. But their stove leg pitons were bent out of shape and no longer of any use, and they retreated to the base of El Cap. There they discovered that the gawking crowds gathered to watch their progress from below were creating traffic jams on the valley floor. At the request of the park rangers, the climbers agreed to postpone the remainder of the climb until after Labor Day. They left their manila lines fixed in place.¹²³

Before they could resume the climb, Powell had to drop out because of a climbing accident in September that left him with a dislocated ankle and a lifelong limp, although he returned for a brief stint on El Cap in the spring, and he continued to add to his list of first ascents into the 1960s.¹²⁴

Harding recruited two others, Allen Steck and Wally Reed, to join the team. He also extended an invitation to Royal Robbins, but Robbins wasn't interested in an extended siege operation and declined. The turnover in personnel was one way in which siege climbing in Yosemite differed from its counterpart in the Himalaya. Before the El Cap ascent was over, eight climbers had taken part; Harding was the only one continuously involved.

They resumed the climb on Thanksgiving, with a turkey dinner hauled up to Sickle Ledge. The next four days of climbing brought them to 1,200 feet. After that they took a four-month winter break. One disadvantage of the prolonged siege was that the fixed manila ropes began to rot from exposure to sun, rain, and ice, requiring Harding and Feuerer to replace them in March with more durable and expensive nylon ropes. In another innovation, the climbers experimented with winching supplies up the route in the "Dolt Cart," a bicycle-wheel-mounted wagon that Feuerer had constructed over the winter (rather than the traditional and exhausting alternative of pulling up a rope tied to a bag of supplies), but the Dolt Cart displayed an unfortunate propensity to flip over.

There were additional changes in personnel as Powell re-joined the group and Steck dropped out, followed by Feuerer later that spring. When the summer of 1958 rolled around, they were again banned from climbing by Ranger edict. Harding went off to try a new route on the east face of Washington Column, leaving El Cap unfinished but festooned with fixed ropes.¹²⁵

The weekend after Labor Day 1958, Harding, with an entirely new team apart from Powell, resumed work on the Nose of El Cap.¹²⁶ Progress was slow. Harding rethought the upper route. Ropes had to be reset, supplies ferried, and Powell, still ailing, dropped out for the second and final time. By that point they had reached about 1,900 feet, which left another 1,000. Park rangers, who had come to regard Harding and his fellow climbers as a problem second only to the foraging bears, now gave them a final deadline: they had to be finished by Thanksgiving. (Harding wasn't overly concerned; after all, once they were on the wall, there was not much the NPS could do to get them off.)

The final push began on November 1, the party now consisting of

Harding, Rich Calderwood, Wayne Merry, and George Whitmore. Progress was slow, the exposure unsettling (Calderwood, just twenty-one years old and with a pregnant wife at home, soon bailed.) The days were short, and toward the end they endured sleet and snowstorms. Still, by November 11 they were within 120 feet of the summit, where friends awaited, shouting down encouragement.

At dusk on the evening of November 11, Harding set off in the lead, and throughout the night he hammered his way up the remaining stretch of overhanging rock. And at 6:00 on the morning of November 12, fourteen hours and twenty-eight bolts later, he pulled himself up on the summit, his two companions following shortly thereafter. "Long, sustained, and flawless," as a recent guide to Yosemite big walls concluded, the Nose is probably "the best rock climb in the world; it is certainly the best known."¹²⁷

There were banner headlines in the Bay Area newspapers, a *Life* magazine reporter took photos of the victorious climbers (though they were never used), and Harding published accounts in both the *American Alpine Journal* and the men's magazine *Argosy* (the latter in collaboration with Merry) about the climb. All told, Harding and his various companions had spent forty-five days on the climb over a year and a half. Harding estimated that he had placed 675 pitons and 125 expansion bolts, 90 percent of which were for direct aid.¹²⁸

Both the extent of the rock-engineering and the resulting publicity proved controversial. Conrad Wirth, director of the National Park Service, grumbled about "stunt" climbers "hoping to be able to commercialize on what they accomplish," and some Yosemite climbers agreed.¹²⁹ Because Harding was first over the top and alone was involved from start to finish, it was remembered as his climb, although he had traded off leads with Powell in the early days and with Merry in the concluding push. He also won an unshakable reputation as a showboat, even though he had not pursued the publicity that the climb attracted, whereas previous climbers, from Dave Brower on Shiprock to Charlie Houston and Bob Bates on K2, had sold stories to popular magazines about their experiences.

