

# The South Arête of Angel Wings

GALEN ROWELL

ANGEL Wings rises vertically 1800 feet above Valhalla, a hanging granite valley near the headwaters of the Kaweah River in Sequoia National Park. So what? Mount Whitney rises 6128 feet above Whitney Portal, Glacier Point is 3250 feet above Yosemite Valley, and El Cap is . . . that's what I'm trying to say; I think I'll start all over again!

Angel Wings is an alpine El Capitan, cleaved out of massive granite and rising 1800 feet above . . . Unfortunately, we didn't climb the biggest face. Not because we were content to leave such difficulties to a future generation, but rather for the reason that it had already been ascended by a past generation. In July 1967, a disgustingly energetic party of mule-supplied middle-aged men (Steck, Long and two Wilsons) walked sixteen miles from the roadhead and spent four days on the face. They had the audacity to break all traditions and ascend the most formidable face on the mountain before any other routes had been made. It was certainly one of the most outstanding rock climbs in the United States outside of Yosemite.

In September 1970, Chris Jones, Greg Henzie, and I watched the sunset on Angel Wings at the end of a cloudless fall day. The main face impressed us, but we had no intentions then of a long climb. We were near the end of a week's cross-country exploring and climbing with a bare minimum of equipment. That face in the sunset would require plenty of bivouac and direct-aid gear, possibly more than we would care to haul on a 32-mile round trip. The next day we made some short ascents on a serrated ridge of towers on the opposite side of the canyon. From there, we could see an unusually fine arête running from the summit pinnacle of Angel Wings to an ugly jumble of rock near the ground. The actual 10,252-foot summit of the massif was at the end of this arête, at least a quarter of a mile east of the previous route. Parts of the arête had questionable overhangs and gaps in crack systems, but most of the route was direct and obvious. About 1500 feet of technical climbing would be involved. Chris and I promised each other to return with suitable equipment in the spring.

June 1971: Our domain was a white sea of vapor. It dampened our voices and quietly dripped on our tube tent. Outside, on the veranda of our encampment, a small coil of rope rose miraculously into the sky, blending into the fog above our heads. Barely visible behind the rope was a buttress of gray granite, also disappearing into the mist. Once in

