New Ways up Old Walls, High Sierra

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THE High Sierra has two outstanding big-wall climbs: the west face of Mount Conness (12,590 feet) and the east face of Keeler Needle (14,300 feet). Both faces were first ascended by parties led by Warren Harding in successive years after his first ascent of the El Capitan Nose in 1958. The style of those original ascents resembled that used on El Capitan. Both routes took four days, used much direct aid, and a few expansion bolts.

More recent ascents of these two routes have reflected modern trends. In 1972 Harding, Tim Auger, and I made the first winter ascent of the Keeler Needle face in three days (*A.A.J.*, 1973, P. 276). Several parties have set out for Mount Conness in winter but until 1976, no serious attempts were made. This article will describe the first winter ascent of the Conness face as well as the first free ascents of both faces in the summer of 1976.

The winter of 1976 had the lowest snowfall in forty-five years. In January and early February I made several climbs at high elevations without using either skis or snowshoes on the approaches. Camps were in meadows at timberline and temperatures were often warm enough to wear a tee shirt during the middle of the day. These months were a peak-bagger's paradise, and I met several people in various places who were trying to bag an impressive list of "winter" climbs.

Before winter—or at least the winter months—arrived, I had discussed doing a winter ascent of Conness with both Chris Vandiver and David Belden, a visiting French climber. We did not want to make the climb in the bogus winter, so we waited until after a mid-February storm brought the real thing. With the help of David's girl friend, Christine de Colombel, we spent two days on skis lugging equipment to the peak, where we were greeted by high winds and gray skies. Neither David nor Chris had the time to wait out a storm, so we cached our gear east of the peak and retreated. David went home to France, and Chris took on a full-time job in the city.

After another storm I returned with Dennis Hennek and Mike Graber to try again. A fourth member of the party, Dave Lomba, came along

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Photo by Galen A. Rowell

Chris Vandiver on the West Face of MOUNT CONNESS.

