

PLATE 7

*Photo by Galen A. Rowell*

**Day Needle and Keeler Needle  
rise above Winter-Ascent Base Camp.**



PLATE 8

*Photo by Galen A. Rowell*

**Tim Auger on the East  
Face of Keeler Needle.**

PLATE 9

*Photo by Galen A. Rowell*

**Auger jumaring on the third morning  
of the winter ascent of Keeler Needle.**



PLATE 10

*Photo by Galen A. Sowell*

**Tim Auger jūmars on East Face  
of P 13,680, the East Peak  
of Mount Barnard.**



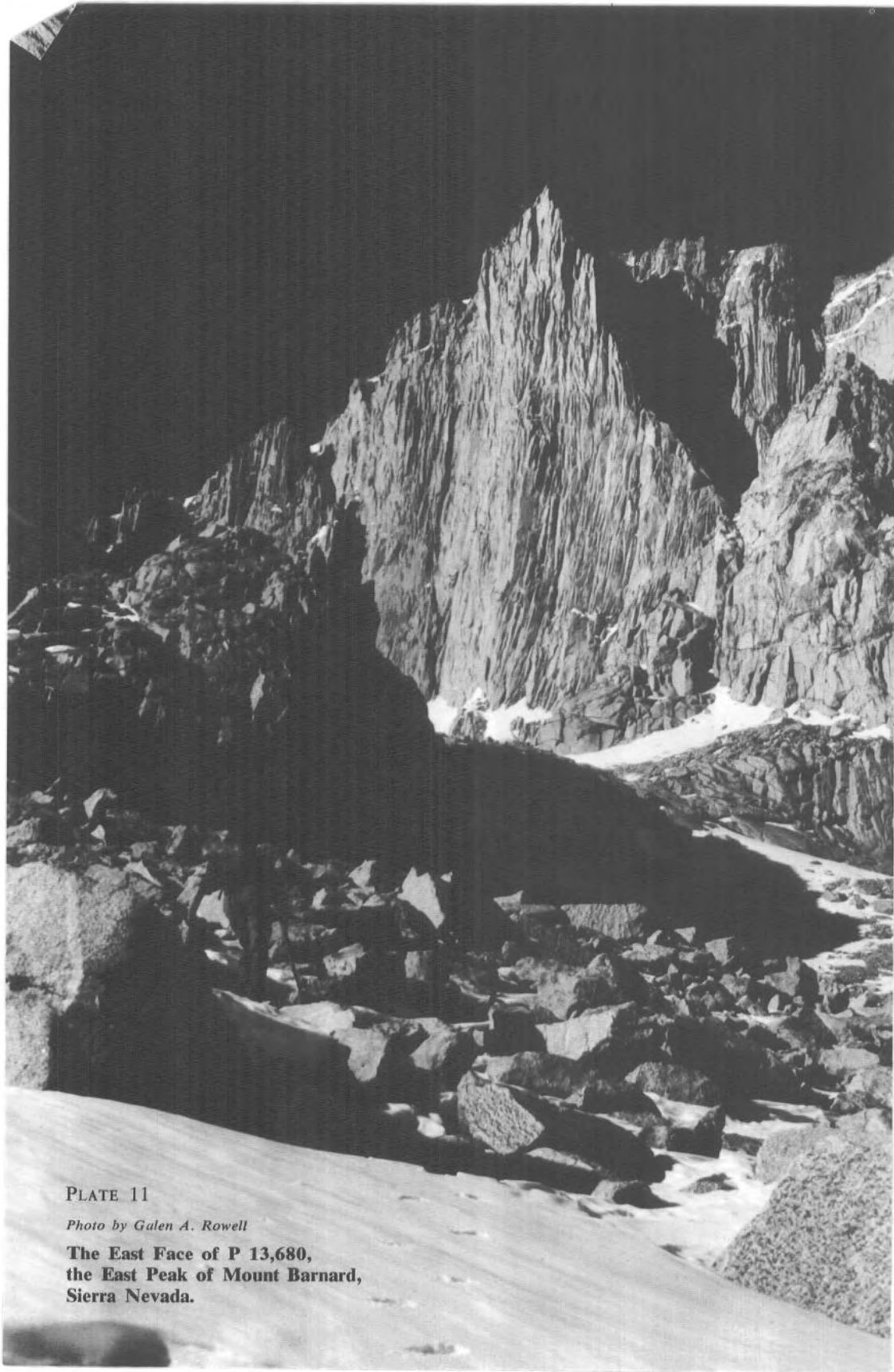


PLATE 11

*Photo by Galen A. Rowell*

**The East Face of P 13,680,  
the East Peak of Mount Barnard,  
Sierra Nevada.**

# Alpine Rock Climbs in California

GALEN A. ROWELL

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THE east face of Keeler Needle was first climbed in 1960. For twelve years, attempts to repeat the route have failed. Not because of the intrinsic difficulty of the route, but because it is at 14,000 feet in a region of harder access and less stable weather than the rest of the big wall climbs in California.

Campfire tales about the original ascent grow with every telling. Warren Harding, Glen Denny, Rob McKnight and Desert Frank spent four-and-a-half days on what is probably the most spectacular rock wall on the High Sierra crest. According to one version, "Desert Frank" never climbed before or after Keeler Needle and was solicited for the climb by Warren in a bar in the nearby town of Lone Pine. Warren denies this, saying that although he never could remember Frank's last name, the location of the bar was Yosemite and he personally gave Frank quite a few hours of instruction. Two years ago he received a bottle of wine in the mail with a congratulatory note on the Wall of The Early Morning Light signed simply, "Desert Frank".

Another legend concerned hundreds of dollars of equipment abandoned during a storm by climbers who got half way up the wall. Yet another told of two-inch cracks running the full length of the face that would undoubtedly go free to anyone who contemplated them from a sea-level living room rather than from a hand-jam at 14,000 feet.

In December 1971 Tim Auger of Vancouver, British Columbia, came to my house in the city with strange ideas about climbing big walls in winter. He wanted to climb El Cap\* and I mentioned Keeler Needle, with a base elevation 8500 feet higher than El Cap. Our enthusiasms clashed at midpoint and that very afternoon we packed for an ascent of the east face of Washington Column, spending two days climbing a typical Yosemite wall in 10° weather. During the day the warmth of the sun made the climbing little different from spring or fall.