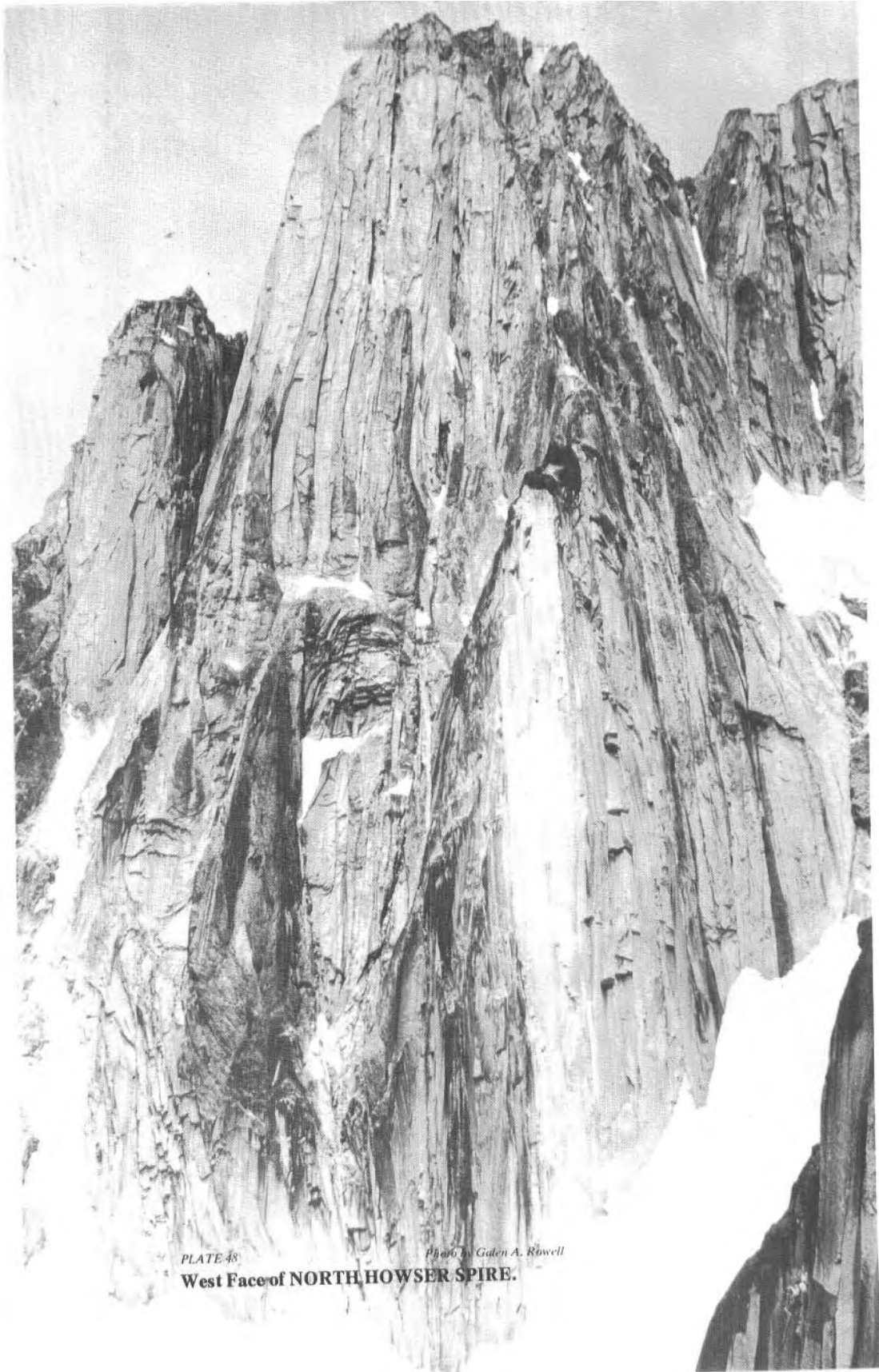


PLATE 48

Photo by Galen A. Rowell

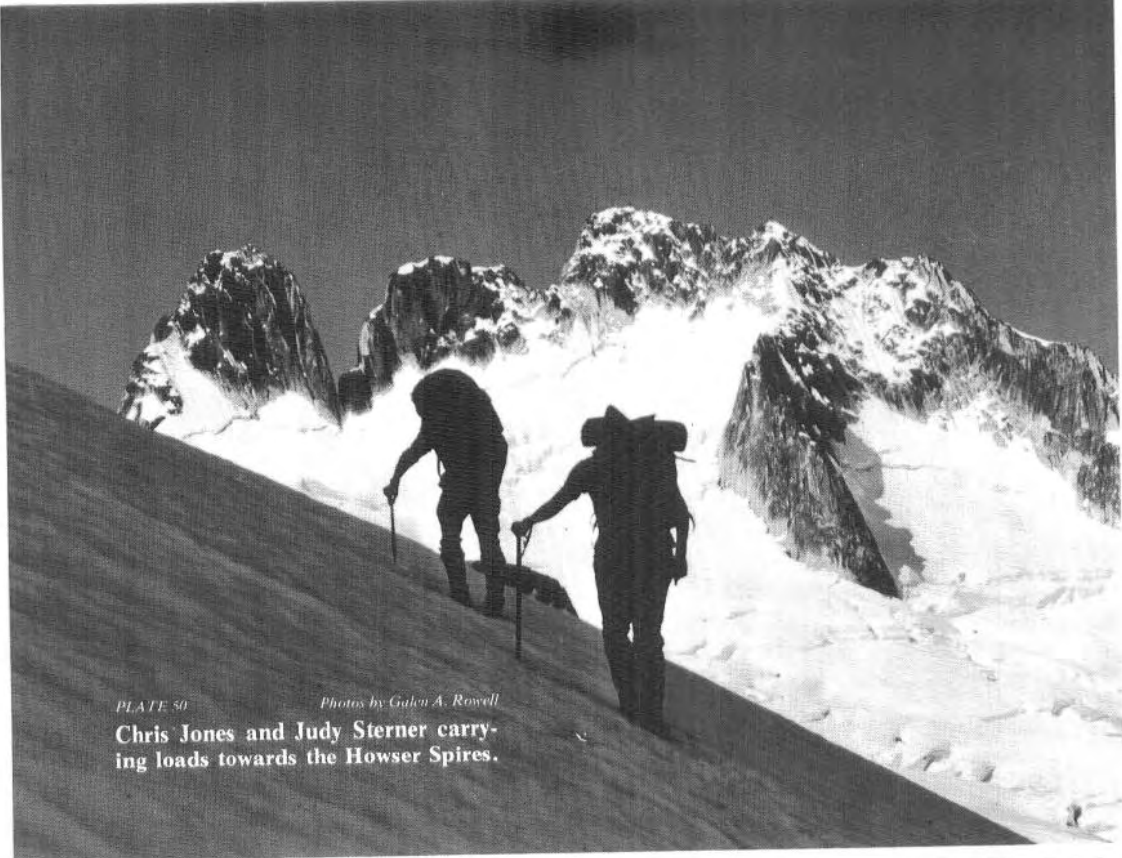
**West Face of NORTH HOWSER SPIRE.**



*PLATE 49*