THE GUNKS

Developments in the climbing culture of Yosemite had parallels elsewhere in the United States: in the Jenny Lake climbing camp in the Tetons; in Eldorado Canyon south of Boulder, Colorado; and in New York's Shawangunks. The latter is a high ridgeline 10 miles in length, rising west of the Hudson River near the college town of New Paltz, and running in a southwest–northeast direction.

The Gunks, as they came to be known in the 1950s, lie 90 miles north of New York City and, with the opening of the New York State Thruway in the mid-1950s, were an easy drive for city climbers. They are sometimes referred to as Yosemite East, although bearing little physical resemblance to their California counterpart. The Gunks feature cliffs a few hundred feet high rather than the 2,000- to 3,000-foot faces of Yosemite, marked by horizontal- rather than vertical-crack systems.¹³⁰ But if there was no need for the multiday big-wall epics of Yosemite, the Shawangunk cliffs are still steep, frequently overhung near the top, technically challenging, and sometimes fatal to those who climb them.¹³¹

The Gunks, which were on private land at the time (now a mixture of private and public lands), were discovered as a climbing site by Fritz Wiessner in 1935, and Wiessner and his fellow immigrant Hans Kraus put up most of the original and most daring routes.¹³² (Kraus, born in Trieste, came of age and was educated as a doctor in Vienna. He fled Austria following the Nazi seizure of power in that country in 1938, settling in New York. Apart from his climbing achievements, he was a pioneer in sports medicine and is best remembered for having consulted with John F. Kennedy in the White House about the president's perennial back problems.)¹³³

Where Wiessner and Kraus pioneered, others followed, many of them members of the New York City chapter of the Appalachian Mountain Club. Like the Sierrans in Yosemite, the New York Appies came to regard the Gunks with proprietary affection, and they sought to maintain control over who climbed there and how they climbed. And, as in Yosemite Valley, in the course of the 1950s that attitude led to generational conflict.¹³⁴

Among the leading figures in the Gunks in the 1950s, and by the early 1960s among the best climbers in the Northeast, was James P. McCarthy, who made his first visit to the cliffs in 1951 as an inexperienced member of the newly founded Princeton Mountaineering Club. Wiessner by this point had moved to Stowe, Vermont, leaving Kraus as the main influence over younger Gunk climbers like McCarthy. Under Kraus's tutelage, McCarthy began putting up tough new routes of his own, and free-climbing many routes that had previously required direct aid.¹³⁵

In 1958, McCarthy was featured on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* (the magazine's first ever climbing cover) putting up a route known as "Foops" on an impossible-looking overhang in the Shawangunks. As the magazine explained to readers more accustomed to reading about team sports:

This overhang presents the sort of problem any advanced climber might face on any number of imposing mountains around the world. This particular overhang, however, is merely an unusually tough formation McCarthy found in the old, worn-down Shawangunk Mountains near his home. McCarthy spends many weekends in this area hunting out interesting problems that help keep him fit for the tougher tests he gets during the summers climbing the Dolomites, the French Alps and the Rockies. "Any hard climb anywhere," McCarthy points out, "is preparation, and even in such small mountains it is an end in itself, enjoyable for its own sake."¹³⁶

In a few years McCarthy would be putting up new big-wall routes in Canada, in the company of Yosemite veterans like Royal Robbins, Layton Kor, and Dick McCracken, and a few years after that he would be setting a new standard in eastern ice-climbing in the company of Yvon Chouinard. But in some ways, McCarthy's career as a climber followed an older model, very different from the Yosemite style. He was not an Appie (a genteel weekend climber), but he was also not a dirtbag climber in the emerging Yosemite model. A successful professional lawyer in New York City, McCarthy was also much more organizationally minded than the

Camp 4 crew, eventually serving as president of the American Alpine Club.¹³⁷

In the first decade or so of climbing in the Shawangunks, a Saturday might see a dozen climbers making their way up the cliffs. By the time McCarthy appeared on the *Sports Illustrated* cover, those numbers had grown to a couple of hundred weekend visitors, including members of the Canadian Alpine Club, along with various university mountaineering clubs. But the Appies still held sway, and they assumed, as the Sierra Club had in Yosemite, that they should set the rules governing who climbed and how.