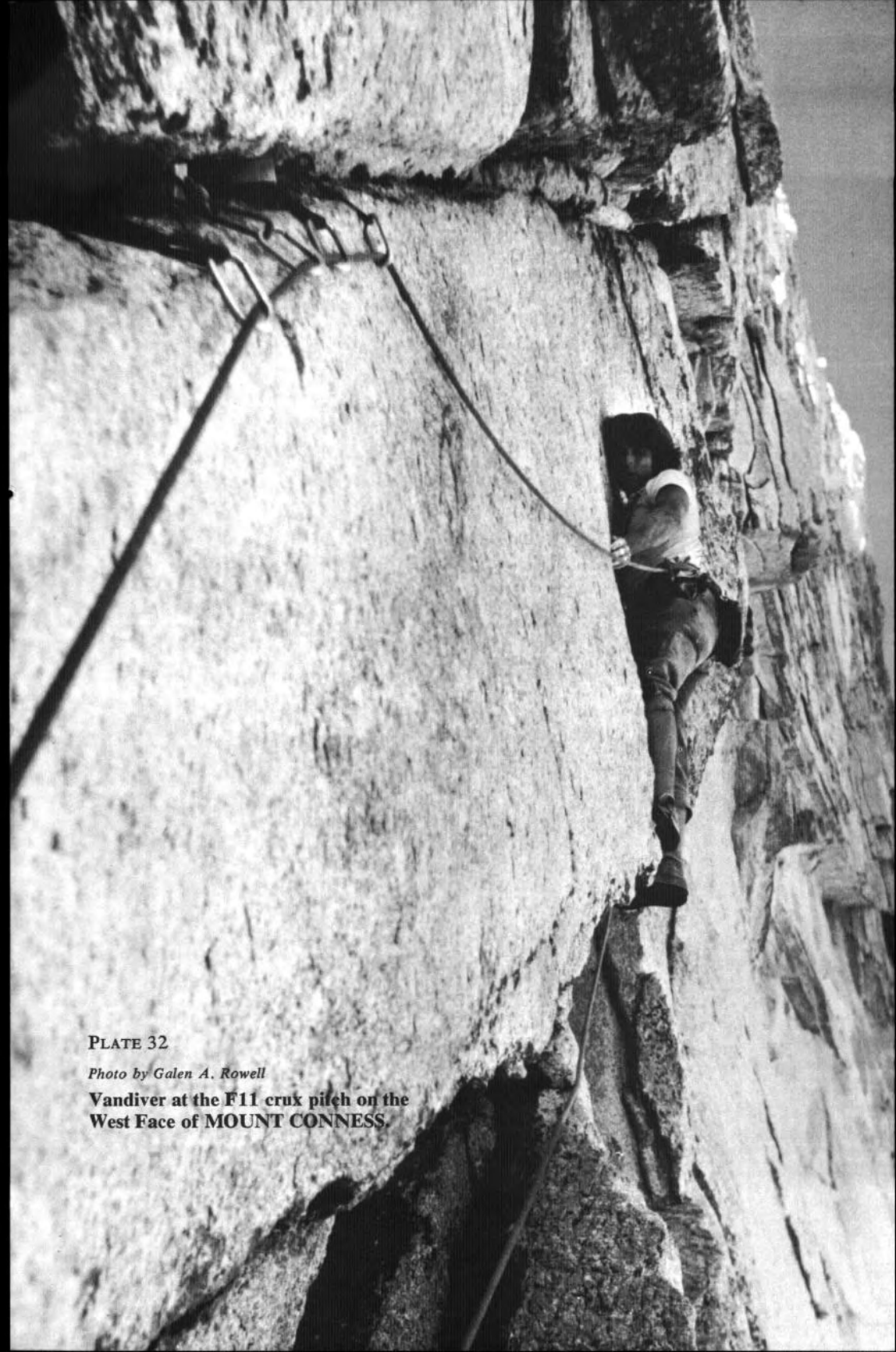

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Photo by Galen A. Rowell

Vandiver at the F11 crux pitch on the West Face of MOUNT CONNESS.

for the winter solitude and to help us transport our gear. It took us two long days of hard work to break trail to the base of the west face. We set up a tent and Mike led the first pitch before dark—an icy, rotten section that had killed Don Goodrich on an early attempt in 1959. Using considerable direct aid, Mike reached an alcove below a long crack in perfect granite.

The next morning dawned clear and cold—ten degrees. I tried to free-climb parts of the next pitch in mountain boots with supergaitors, but resorted to aid for more than half the distance. The rock was monolithic and sheer, very much like Yosemite Valley and quite unlike most High Sierra climbing. Dennis and Mike took the next two leads of somewhat easier going. Then came a long crack, tiered with overhangs and widening into off-width climbing near the top. In 1959 the first-ascent party did not have pitons wide enough for the off-width and they had placed several bolts next to the crack. These were widely spaced, however, and clearly indicate that considerable F9 climbing was done then at high elevation. Modern #10 and #11 hexcentric nuts make the bolts unnecessary, but I gladly clipped into them for safety. In the cold of winter we were concerned with getting up the route, not climbing it in perfect style. We often grabbed pitons and nuts as handholds.

There are no suitable bivouac ledges on the middle of the face, so we set up hammocks in an alcove one pitch below the high point. We melted water with a suspended stove and made freeze-dried meals. After dinner we peered out of our hammocks at the snow-covered landscape lit by a full moon. The bowl below us looked like blue porcelain and the wall overhead seemed endless. A cool breeze throughout the night reminded us that it was winter. In the morning we waited long after dawn for the sun's warmth to pour into us before breaking camp. We jümared up the ropes into a cold dihedral where Dennis led a pendulum and Mike continued up a vertical corner. At about eleven A.M. we broke into the sun again and I led a section of shallow cracks up to a good ledge. Two more fifth-class pitches put us on the summit by two in the afternoon. Dave had brought up our skis from the base of the route and we had an enjoyable run down the mountain.