*Photo by Galen A. Rowell*

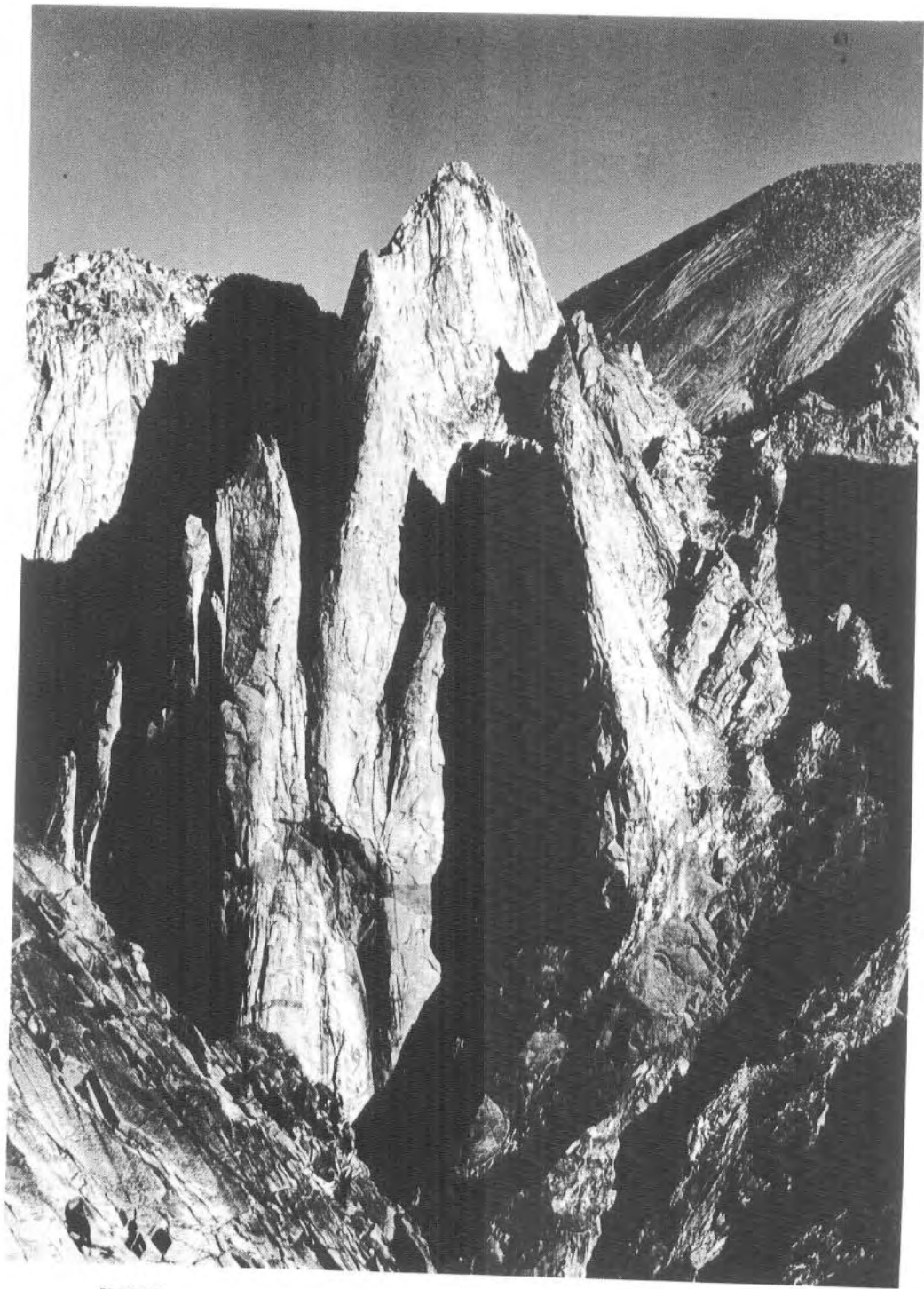
**Tony Qamar on the West Face of  
North Howser Spire.**