The AMC maintained a registration system for climbers, assigned them to rope teams for designated routes, and determined the qualifications of prospective climb leaders. A “Safety Code” distributed by the AMC to would-be Gunks climbers in the 1950s proclaimed: “Climb only with a recognized mountaineering organization of conservative tradition.”¹³⁸ But the self-satisfied conservative tradition of the Appies was about to be challenged.

It first was questioned from within the AMC itself, by a group of young turks tired of being told by their elders what they could or could not climb, reinforced in their defiance by the small circle of climbers around Hans Kraus, who knew themselves to be far superior climbers to the Appie leaders and disliked all the red tape. The dissidents were, however, a kind of loyal opposition, socially and culturally still much a part of the AMC establishment.¹³⁹

The roughnecks who began to show up in the later 1950s did not share such allegiance to the AMC. In 1957, a local carpenter named Dave Craft came to the Gunks for the first time and, under AMC tutelage, learned to climb. The following year, two undergraduate members of the outing club at the City College of New York—Roman Sadowy and Claude Suhl—arrived on the scene and also learned to climb with the AMC. Others who did not fit the traditional Appie model soon followed. Art Gran, although an Appie himself, was growing disillusioned with the AMC’s elaborate training program and rules. He started climbing on his own off-season, when most Appies weren’t around, and formed a close

relationship with the newcomers from City College and other outsiders, who for a while were known as "Art's boys." As Gran recalled:

When we climbed together, we did not do so as part of the AMC trip; this more or less started the growth of the independent movement, and it soon mushroomed to gigantic proportions.¹⁴⁰

The "independent movement" could be distinguished by climbing style (much more daring than Appie orthodoxy allowed), social origins (working-class rather than middle-class professional), and dress (early beatnik versus the Appie preference for twee alpine accessories like patterned sweaters). The Appies couldn't stand the independents and labeled them "vulgar." Unperturbed, the reprobate independents started calling themselves "Vulgarians." They had youth, and soon numbers, on their side, outnumbering the Appies by the early 1960s. The premier chroniclers of New England and New York mountaineering, Guy and Laura Waterman, noted:

The Vulgarians worked hard at becoming one of the more colorful circles that ever whirled through the northeastern climbing orbit. Brash, boisterous, and ever eager to shock, they exalted bad manners to the level of an art form. They held wild parties . . . , climbed nude . . . , invaded Appie campgrounds with their all-night orgies [and] urinated off the roof on Appies as they emerged from a local restaurant. They also did superb climbing.¹⁴¹

By the early 1960s, the AMC's credibility and authority as gatekeepers to the Gunks had been demolished, along with any attempt to regulate who climbed there or how—part of the national trend in which the premier outdoors clubs steadily lost their influence over the future of American climbing.

THE YOSEMITE WAY OF LIFE, 1959–1963

In September 1961, Royal Robbins, Tom Frost, and Chuck Pratt put up the second route on El Capitan (the first being Warren Harding's epic 1957–58 ascent of the "Nose"). The new route ran up the southwest face, also known as the Salathé Wall. Robbins, Frost, and Pratt fixed ropes on the lower 800 feet of the route, returned to the ground to ferry more supplies to their high point (siege style), but climbed the last 2,000 feet alpine style in one continuous six-day push.

The total climb took nine and a half days spread out over two weeks in September. They used pitons for protection and direct aid, but, as Robbins preferred, placed a minimum of bolts, thirteen in total, and all on the lower, fixed-rope portion of the climb. It was, in the opinion of Camp 4 regulars like Steve Roper and Yvon Chouinard, among the greatest rock climbs ever done. The *American Alpine Journal* devoted four sentences to it.¹⁴²

In the 1950s and early 1960s, the American Alpine Club counted few adherents among Yosemite climbers (or younger rock-climbers in general, and particularly younger climbers in the western states). "We were used to being ignored by the American Alpine Club," Royal Robbins recalled in the early 1970s. "It didn't bother us. I was once asked to join but I didn't see the point of it."¹⁴³

Before the term "generation gap" became popular, AAC leaders were becoming aware of the split between young climbers and their elders. In February 1961, Nick Clinch, recently returned from leading the first ascent of Masherbrum in the Himalaya, and an AAC officer, wrote to club president Bob Bates to report on a meeting he had attended at the University of Colorado in Boulder:

The talk centered around the American Alpine Club.... The young climbers seem to feel that a large number of AAC members are antagonistic to the type of climbing that they do. I explained that the club was composed of many different types of mountaineers but that we did not disapprove of difficult rock climbing—most of

the club members did rock climbing of a high standard for their day. However, rock climbing was not an end in itself. This has always been the main breach between the AAC and younger climbers.¹⁴⁴