In an effort to learn more about Keeler I cornered Warren Harding. When I produced a sharp telephoto of the face he appeared bewildered

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\*Tim succeeded on El Cap in March 1972.

about where the route lay and even where it started. I mentioned my plan for a winter ascent and he wished me luck in a way that almost contradicted his apparently poor memory.

The following weekend Tim and I visited the east side of the Sierra. The night before we arrived for a look at Keeler it was twenty-two below zero near Bishop. The road to Whitney Portal was blocked by snow. Keeler would have to wait.

The next step was to plan for a mini-expedition and wait for a spell of good weather. It was obvious that a couple of climbers by themselves would be unable to carry all the gear necessary for a multi-day winter ascent on the long approach to the 12,500-foot Base Camp. Both Tim and I have a dislike of over-organization. The idea of the usual expedition planning was repugnant. I began recruiting friends. Eventually nine people occupied the high camp. Planning and lists of minutiae were kept to a minimum. Major articles, such as stoves and ropes and tents, were itemized, but all others were left to the discretion of the individual. Each person selected his own food, clothing and personal gear. Financial divisions were absent and base campers would be able to come and go as they pleased. Hopefully some of them could climb east-side routes on nearby Mount Whitney while we were on the needle.

At the end of February Warren Harding appeared after a lecture tour in the East. "Have you been to Keeler?" he asked me. "No," I replied, "but we're going next week. Want to come along?"

A week later Tim touched the rock of the Needle from the top of a steep snowfield. The rock was rough, the wall was steep, his hands were cold and he used six direct-aid pitons to get past an overhang. The next lead was steeper, but a series of ramps interconnected in a manner that allowed the pitch to be climbed without aid. But how slowly! At close to 13,000 feet extended effort always meant even more extended rest. In the evening we rappelled down the two pitches which we had begun in the middle of the afternoon.

The grinning faces of the seven others in camp showed their enjoyment of the winter wildness far better than any words. Besides Warren and Beryl Knauth, his girl friend, the camp was occupied by Mike Farrell, Jim Stuart, Tom Geiser, Judy Sterner and Ron Gilligan. The next morning Warren, Tim and I were heading up Keeler with four days' food, bat tents and plenty of cold weather gear. Mike, Tom and Ron were heading for the east buttress of Mount Whitney, a half-day's climb in summer.

