

A Tuttle Creek Tableau

New Climbs in an Unculled California Area

GALEN ROWELL

THE Dream: I am inside an impeccably constructed stone building with a high beam ceiling and a fifty-foot-wide level concrete floor. The only adornments are a huge stone fireplace and three beds with mattresses. I suddenly realize that the building is constructed in the shape of a giant cross. Joe Faint is staring quietly out the window, mouth agape. Otherwise I am alone. Outside, a trail leads downward but none goes above the building. The ground is mantled with sagebrush, snow, piñon pine and cactus. The skyline is dominated by a huge bulwark of unclimbed two- to three-thousand-foot granite walls. I shake my head several times. It is not a dream and it is less than two miles from a road in California.

* * *

Joe Faint and I visited the stone house on Tuttle Creek, a few miles south of Mount Whitney, for the first time in the early winter of 1969-70. We came; we saw; we fled – in the face of an oncoming storm. But not before we had seen at close hand the canyon above the stone house and the sheer Yosemite-type walls of its northern side. At home we searched for references both to the oversized granite walls and to the abandoned stone house. We found neither. The following quote typifies the attitude of most Sierra literature: “South of Mt. Whitney the elevation and spectacular quality of the Sierra dwindle abruptly.”*

In 1970 it was quite surprising to find the 3000-foot plus, 65°, south face of Lone Pine Peak unclimbed by any route and less than two miles from a serviceable road. On a cold January weekend, Joe and I returned to the stone house to attempt what appeared to be a 500-foot buttress directly across the canyon from the house. The climb turned out to be rather more adventurous than we planned, the small-appearing buttress being in actuality a full thousand feet high. The climb was a grade IV and was entirely fifth class, consisting of a fine balance of spectacular

**Deepest Valley*, Genny Schumacher, page 77.

chimneys, jam-cracks and high-angle face climbing near the summit. We reached the cairnless summit at dusk, descending the third-class back side just before darkness caught us.

Someone brought up the possibility of making the first ascent of the south face of Lone Pine Peak in winter. Although it sounded preposterous at first, several things seemed to be in our favor. It was a mild winter and the wall faces south. Besides, the presence of cactus seems a relatively good indicator of the low annual snowfall in the region. The approach hike is quite short although the round trip from the San Francisco area is a thousand miles. Little did I know then that I would be making nine weekend trips to the area during the winter and spring.

To increase our odds of success we enlisted the aid of Fitzroy veteran Chris Jones. In true Patagonian fashion we hiked through raging wind and snow to the stone house and watched banners blowing from the tantalizing faces which were quite obviously in no condition to be climbed. Staying in the stone house in winter was in itself a rewarding experience and by then we had found out more about its origins. In the early part of the century it had been built by a fundamentalist church for the use of its youth groups. The townspeople of Lone Pine frowned at the bright-eyed young people heading up the trail hand in hand. They were obviously having entirely too much fun. Pressure was brought to bear on the Forest Service and soon the flume supplying water to the house was declared an unlawful use of the wilderness. For more than forty years the house has been vacant. Winter snows blow through the doorways and summer sunlight burns the tar paper from the roof on southern exposures. The level concrete floor is as unflawed as the day it was poured and the beams of the high ceiling appear freshly hewn in the golden light from the massive stone fireplace.

Chris, Joe and I returned to the city and my next visit was with Warren Harding on a R&R tour of the Sierra. On this trip I checked out the south fork of Tuttle Creek, out of sight around a corner from the stone house, while Warren remained at the house. I saw a fine cluster of crags and beyond, near the head of the canyon, was a spectacular, 600-foot, obelisk-shaped spire. Returning to the stone house I found that Warren had claimed it as permanent headquarters for his wine tasting society, the L.S.E.D.&F.S. (Low Sierra Eating Drinking and Farcing Society). I did obtain permission from him to use the premises occasionally.

A stable period of weather in early March found Chris and me heading for the stone house without Joe, who remained in the city due to prior commitments. Not having an early enough start on Saturday for Lone Pine Peak, we headed up the south fork canyon and climbed a 700-foot chimney system to the top of a prominent wedge-shaped block which we

named The Keystone. The climb was entirely fifth class and in an area we named Tuttle Creek Crags. Many other two- to ten-pitch climbs remained to be done on the fine granite.