Within a few years of the Salathé Wall ascent, the AAC started making a determined effort to reach out to younger climbers in Yosemite and elsewhere. One reflection of the change could be seen in 1963 in the *American Alpine Journal*, which ran four articles about Yosemite climbing in a single issue. Of the four, the one that drew the most notice was by Yvon Chouinard, entitled “Modern Yosemite Climbing.” Chouinard began with a bold assertion:

Yosemite climbing is the least known and understood and yet one of the most important schools of rock climbing in the world today. Its philosophies, equipment and techniques have been developed almost independently of the rest of the climbing world. In the short period of thirty years, it has achieved a standard of safety, difficulty and technique comparable to the best European schools.¹⁴⁵

In the pages that followed, Chouinard offered a highly technical account of what made climbing Yosemite’s vertical granite crack systems unique, in terms of both the evolution of technique and ethics. But he also talked more generally about the community of climbers that had gathered in the valley. Toward the end he described the “strange, passionate love” that he felt for climbing in Yosemite, and concluded: “More than just a climbing area, it is a way of life.”

The half decade between Harding’s ascent of the Nose and the appearance of Chouinard’s article had been crowded and intense years for the Camp 4 regulars, full of achievements—and controversies. To mention just a few highlights:

In April 1960, Yvon Chouinard and Tom Frost tried out a new climbing device that Chouinard had just invented and given the whimsical name “Realized Ultimate Reality Piton,” or RURP, a razor blade-sized, wedge-shaped piton that proved capable of holding the weight of a climber

when inserted into a hairline crack on an otherwise smooth granite face. They used the RURPs in making the first ascent of the southwest side of Kat Pinnacle, a steep, blank pillar just outside the valley. Every move up the pinnacle required direct aid and, until the invention of the RURP, would have been impossible to contemplate without drilling bolts into the rock.¹⁴⁶

In September 1960, Robbins, Chuck Pratt, Joe Fitchen, and Tom Frost repeated the Nose route on El Capitan in seven days—three days faster than planned, and weeks faster than the first ascent. Even more important, they used no fixed ropes, but climbed alpine style.¹⁴⁷ This was a committing climb; no umbilical cord linked them to the ground.

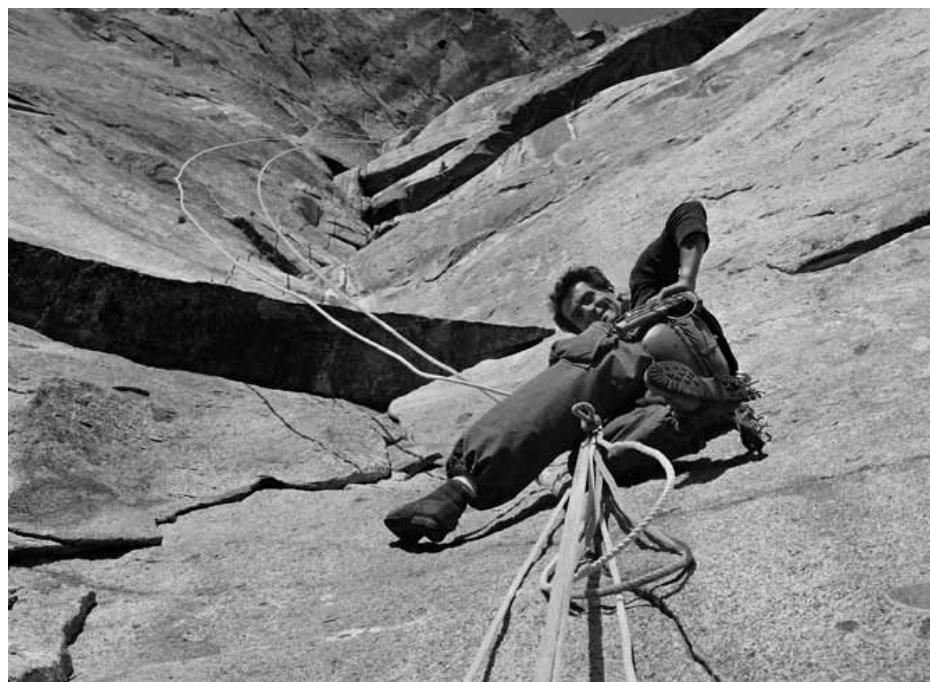
The climb deepened the Robbins-Harding rivalry and sealed the fate of fixed-rope siege climbing in the valley (which even Harding soon abandoned). As Robbins wrote a few years later in the pages of the *American Alpine Journal*: “Siege climbing makes success certain, thus depriving alpinism of one of its most important elements: adventure. What fun is there in a game when the odds are a hundred to one in your favor?”¹⁴⁸ However, there is no doubt that the Robbins party benefited from the bolts that Harding had fixed on the route in his original siege of 1957–58.¹⁴⁹