The night was clear. Peeping out of the tent I watched Venus shining brightly above the silhouette of Keeler. What would we find up there? Warren couldn't tell us. He was an alpine wizard with a poor memory. The granite he passed on his way up the needle a dozen years before had made no more impression in his mind than neon lights in a small town on a drive across the country.

Early in the morning we jumared to our highpoint. The snow, the cold and the remoteness seemed portentous as I hung fifteen feet out from the wall on the second pitch. Warren was last and he took a long time. Although we couldn't see him beneath the overhang, we could hear his labored breathing. It was his first serious climb in almost a year and he was out of shape. Even after he shattered his leg in a pedestrian collision with a truck, his resilient physique allowed him to limp past me on a long hike with heavy loads less than a year later. Now, three years of relative inactivity (except for a few isolated efforts, such as El Cap, Kolana Rock and Half Dome) were catching up to him. Even though Tim and I were moving faster and with less effort, we recognized that our motive power was youthful energy and Warren's was inner fortitude. When our energy ran out, Warren would still be coming up the grade in a lower gear.

Late in the afternoon Warren led up to a broken area where we hoped to find a bivouac site. All the ledges were down-slanting and covered with ice and snow. A  $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch fixed rope was partially buried in the snow and on the lower pitches we found several pitons, carabiners and rappel slings. I continued upward to a small ledge. It was covered with snow, but after digging we found a level spot large enough to sit and cook. Tim slept on the ledge while Warren and I slept in bat tents suspended above.

In the morning I led a slightly overhanging dihedral to a stance in a deep recess. The climbing was more than half free, but jam-cracks at high elevation take almost as long as direct aid. Our weather was flawless and the morning sun warmed us from a clear sky. All my doubts were vanishing. I could think of no place I would rather be. Tim came up on Jümars and we looked at each other, smiling. His mind was in the same groove and he took off on the next lead while Warren was still cleaning the long dihedral below. Tim began to haul the first sack; it jammed under an overhang just above me. I saw that I could free it by moving across to the other side of the recess. As I scrambled across, a large rock hit me on the back of the head, seemingly coming from nowhere.

I screamed and buried my head in a patch of snow. With Tim a pitch above and Warren a pitch below, I was effectively alone. My mind was muddled and I didn't know how badly I was hurt. "It was a big one!" I yelled, hating hard hats more than ever because I didn't have one. I felt angry that I had lost my wool cap, although it probably lessened the impact of the rock. After a few minutes the gradually widening circle of red in the snow stopped. I realized that besides some surface pain, minor bleeding and a headache, I had no symptoms of serious injury.

Meanwhile, Tim had been silent. He later told me that he was worried when he heard a sound like a dropped watermelon, the clattering of a rock and a blood-curdling scream, but was reassured when moments



later I yelled, "It was a big one!" He figured that if I could judge the size of what hit me, and seem concerned about it, that I must not be too badly off. When I jumped up to him I passed a spot where a rock about eight inches across had been recently dislodged. The spot was under the haul line and the sequence of events was obvious. Tim assured me that my pupils were the same size and the inch-long gash was superficial.

Each of us led another pitch before the end of the day. Tim got the crux, a difficult overhanging jam-crack/squeeze-chimney a full pitch long. At sunset we came to a broken area of south-facing ledges which were free of snow. Warren set up the bivouac while Tim tried to fix a lead before dark. We knew that the route made a horizontal traverse somewhere and we asked Warren if this was the spot. Once again his memory was dim. He fielded the question like a politician answering a query on Vietnam: "Well, why don't you try traversing there and if when you get out there it looks like it goes, that's probably it." It was, but darkness prevented Tim from finishing the lead. This time we spent a comfortable night in bat tents pitched as one-man tents on the ledges.

In the morning sunlight Tim finished his lead out on the prow. Soon I was staring at his grinning face as he stood in an unbelievable place. On the otherwise sheer prow a ledge clung to the wall like an inverted flying buttress. As Warren climbed the next lead I threw down a rock and watched it land in the snow at the base. Such verticality is rare in the high country, where most faces that appear vertical from a distance become leaning and broken upon close examination.