My impressions of the climb were that it was a typical big-wall effort. It went like clockwork: slowly and methodically and according to plan. With cold weather gear, our packs had been quite heavy and our most memorable experiences had been our camaraderie on the approach and descent rather than the moments on the climb. Without Dave Lomba's help our loads would have been much heavier and our enjoyment less. Harder than any pitch on the climb was the last hundred yards to the car in Leevining Canyon. Each of us yelled insults at the dense aspen forest as we waded through deep snow and across the many forks of a braided stream. In one place the ice broke under my weight and a

large floe began to float away with me. At the last moment I grabbed a limb and swung a soaked foot onto shore.

I had no idea that only four months later I would be making my third trip that year to the base of the Conness face, this time in summer and from the opposite side. Chris Vandiver and I walked into Conness on a warm July day with thirty-pound soft packs. Although I was skeptical, Chris was convinced that the 1200-foot vertical face could be free-climbed. Several attempts had already failed, but most of the sections of the route had been free-climbed by one person or another. We knew that the second pitch was the crux and we wanted to get past it on the same day that we hiked in.

As we began the route I found it hard to believe that we were on the same climb as before. The snow cone at the base was gone and so was the ice in the cracks. With light shoes and clothing it felt entirely different than climbing in our winter regalia. I led the first pitch—F9—and set up a belay for Chris. There were two alternatives, one a long traverse to the right and the other a more direct slanting crack above the belay. We found out that Vern Clevenger had led the righthand way and rated it unprotected F11, something he never wanted to repeat. Chris had similar problems with the more direct alternative. He tried for more than an hour to free-climb a shallow groove but he was unable to get good protection or to work out the sequence of moves. The groove leaned to the right and threw him off balance.

Chris descended and moved a few feet to the right, leaving his protection in place. He contemplated a small ceiling with a foothold just above its lip. Above, the rock looked blank for ten feet until it joined the top of the groove he had first tried. It looked scary; he didn't want to try it. Finally, he climbed up and to the right where he placed more protection and clipped in the haul line. Using a double-rope belay, he climbed the ceiling and barely managed to stand on the foothold. The bulging headwall above threatened to throw him off balance. He stood perched on the hold for long minutes while figuring out the sequence of moves. Finally he committed himself and barely made the final move into an F8 slot. The crux had been F11.

We left our two ropes dangling and slept beneath the wall in a wild meadow that showed no sign of human visitation. We could see for miles, but we heard no voices, saw no campfires, nor any other evidence of people. It was nice to know that such an experience was still possible within Yosemite National Park in the middle of summer.

Before dawn we hiked back to the wall and climbed to our high point. The next pitch was mine and only F8. Chris led another and soon it was my turn again on the long section of tiered overhangs. I was amazed how much easier things went in warm weather with light gear. The pitch was F10, but it took less than half an hour to lead. The next

lead was Chris's and it was a section we anticipated to be the second hardest part of the climb— a pendulum in a shadowy dihedral. In ten minutes Chris scurried up the lower part that we had nailed in winter, then stepped across the pendulum with comparative ease—F9. From that point on, every pitch was F9 until the route eased up near the summit. At two P.M.—this time without a bivouac—we ate lunch on the summit, amazed that the all-free ascent had gone so well.

After freeing Conness, Chris and I talked about trying Keeler Needle. Its face was 1800 feet high and I remembered several overhanging sections. In mid-August we went to attempt Keeler with Gordon Wiltsie, an eastern Sierra climber with big-wall and high-altitude experience. We were chased off by a snowstorm, but at the end of the month we returned again.

On Keeler, too, the second pitch turned out to be difficult. The normal route went over a ceiling by means of a three-inch crack filled with a loose, shattered flake. I tried to bypass the ceiling by face-climbing to the left, but was unable to make a ten-foot section. Eventually, I returned to the ceiling and found the scariest part to be F7 climbing with poor protection on the face next to the rotten flake. Once on the main part of the overhang I was able to get good protection and firm holds. The moves were F10, but very safe. The rest of the first day's climbing was consistent F7 and F8 except for one broken area near the top of a pedestal. That night we bivouacked on a comfortable ledge about halfway up the wall. We had started at noon, but we had planned to do the route in two days so we wouldn't have a time crunch trying to free difficult sections.