In March 1961, Chouinard published an opinion piece in the influential climbing magazine *Summit*, attacking the use of bolts in climbing. “The main objection to bolts,” he wrote,

is that they permanently mar the beauty of the rock. Bolts also enable inexperienced and unqualified persons to climb difficult routes with comparative ease. Bolts are often a means for making up for inexperience and inadequacies, and I like to think that not every route is for every climber.¹⁵⁰

The bolt controversy spread from the pages of *Summit* to the walls of Yosemite, where critics of bolting began “chopping” (removing) bolts they considered unnecessary for either protection or direct aid.¹⁵¹

In October 1961, immediately following the Robbins-Frost-Pratt ascent of the Salathé Wall, Harding, Glen Denny, and Al Macdonald



Glen Denny's photo of Warren Harding on the first ascent of the west face of the Leaning Tower.

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climbed the severely overhanging west face of the Leaning Tower in Yosemite in an eighteen-day siege effort in which, demonstrating what Harding thought of Chouinard's *Summit* manifesto, he placed more than a hundred bolts. Harding would not be intimidated by the self-righteous critics whom he later dismissed as "Valley Christians."¹⁵²

Two years later, in October 1963, Chouinard, in his first attempt on El Capitan, joined three veteran El Cap climbers—Frost, Pratt, and Robbins—to attempt a first ascent of the monolith's southeast face, the greatest unclimbed rock wall remaining in the valley, also known as the North America Wall (so named for a patch of black diorite in its center, surrounded by white granite, with a vague resemblance to a map of North America).

For six days they climbed in brutal heat; then it began to rain; then it began to snow. Ice water ran down their arms and legs as they hammered



Glen Denny photograph of Royal Robbins (left) and Tom Frost on the North America Wall of El Capitan.

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in their pitons and drilled holes for a minimum number of bolts (thirty-eight). Finally, on the last day, the sun came out again. Under a deep-blue sky they admired the view from their bivouac ledge. It was Halloween day. Six hours later they had, as Robbins recorded, “overcome the last problems and shook hands on top, happy as pagans.”¹⁵³

The happy pagans were beginning to bring Yosemite-style technique to other walls. At the conclusion of his *American Alpine Journal* article on modern Yosemite climbing, Chouinard predicted that Yosemite would prove to be the training ground for a “new generation of super alpinists who will venture forth to the high mountains of the world to do the most esthetic and difficult walls on the face of the earth.”¹⁵⁴

By the time Chouinard’s article appeared, Yosemite climbers had already established an impressive record of first ascents outside the valley. Don Wilson, Mark Powell, and Jerry Gallwas explored the possibilities

for climbing sandstone needles in the American Southwest, achieving a first ascent in September 1956 of Cleopatra's Needle, in the Valley of Thundering Water, New Mexico. Wilson, Powell, and Gallwas were joined by "Dolt" Feuerer in the first ascent of the Totem Pole in Arizona's Monument Valley in June 1957.¹⁵⁵

In August 1960, David Rearick and Bob Kamps made the first ascent of the Diamond, the sheer and distinctively shaped upper half of the nearly 2,000-foot east face of Colorado's Longs Peak. Previously, climbs on the route had been banned, but the National Park Service gave Rearick and Kamps permission to try it. Following a Yosemite-like vertical-crack system through the middle of the Diamond, they took three days to reached the summit.