I watched two dots move across the snow from Base Camp toward Mount Whitney. Beryl and Mike were starting to climb the "Mountaineer's Route" to meet us on top with ice axes for the descent. Two pitches and several hours later I led what I thought should be an easy section. With hindsight, perhaps we should have tried the southern instead of the northern side of the prow on the next to the last pitch. Instead, I huffed and puffed up a short F9 jam-crack. The angle of the prow was breaking back and Tim climbed the last pitch without a piton, reaching the top at about the same time that two dots appeared on top of Whitney. By early afternoon we were all on top of Whitney celebrating the climb, reunion with our friends and Tim's twenty-sixth birthday. With winter gear, the sixteen pitches had taken three days, making the climb equal in effort to some of the longer Yosemite climbs. Our luck with the weather was so good that we questioned whether we had made a real winter ascent.

On the descent Tim and I talked of the future. Both of us would go separate ways for the summer. Tim still wanted to climb El Cap in winter. At belay spots on the climb we had talked of doing a route together on which we could move quickly. Keeler required so much food, climbing gear, winter clothing and direct aid that progress was

relatively slow. From the summit of Whitney I had pointed out the profile of an unclimbed wall on the east peak of Mount Barnard. "The climber's guide says that it's 2200 feet, but I've seen the map and been to the base. It's only 1400 or so," I told him. It looked as steep and almost as high as Keeler, but just a notch less serious, especially from ten miles away.

A month later I met Tim in Yosemite after his successful ascent of El Cap, and we headed for Barnard with a minimum of equipment.

The next morning, Tim, Judy Sterner and I carried loads up the arduous 6000-foot approach to the base of Peak 13,680+, the east peak of Mount Barnard. The following morning, at daybreak, we started the climb. No haul bags. We crammed two day-packs with bivvy gear, chocks, twenty pitons and a little food. We hoped to find enough snow on ledges to quench our thirst. If we encountered any difficult free sections, the leader could take off his pack and retrieve it with the haul line.

Moderate fifth-class climbing led us to a perched snowfield from which the diamond-shaped wall swept unbroken toward the distant summit. Tim was not optimistic about the free climbing. His lead was harder than he expected and he yelled down that the next pitch would be a horizontal traverse across a smooth steep wall to the base of a dihedral. In Yosemite I would not have been optimistic either, but here the cracked and mottled high-country rock made the traverse an F7 romp. The dihedral was steep, but blessed with several parallel cracks. I chose two and went for about a hundred feet with an arm and a leg in different cracks. Pitches went quickly with supreme satisfaction. Overhanging bulges had just enough cracks and knobs to allow free climbing. We ate lunch and snow on a fine ledge early in the afternoon. Until the ledge we had not come across any decent bivouac spots, and we were relieved to find something.

But the free climbing continued on, and we hoped to make the summit in one day, something that was only a dream when we began. Most pitches were F7 or 8 and one pack had to be hauled about half the time. Except for the fifty-foot jog on the third pitch, our route was becoming a straight and narrow line toward the summit, only a few feet south of the center of the prow. At 5:30 P.M. we reached the top. Tim's last lead was a vertical corner with a touch of F9, a fitting ending to the finest all-free route I have ever done on the Sierra crest. We looked around to a setting sun and no ice axes. Imagining the descent route to be a steep, icy gully, we had coerced Judy into bringing our axes up the back way to the summit. She climbed half way up the 20° slopes of soft snow, cursed male chauvinists, and left the axes where we were lucky to find them on our descent. At dusk we crashed through the brush and soft spring snow into our campsite at timberline.

*Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Whitney Region, Sierra Nevada, California

ASCENTS: *Keeler Needle*, 14,240+ feet, second ascent and first winter ascent of east face. NCCS V, F9, A3 (Harding, Auger, Rowell) March 5, 1972

*Thor Peak*, 12,300 feet, west arête (Farrell, Gilligan, Sterner) March 1, 1972

*Mount Whitney*, 14,495 feet, east buttress (Farrell, Gilligan, Geiser) March 3, 1972

*Mount Whitney*, 14,495 feet, "Mountaineer's Route" (northeast couloir) (Knauth, Farrell) March 5, 1972

*Peak 13,680+*, (east peak of Mount Barnard) first ascent of east face, NCCS IV, F9 (Auger, Rowell) April 1972

PERSONNEL: Tim Auger, Warren Harding, Galen Rowell, Mike Farrell, Judy Sterner, Beryl Knauth, Jim Stuart, Tom Geiser, Ron Gilligan