*PLATE 50*      *Photos by Galen A. Rowell*  
**Chris Jones and Judy Sterner carrying loads towards the Howser Spires.**



*PLATE 51*  
**Tony Qamar nailing on the second morning on Howser Spire's West Face.**



*PLATE 52*

**South Arête of ANGEL WINGS, Sierra Nevada.**

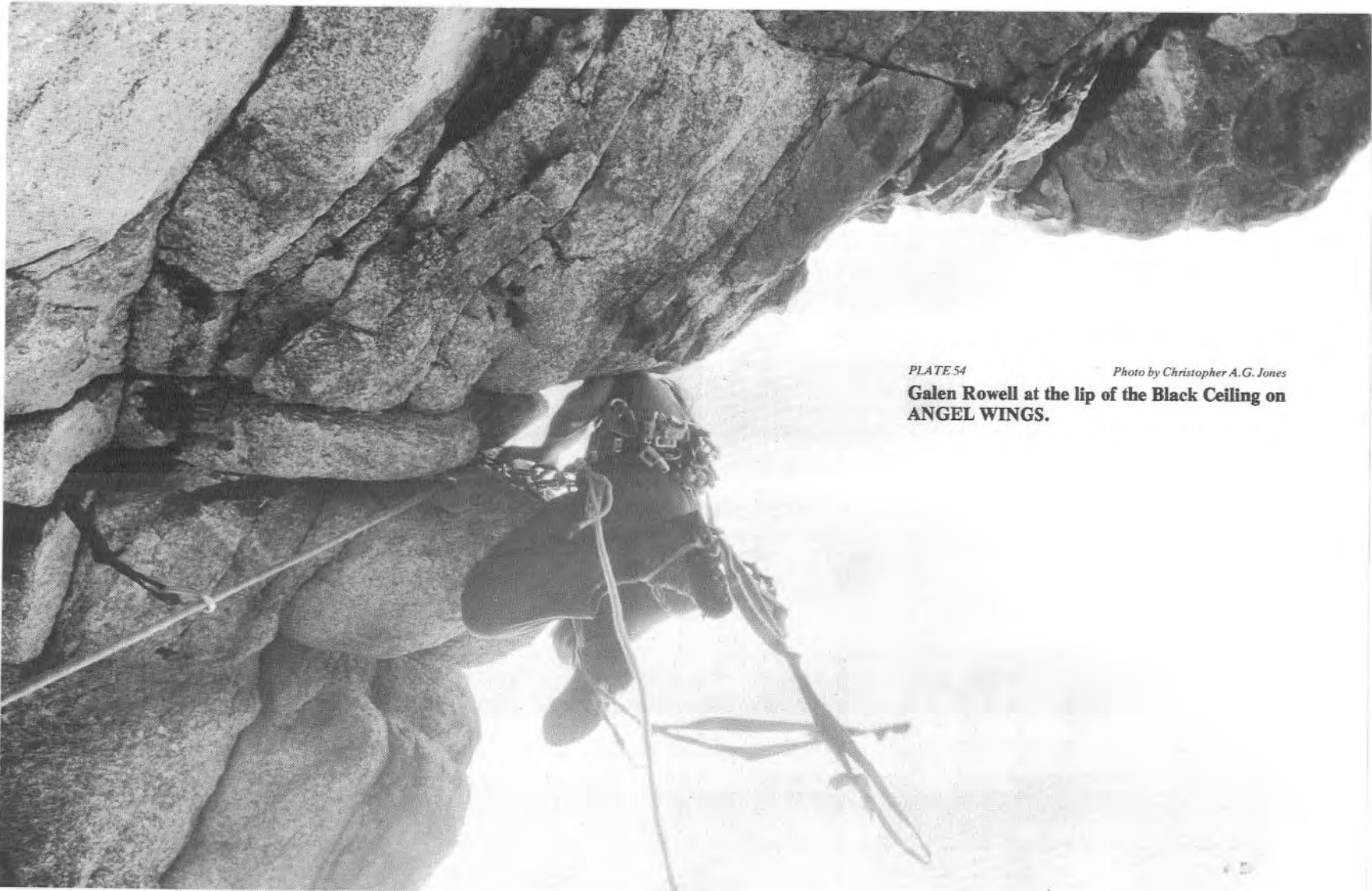
*Photo by Galen A. Rowell*

PLATE 53

Photo by Galen A. Rowell

**Chris Jones on Angel Wings.**





*PLATE 54*

*Photo by Christopher A.G. Jones*