Unlike Yosemite, the climb combined high exposure with high altitude, with the last 250 feet to the summit over 14,000 feet. The lifting of the ban on attempts on the Diamond proved a significant victory for American mountaineers; thereafter, there were few Park Service edicts against climbing on particular mountains or routes, except to protect endangered species or archaeological sites.¹⁵⁶

Venturing farther afield, Royal Robbins and Gary Hemming put up the American Direct route on the west face of the Petit Dru (part of the Mont Blanc massif in Chamonix, France) in 1962, the most difficult route yet on a rock formation where the cream of European alpinists, including Walter Bonatti, had preceded them. Robbins was back in 1965 with John Harlin to put up another route on the Petit Dru's west face, the American Direttissima. (The following year Harlin, who in 1962 had been the first American to climb the North Face of the Eiger, died in an attempt to put up a direct route in winter on the same face.)¹⁵⁷

And in 1963, Robbins, Layton Kor, Jim McCarthy, and Dick McCracken headed to the Canadian backcountry to make the first ascent of the south-east face of 8,563-foot Mount Proboscis in the Logan Mountains of the Northwest Territories.¹⁵⁸

By 1963, Yosemite's place in the firmament of world-class climbing was well established. Camp 4 would pass into legend. As Steve Roper

recalled of the golden age: "Chouinard's statement about Valley climbing being 'a way of life' struck many of us as an absolute truth." As he observed:

By 1963 people such as Robbins, Chouinard, [Chuck] Pratt, [Eric] Beck, and myself had lived in the Valley for months at a time. We felt as if we truly belonged in the Valley; it was our spiritual home. Away from the cities and responsibilities, we lived simply, feeling at peace with ourselves and the world. . . . Humbled often by the walls, we had to look deeply into ourselves to find out what made us tick.¹⁵⁹

AMERICANS ON EVEREST

Nineteen sixty-three was, perhaps, the greatest year in the history of American climbing, and Yosemite was only part of the story. The other great events were taking place 7,500 or so miles to the west, on the slopes of the world's highest mountain. If Yosemite epitomized the competitive individualism coming to the fore in big-wall climbing, the American expedition to Everest was perhaps the last golden moment of the spirit of the brotherhood of the rope.

In a prospectus written in the summer of 1960 for the American Mount Everest Expedition (or AMEE), Norman Dyhrenfurth used a justification for climbing the mountain considerably more contemporary in its concerns than the old Mallory chestnut, "because it's there." Noting Chinese claims to have reached the summit of Everest that spring, Dyhrenfurth suggested that Americans needed to prove that they, too, were up to the challenge of ascending the world's highest mountain. "Most mountaineers of the Free World agree that the struggle for the Himalaya should remain a purely idealistic, non-political pursuit. And yet there can be no doubt that the ascent of [Everest] by an American team would go a long way toward winning new friends in many places."¹⁶⁰

Just who these foreign friends were who were so eager to see an American team raise the Stars and Stripes atop Everest was left vague

in the prospectus. But it was a brilliant and well-timed marketing ploy. Dyhrenfurth, son of well-known Swiss mountaineer and geologist Günther Dyhrenfurth, emigrated to the United States shortly before World War II. Following military service, he embarked on a successful career as a documentary filmmaker. He retained close ties with the European climbing community, serving as photographer on the 1952 Swiss Everest expedition, and leading an unsuccessful attempt to climb Everest's neighbor, Lhotse, in 1955, as well as taking part in several other Himalayan expeditions.

He passionately wanted to return to Everest, this time with an American team. The problem was raising the money to do it—several hundred thousand dollars' worth. When he mentioned the project to Nick Clinch, organizer of the successful Hidden Peak and Masherbrum expeditions, Clinch told him flatly, "You'll never get that kind of money in this country. . . . Nobody gives that much of a damn about mountains or mountaineering."¹⁶¹

What people in the United States (and in the US government) did care about in the early 1960s was the Cold War, and the competition with the Soviet Union for international status. That competition took many forms, including an arms race and a space race. Dyhrenfurth made the unlikely, if effective, pitch that putting an American on top of Everest, as a later AMEE press release promised, would prove "a feather in our cap, a booster to our prestige, a refutation beyond argument of our detractors' taunt that we are a nation gone soft and gutless."¹⁶²

This was not the way John Muir or, for that matter, Charlie Houston would have sold an expedition. But it was language that the new president of the United States, John F. Kennedy, could appreciate. And eventually, through various schemes to carry out government-subsidized scientific and social scientific research, a significant number of federal dollars flowed into AMEE's coffers. The National Geographic Society also signed on as a sponsor. And there were book, and film, and *Life* magazine deals.¹⁶³

Dyhrenfurth assembled the largest and most elaborately organized expedition in American mountaineering history, twenty members strong. He personally would function as both expedition leader and filmmaker.