During our bivouac we talked about our style of climbing. It was hardly original. Our techniques and equipment bore far more resemblance to those of Robert Underhill's first ascent of the nearby east face of Mount Whitney in 1931 than to those used on most Yosemite wall climbs. The 1931 party had used tennis shoes; the later wall climbers were shod in stiff-soled kletterschue. We were using soft shoes again. Although we had modern hardware—mostly nuts—its purpose was protection, not aid; that, too, had been the purpose of the 1931 equipment. What we were doing was using classic climbing traditions in a realm where big-wall technique had temporarily pre-empted much of the need for free-climbing skill and style. The trend toward free-climbing old big-wall routes had already started in Yosemite, where the east face of Washington Column was freed, and in Colorado, where the Diamond on Longs Peak had also been freed.

It was all too easy to view the significance of these big free climbs as just another step in Lito Tejada-Flores' famous climbing games. But the meaning was much deeper. For almost two decades rock climbing had been bisected into two halves. There were free climbers who nor-

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Photo by Galen A. Rowell

Chris Vandiver on the first free ascent of KEELER NEEDLE.

mally did shorter, harder routes and concentrated on style; and there were wall climbers who used different equipment and ethics with a goal of reaching the top of a long cliff. Now, the two disciplines were merging together again. Each had gone its own direction until the guiding principle of simplicity in mountaineering began to meld them together again.

Philosophizing our efforts was satisfying, but it had little to do with actually free-climbing the overhanging corner above our bivouac. A party of fast, capable climbers was ahead of us on the route and late in the afternoon they had yelled down, "You won't be free-climbing this part."

Chris was definitely the most skilled free-climber in our party and shortly after dawn he began the long corner. At first he face-climbed to the right, but after thirty feet he was forced into an off-width crack. The rock was not perfect and the altitude made jamming exceedingly strenuous. Watching from below, we could not appraise how Chris was doing. His motions slowed until he was only gaining an inch with each new positioning of hands and feet. But he wasted no movements; everything was smooth and under perfect control. It seemed that if he fell, that too would have been in perfect control. He didn't fall; we knew the crux was over when his motions lengthened and he scrambled up to a rest position. The crux was F10—better protected and not as difficult as the one on Mount Conness a month earlier. We were surprised. Keeler was larger than Conness and it had a bolder appearance. We had expected it to be at least as hard.

We knew the difficulties eased off above Chris's dihedral pitch. I remembered one long aid pitch, but recalled also a comment from a later party that had free-climbed around it via a crack that had been filled with snow during my winter ascent. All morning the three of us alternated leads, none harder than F8. We stopped to eat on a spectacular ledge that clung to the uninterrupted sweep of granite like a window washer's scaffold. We all recognized it because it had appeared on an *Ascent* cover photo in 1972. The backdrop of that photo had been winter and it captured a feeling of solitude. Our view from the same ledge was of barren cliffs and the desert floor nearly 11,000 feet below. We could clearly hear conversations on top of Mount Whitney, about a quarter of an air-mile away, where about fifty hikers stood staring at us.

Shortly after noon we reached the summit and celebrated our success. Because of our lightweight climb, we had foregone the use of haul bags and had carried Ultima Thule packs up the route. We were able to cram all our ropes and hardware inside, scramble down to the Whitney trail, walk to the summit, and join the group of climbing fans unnoticed. While they eagerly discussed the sport of climbing, our thoughts were

already moving down the mountain, through timberline meadows, twisted stands of foxtail pines, and finally to our car, which would take us to a hot spring and a prime-rib dinner that same evening.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: High Sierra, California.

ASCENT: Mount Conness, 12,590 feet, first winter ascent of west face (Graber, Hennek, Rowell) March 6, 1976, NCCS V, F10, A3.

Mount Conness, first all-free ascent of west face (Rowell, Vandiver) July 1, 1976, NCCS V, F11.

Keeler Needle, 14,300 feet, first all-free ascent of east face (Rowell, Vandiver, Wiltsie) August 21, 1976, NCCS V, F10.

PERSONNEL: David Belden, Christine de Colombel, Mike Graber, Dennis Hennek, Dave Lomba, Galen Rowell, Chris Vandiver, Gordon Wiltsie.