**Galen Rowell at the lip of the Black Ceiling on  
ANGEL WINGS.**

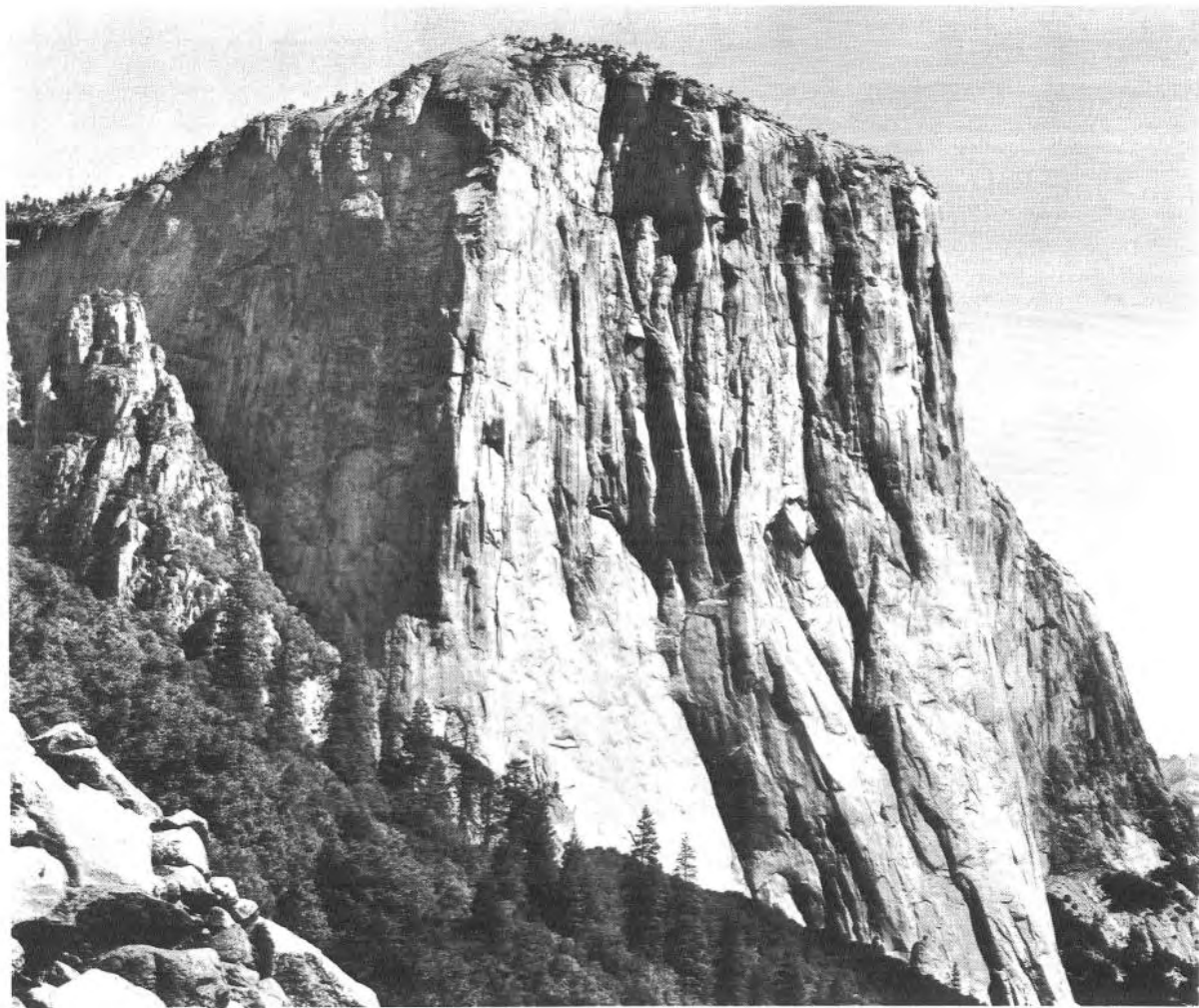


PLATE 55

*Photo by Edward Cooper*

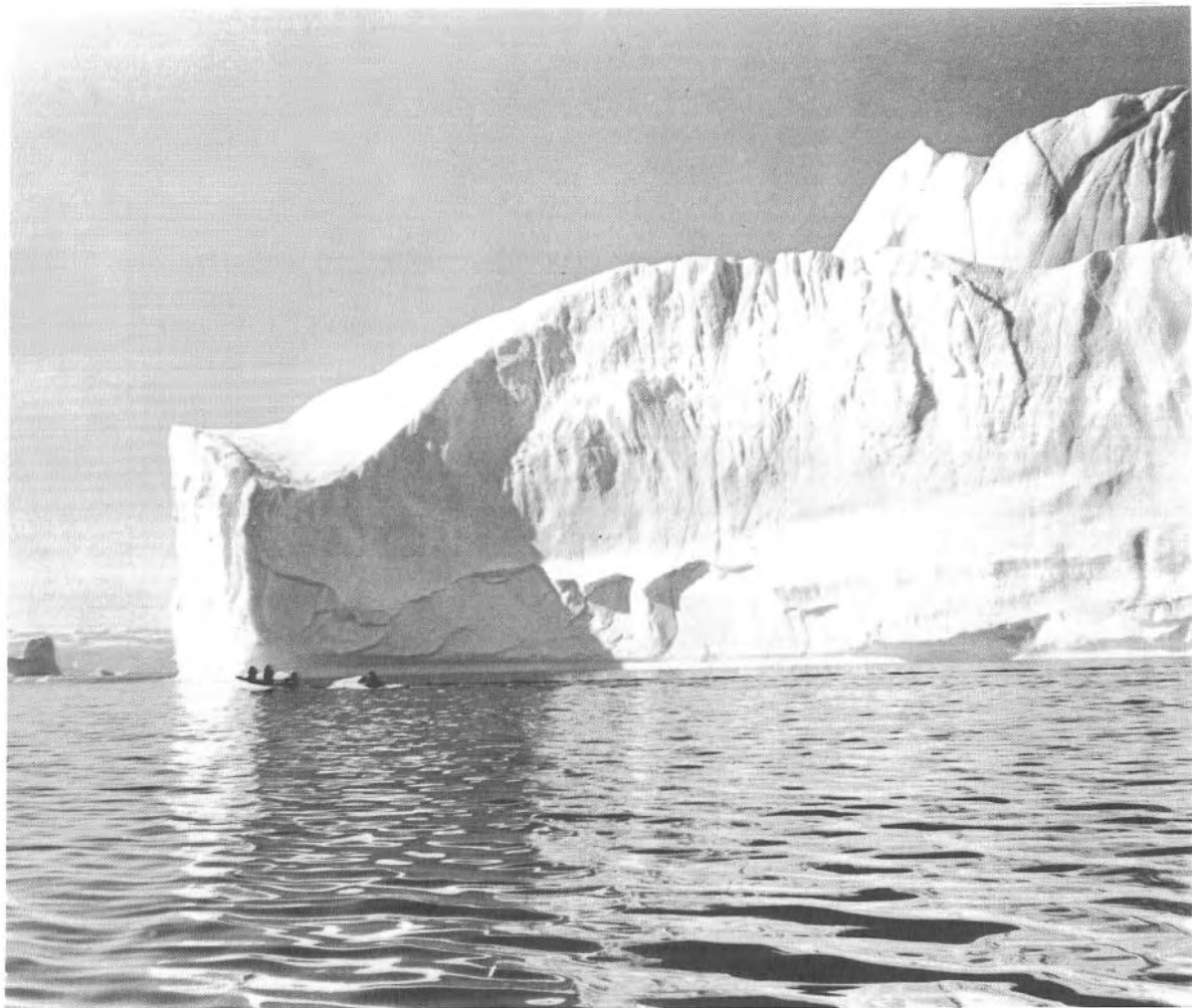
**El Capitan, Yosemite, from the west. Salathé Wall rises in center.**