He sought out the country's strongest climbers to join him in Nepal, as long as they were what he thought of as "expedition men" (Fred Beckey would not be invited).¹⁶⁴

Thirteen of the twenty members of the expedition were from the western United States, by either origin or adoption, by now the norm on American Himalayan expeditions. Nine had worked as professional guides in the Tetons or Cascades. Several were connected with the retail end of mountaineering. And Dyhrenfurth was positioning himself as a professional organizer of expeditions. The old "amateur" ideal of the gentleman climber was giving way to a new professionalism. This expedition, much more than those of the past, consisted of men whose lives and careers had been shaped by their involvement with mountaineering.

Two and a half years after going public with the idea of an American Mount Everest Expedition, in January 1963, Dyhrenfurth and an advance guard of climbers flew to Kathmandu. Others followed, and on February 20 a long line consisting of nine hundred porters, thirty-odd high-altitude Sherpas, and twenty members of AMEE set off from Kathmandu en route to Everest. Ullman had to turn back almost immediately because of health problems, so he served instead in AMEE's press headquarters in Kathmandu.

On the approach march, the climbers debated strategy. Dyhrenfurth's number one priority was getting a climber with an American flag on the summit, and that meant following the by now "standard route" that the British had climbed in 1953 and the Swiss had followed on their own successful expedition in 1956: up the Khumbu Icefall to the Western Cwm, from there up Lhotse Face to the South Col, and then up the southeastern ridge to the summit. But with twenty climbers involved, other goals could be pursued.

One option was for a "grand slam" of gaining the summit of not only Everest, but also its two immediate neighbors, Lhotse and Nuptse. Tom Hornbein, Willi Unsoeld, Dick Emerson, and a few others were in favor of another option: putting a totally new route up to the summit of Everest via the West Ridge, the dividing line between Nepal and China. Dyhrenfurth tentatively agreed, provided the Southeast Ridge remained the priority,

but in the ensuing weeks there would be a constant struggle between the West Ridgers and their rivals for resources—especially for the labor power of the expedition's Sherpas to carry supplies.

Base camp was established on March 21, at 17,800 feet, below the Khumbu Icefall. Two days later a work party was in the icefall finding a route through its jumbled mass of ice towers and crevasses, when one of the towers collapsed, killing Jake Breitenbach, a twenty-seven-year-old Dartmouth alum and Teton guide from Jackson Hole, Wyoming. His body could not be recovered but would emerge seven years later at the base of the icefall.¹⁶⁵

Breitenbach was well liked, and his death shook the expedition. Nonetheless, work was soon resumed on the icefall route. By March 30, Camp 1 had been placed on the Western Cwm. Hornbein, Unsoeld, and others moved onto terrain that no human being had ever before stood on as they worked their way up to the mountain's West Shoulder, beneath the West Ridge. But in mid-April, Dyhrenfurth called a temporary end to their exploration, concentrating all resources on moving up the Southeast Ridge.

And so it was that on the morning of May 1, a full month before the 1953 British expedition had been in its highest camp, Jim Whittaker and Sherpa Nawang Gombu set off for the summit, which they reached at 1:00 p.m. Whittaker planted an American flag on a 4-foot aluminum stake on the summit, and with that gesture Dyhrenfurth's expedition had achieved its official and minimal goal. President Kennedy hailed the achievement of "our gallant countrymen," not yet informed that one of them was not from the United States.

If Whittaker and Gombu's ascent had marked the end of the American Mount Everest Expedition, it would have been an event that pleased the public but left many of the climbers dissatisfied. But now AMEE would truly make mountaineering history, by launching an assault on two separate routes on the same day, with climbers from the Southeast Ridge and climbers from the West Ridge rendezvousing at the summit and then descending together to the South Col. As Barry Bishop explained in a letter home to Arnold Wexler on May 9: "Lute Jerstad & I have the nod &

we'll move up the 11th for an 'all or nothing' try on the 18th. Plans call for Unsoeld & Hornbein to try for the top the same day—via the W. Ridge. Talk about a long shot!"¹⁶⁶

There were delays: high winds the night of May 16 played havoc with the tents on the West Ridge. But finally, on May 21, four Americans bedded down for the night in two assault camps on opposite sides of Everest.

Hornbein and Unsoeld awoke at 4:00 a.m. on May 22 and set out at 7:00 a.m. They took nothing with them but oxygen, a little food, their personal effects, and a walkie-talkie. They would not be returning the same way. They made their way up a couloir (thereafter the Hornbein Couloir) through the stretch of rotten rock known as the Yellow Band, laboriously cutting steps. Near the top of the couloir they came to a



Willi Unsoeld (left) and Tom Hornbein reconnoiter the West Ridge of Everest, April 1963. Photograph by Barry Bishop.