The flush of sunrise caught us the next morning as we were climbing a snow gully on the south face of Lone Pine Peak. We were equipped for survival, not comfort. A bivouac would be possible but neither planned nor pleasant. We hoped that by going light and sometimes in tandem we could climb the face in a single day. Several lines on the wall were definitely in the Yosemite grade V to VI variety but we could see a system of ledges and couloirs in one area which would break up the continuity of the difficulties. For the first hours we climbed mainly with crampons, taking them off occasionally for a rock pitch. In the early afternoon we were in a giant couloir, approaching a *cul-de-sac* at an incredibly slow pace through deep powder. The only feasible escape was a F8 chimney coated with ice which brought us underneath a very steep and blank headwall. With less than four hours of daylight, we still had a thousand feet of icy rock above us. A rappel lost us height but gained us a ledge, enabling us to traverse to an inset where we climbed a snowfield, a waterfall on a knobby wall, and another snowfield before we were forced back onto steep rock. We were moving quickly but so was the sun. A shadowy, ice-filled, flared chimney slowed us down; the sun kept moving. Several fifth-class leads later we reached a false summit; the sun was touching the horizon. Finally a traverse around a gendarme unexpectedly and anticlimactically placed us on a snowfield connecting with the summit plateau. We had beaten the sun up the mountain, but we still had a long and intricate descent ahead of us. We headed down the eastern side of the mountain, reaching the stone house by headlamp about four hours into the night. We were tired, lucky, hungry and happy.

Up the canyon from Lone Pine Peak sat the prize of the entire area, the 2000-foot south face of unnamed Peak 13,016. On an April weekend, Chris, Joe and I slogged through snow to the base of the face, estimating its angle at over 70° and its weaknesses as few. There appeared to be only one bivouac ledge, which was two-thirds of the way up the wall. On Sunday of that weekend, Chris and I ventured up the south fork canyon and climbed the "Obelisk." It was all enjoyable F5-7 free climbing except for a single, vicious F9 crack forty feet off the ground. The summit pitch was one of the finest culminations to a climb imaginable. A single crack runs up the steep final headwall and dead ends against the overhanging summit block. A hand traverse underneath the block brings one to a ledge from where a few easy moves place one on the top. The most amazing thing is that the summit pitch is probably not harder than F6.

In early May we heard the disturbing news that Fred Beckey had just visited "our" canyon and climbed a three-day grade V. Instantly we thought it must have been the face on Peak 13,016, but it turned out to be another route on the south face of Lone Pine Peak a few hundred feet west of the line of our winter first ascent. We knew that the face on Peak 13,016 was no secret and in the middle of a work week Chris, Joe and I headed for Lone Pine. We brought two friends to share our heavy loads and spent most of a day reaching a base camp in a fine grove of red firs directly underneath the wall. That evening, Joe and I climbed the first 500 feet by a relatively easy transverse ledge system, leaving our haul bag and hardware at our high point and fixing a rope at the hardest point. The next morning the climbing began in earnest as Joe led a long pitch of mixed direct-aid and fifth-class cracks. Several leads higher we found ourselves in an area of rotten rock and our dream climb was fast becoming a nightmare. We found out by experience that in this relatively unglaciated canyon the rock on ridges and arêtes is often weathered and friable while that in recesses and on flat faces is commonly fresh and clean. This is exactly opposite from Yosemite and we had to reorient our minds to fit the Tuttle Creek geology. By traversing we soon were back on sound rock and that evening we reached the good ledge, 600 feet from the summit. The morning sun shone brightly on a fantastic row of spires at the head of Tuttle Creek which were invisible from the floor of the canyon. A check of the topo map showed that some banal geographer had assigned the name Corcoran Mountain collectively to the five widely separated spires over 13,500 feet in elevation. By midday we had climbed the remaining pitches and were on top of the mountain enjoying a splendid view of the 11,000-foot eastern Sierra escarpment. Peak 13,016 is one mile east of the main crest and hence offers a more spectacular view than from a higher peak on the crest itself.