PLATE 56

*Photo by Donald J. Liska*

**Boating past a huge iceberg in Scoresby Sound, East Greenland.**



a while, the curtain would randomly open to expose large vertical cliffs in the near distance.

We were perched on a pedestal of rock five hundred feet above the floor of Valhalla, at the end of the “ugly jumble” and at the beginning of the real arête. Only two sections below us had required a rope, but the climbing above, where two ropes were now fixed, was more difficult than we had expected. Awkward aid, a F9 jam-crack, and a drizzle had combined to slow us down to a depressing halt.

I had no urge to climb, only a nagging numbness thwarting every thought of pleasure. I remembered Kesey’s Chief Broom, and his schizophrenic fog rushing in to shut out his surroundings from his mind. I tried to force thoughts of all the good things on the previous day — sunlight, abundant wildflowers by the trail, Angel Wings rising into the sky from a mantle of clouds that I knew were just afternoon build-up and would disappear in the night before we began to climb.

But we were in the clouds and my memory drifted to slings, rusty cans, water bottles, and a piton, seen on the ground as I looked down through the heavy fog on the approach. Relics of the not-so-distant past. As yet unsoftened by the passage of time. So common in Yosemite and so fecal in the high country.

Suddenly it’s morning. I stick my head out of the tent and see nothing but gray. As we eat breakfast, a window opens in the clouds, exposing the sunrise on snowy mountains for just a few minutes before it slams shut. We had discussed giving up the climb, but now our spirits soar from the moment of light and we decide to continue.

Soon I am Jümaring. Up past Chris’s aid pitch and on by the exhausting jam that I had climbed the previous afternoon. Over my head, but still several leads away, is an ugly black ceiling glowering out of the mist like the cornice of an old building through a London fog.

The clouds lift, but begin to return just as we approach the roof. Chris belays under the eaves as I dangle from the ten-foot ceiling. Above, the crack that I am nailing ends in the middle of nowhere. Rather than follow it to oblivion, I tension-traverse and face-climb to the right, just above the ceiling. Frightening. Still in the middle of nowhere, but not far below the beginning of a chimney system. I try climbing free; it won’t go. I try using aid; I can’t get in the second piton. I try free again; it goes and soon I belay Chris from a comfortable ledge at the base of the chimney.