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60-foot cliff. Hornbein took the lead and led to within 8 feet of the top when, exhausted, he had to drop back down beside Unsoeld.

Protected by the piton Hornbein had placed at his high point, and cranking his oxygen up full blast, Unsoeld surmounted the obstacle—the hardest climbing they would do that day. He then belayed Hornbein to the top. It was from that position that they radioed Jim Whittaker at base camp to say that they were committed to the route. They could not return the way they had come. To survive to climb another day, they would have to reach the summit and then traverse the mountain.

At 6:15 p.m., just over eleven hours after setting out, they looked up and could see the flag that Whittaker and Gombu had left on the summit three weeks before. They walked together to the top, arms linked. "Now some people have suggested it was to avoid the argument as to who got there first," Unsoeld would later tell audiences at the slide shows he did about the climb, "but there are other reasons to link arms with your buddy."¹⁶⁷

Jerstad and Bishop were not waiting for them; they had arrived nearly



Lute Jerstad approaches the summit of Everest, with Jim Whittaker's flag still flying, May 22, 1963. Photograph by Barry Bishop.

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three hours earlier on their own successful summit day. So after a short time at the top, Hornbein and Unsoeld set off down the Southeast Ridge following their comrades' footsteps. By 7:30 it was too dark to see even their own feet, let alone the tracks left by Bishop and Jerstad. But calling out in the darkness, they were answered by the two men ahead of them. The four rendezvoused at about 9:30 p.m., all close to exhaustion, Bishop in a very bad way. Hornbein, who still had a little oxygen left in his tank, gave it to Bishop. They continued down in the darkness, but by midnight they decided it was too dangerous to continue. So they sat on a rock outcrop and waited for daylight.

Their open bivouac that night, at over 28,000 feet, was the highest ever attempted. They were blessed with a rare windless night. All their oxygen had now run out; whether from the effects of exhaustion or hypoxia, they were not thinking as clearly as they needed to. Of the four men, only Hornbein thought to take his crampons off to avoid conducting cold to his feet. It did not occur to him to suggest to the others that they do the same. At one point Unsoeld offered to warm Hornbein's feet against his stomach, and Hornbein took him up on it. But when Hornbein, in turn, offered to warm his companion's feet, Unsoeld declined. His feet, he said, were feeling fine. That's because they were frozen, and he could feel nothing.

The next morning they made it safely down toward Camp 6 above the South Col and met their anxious expedition mates, Dave Dingman and Sherpa Girmi Dorje. Unsoeld and Bishop, with the worst cases of frostbite, were evacuated by helicopter to a Kathmandu hospital. Bishop lost all his toes; Unsoeld, all but one.

President Kennedy sent another congratulatory telegram, and in July, back in the United States, there was a Rose Garden ceremony at the White House, with the president presenting medals to all expedition members. The expedition put American mountaineering in the national and international spotlight, with subsequent stories in *Life* magazine and *National Geographic* magazine, an expedition history by James Ramsey Ullman, a lavishly illustrated big-format Sierra Club book by Tom Hornbein about the West Ridge climb, and an hour-long National Geographic Society

documentary that earned the highest ratings up to that time for televised documentaries.

No one, not even the British who had invented the sport of alpinism, could look down on American mountaineering after the Everest triumph. Bill Tilman, reviewing James Ramsey Ullman's book about AMEE for the *Alpine Journal*, declared that the West Ridge climb lifted the American Everest expedition "to a plane level with that of the first ascent of the mountain in 1953."¹⁶⁸

Many young Americans, exposed to the barrage of Everest publicity, decided that they wanted to become mountaineers too. In one measure of the newfound popularity of climbing (or at least dressing like a climber), Jim Whittaker's employer, Recreational Equipment Incorporated (REI), increased its membership from 50,000 in 1965 to 250,000 in 1972. A rival



Young hut crew members packing supplies to the AMC's Lakes of the Clouds hut on Mount Washington, 1969.

COURTESY OF APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN CLUB.

retail chain, Eastern Mountain Sports, was established in 1967, and local retail distributors sprang up in many cities. In another such measure, Sierra Club membership grew from 29,000 members in 1965 to 100,000 in 1970. Many more came to climbing outside the traditional club framework. The rucksack revolution was on.¹⁶⁹