When summer began, both Chris and Joe went their respective ways. Not finding a suitable companion, I decided to investigate the Corcoran towers alone. My idea was to approach them by crossing the Sierra crest near Cottonwood Creek, several miles to the south, and then to hike north until I would recross the crest over a ridge which would put me in a basin just east of the towers. Somehow I ended up on top of 14,000-foot Mount Langley, weathered a snowstorm, then failed completely on the first third-class move of the ridge with my 65-pound pack. I then hiked many miles cross country to meet the Mount Whitney trail, reaching the roadhead 30 miles and less than 24 hours after I left my car on Cottonwood Creek. Oh yes, my car . . . Getting back to Cottonwood Creek was another story and involved a large bribe to a red-nosed man who was driving in circles near the town of Lone Pine.

Reaching the 13,500-foot towers via the trailless north or south forks of Tuttle Creek and their 6500-foot roadhead did not seem particularly appealing, so my next attempt was via Whitney Portal, 8360 feet, and a trail to Meysan Lake. This time I successfully reached the lake and crossed two 12,000-foot ridges, ending up in the rockbound basin to the east of the towers. My goal was to traverse as many of the towers as possible, but I began early in the morning by climbing the west ridge of Peak 12,880+, which is the highest point of the ridge on which the stone house sits. Surprisingly, my fourth-class route was new and only the third ascent of the mountain. I turned around and headed for the most spectacular “shark’s tooth” tower of the Corcoran ridge, climbing the only feasible route on the east side, a F7 strenuous crack on which I self-belayed. Its summit had been reached only once before from a fifth class route on the western side in 1968. I then climbed the last tower to the south, not needing to rope up. Doubling back, I began working north toward Mount LeConte, 13,960 feet. The spires were separated by gaps of three to six hundred feet and several times I found it necessary to rappel or self-belay. Descending from the fourth of the towers I found the horn of a Sierra Bighorn sheep and paused to meditate over the fate of this animal mountaineer, better adapted to his task by nature than many a human with axe, piton and crampon. It is little more than a hundred years since modern Western man first shared the summits with the sheep, but now they race each other down the path toward extinction.

I left the horn where I found it and began to climb the southwest ridge of Mount LeConte. This seemed to be the hardest climbing of the day. However 6000 feet of elevation gain above 12,000 feet was taking its toll on my body. I self-belayed several times on short stretches of F5-6 climbing, reaching the summit of LeConte late in the afternoon. On the way back to my camp at 11,600 feet, I found myself making slower time downhill than I had been making uphill in the morning. The traverse of six summits had included three new routes, but the most vanquished of all was me. It is hard to equate success with lying on one’s back for several hours unable to move from total exhaustion.

Though the climbing impact in the Tuttle Creek region was heavy in 1970, many fine climbs remain to be made. The Lone Pine Peak — Peak 13,016 headwall is quite continuous with only a single break in over two miles. Fine alpine rock climbing awaits the climber willing to forego the trails and social scene of Yosemite Valley . . . of course, there’s always the stone house!

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Tuttle Creek Canyons, Sierra Nevada, California.

ASCENTS: Stone House Buttress, first ascent of summit via south face, January 1970 (Faint, Rowell) NCCS IV, F8.

The Keystone, Tuttle Creek Crags, first ascent, March 1970 (Jones, Rowell) NCCS III, F8.

Lone Pine Peak, 12,944 feet, first ascent of south face, March 1970 (also first winter ascent of south face) (Jones, Rowell) NCCS IV, F8.

The Obelisk, first ascent of summit via east face, April 1970 (Jones, Rowell) NCCS III, F9.

Peak 13,016, first ascent of south face, May 1970 (Jones, Faint, Rowell) NCCS V, F8, A2.

Peak 12,880+, first ascent via west ridge, August 1970 (Rowell) Class 4.

Mount Corcoran, 13,600+ feet, first traverse of the four major summits, including first ascent of the east face of "Shark's Tooth Tower", August 1970 (Rowell) NCCS F7.

Mount LeConte, 13,960 feet, first ascent of southwest ridge, August, 1970 (Rowell) NCCS II, F6.

PERSONNEL: Joe Faint, Chris Jones, Galen Rowell (plus numerous porters and camp followers not actively involved in climbing).