I begin to shiver, bare-armed in the cool wind, as Chris slowly cleans the intricate pitch. The haul bag, with my sweater, is temporarily jammed under the lip of the ceiling. Big Chief Broom and his fog machine have returned to haunt me.

Hours of chimneys bring us to a ledge, level with the top of the first spire. The highest summit is still five hundred feet overhead. Chris rests and eats while I climb the ridge of the first spire alone. At the top I find nothing — no cairn, no view, no happiness. Returning to Chris, we

continue up the misty wall toward the summit of the main spire. The climbing becomes easier and several leads go without a piton. I climb onto the summit ridge, but return to the west side where a traversing ledge system makes the going easier. At an unknown hour in the late afternoon, we drag ourselves and our bags onto the summit. No cairn, no view, but this time a sense of accomplishment. The highest point of Angel Wings had felt its first footsteps.

Looking downward on the north side, we can see occasional spots of talus through the swirling fog. Descending the fourth-class ridge, we reach a boulder-strewn plateau connecting our tower with the top of the 1967 "old men's" outing. Down through the mist, over talus, past whitebark, lodgepole, and finally Jeffrey pines, we suddenly emerge from the ceiling of cloud into the clear calm of a summer evening. Rappelling cliff bands and thrashing through brush, we reach the floor of a valley at the beginning of twilight. We intersect the trail that we followed on the approach at a point three-and-a-half miles from the base of the wall, where our food, pack frames, and extra equipment are cached on the edge of a little meadow, across a raging June stream from the trail. We hide our climbing gear in the bushes, and since we have no flashlights, I run ahead up the trail to cross the stream before dark and locate our gear.

Thirty minutes later I lie on my side, puffing like a fish out of water by the edge of the little meadow. I am alone and only the white boulders and a reddish glow in the western sky are visible in the failing light. The moon and stars are blotted out by the high mantle of clouds.

But I am not alone. Slowly my breathing returns to normal and as I lie in the grass, a deer walks indifferently across the clearing, profiled by the light on the horizon. He senses my presence quite unexpectedly and makes a graceful leap through the air. Instead of dancing off into the distance, he lands with a sickening grating of hoofs onto rocks at the beginning of a talus field. Sparks from his feet break the darkness.

The time from my first sighting to the thrashing landing in the rocks is less than a couple of seconds. For no explainable reason, I leap up and give chase to the startled animal. No longer is he a young-man-about-town out for an evening stroll. Fear is now his motive power and he is out of his element, crashing with grotesque slowness through the unfamiliar boulders. I almost catch him. If I succeed, I don't know what I'll do. But I am not thinking that; I am just chasing.

I wind quickly and he does not. Soon he is just a clattering dot on distant rocks. I ask myself: what was I trying to accomplish? I do not have an answer. At the moment, it just seemed like the thing to do.

A few minutes later, Chris meets me as I recross the stream with our packs. In the dark at Hamilton Lake, a generous group of people offer us fire and warm drinks. Soon we can think only of sleep.

Morning dawns completely clear. We see the entire arête for the first time. It is no longer an unknown quantity; it is now only the sum of its

pitches, perhaps equal on paper, but not in the human mind.

The climb was cold, hard, wet, and discomforting. It was not enjoyable. As we walk down the trail with heavy packs, I realize that the experience is not yet over. In the mountains, the approach and descent are integral with the climb itself. Sometime later — maybe much later — in the counterfeit comfort of the city or in a different range of mountains, Angel Wings will return in the middle of a cold fog or with a flash of light on a moonless night.

*Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Sequoia National Park, Sierra Nevada Range, California  
ASCENT: Angel Wings, 10,252 feet, first ascent of summit and of south arête. NCCS V, F9, A3  
PERSONNEL: Chris Jones, Galen Rowell

