

Gumbies on Gurney

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THE KICHATNAS are located approximately 45 miles southwest of the Denali massif in the Alaska Range. Although the peaks are all under 9000 feet in elevation, what they lack in altitude, they make up for in steepness and intensity. The Kichatnas have been described as an Alaskan Yosemite or a big version of the Bugaboos. In addition to vast granite walls, the range is blessed with all the nastiness of Alaskan weather. Unlike the Yosemite or other wall areas in the Lower Forty-Eight, help is not a shout away. Our goal was to climb the southeast face of Gurney Peak, which had been climbed twice before, but from the north.

Our team consisted of four Salt Lake climbers: Bob Ingle, Seth "ST" Shaw, James Garrett and me. We hoped our training on Utah crags and frozen waterfalls would prepare us for the wretched chimneys, cataclysmic storms and loose rock we expected to encounter. Were we ready for this? Being Alaska Range Gumbies, we hoped so.

After a long drive in the Blue Salmon (aka '72 Ford Van), we arrived in Talkeetna. The weather was fine and our ace pilot Doug Geeting blasted us in after only one day. The Cessna 185 was full of gear and food. Forty-five minutes later, we were circling the main summits of the Kichatnas. After our landing, the mountains took on a different perspective. From Base Camp on the Trident Glacier, the mountains rose abruptly out of the smooth silk of the glacier, touching the sun as it worked its way across the sky.

The southeast face of Gurney Peak lay four miles to the south over two passes. The first pass appeared to be a casual walk-up with a few patches of rock. The rocks were overhanging, the snow waist-deep and the crevasses moving. We made it over the pass, but not at the low point. We fixed three ropes and christened the pass "Bust Ass." We ascended and descended the pass eight times to ferry our gear to the base of the route. Each time it was a new adventure: big spindrift avalanches, frayed ropes or, our favorite, iced ropes. The second pass was a tedious hike up a steep slope.

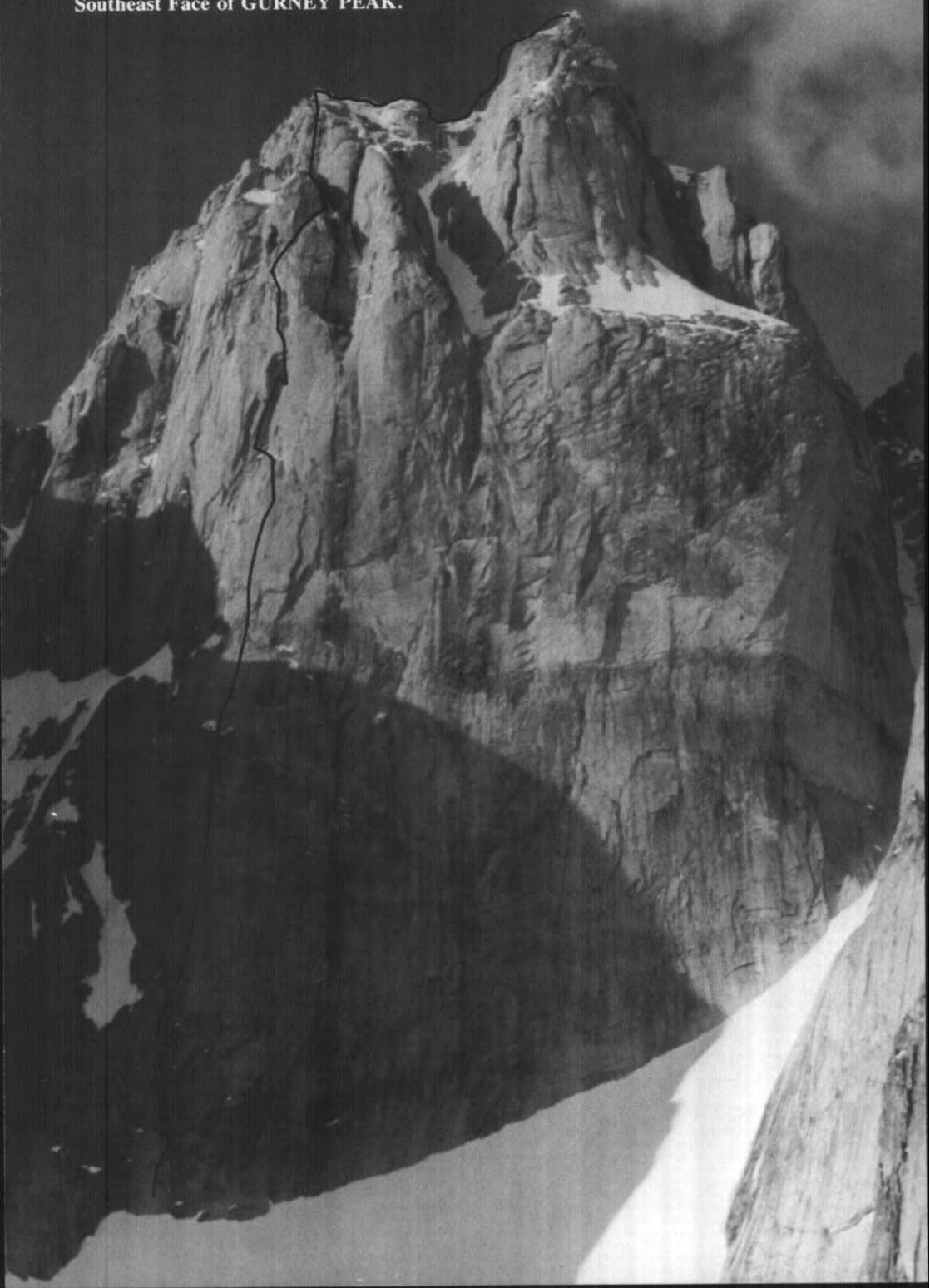
The spectacular scenery made up for what the hard work took out of us. The days developed into a routine, interrupted only by a short storm now and then. Papier mâché (oatmeal) for breakfast, Snickers for lunch, noodles for dinner and lots of grunting in between.

*Recipient of an American Alpine Club Climbing Fellowship Grant.

PLATE 20

Photo by S.T. Shaw

Southeast Face of GURNEY PEAK.



Finally we touched the wall, ready to climb the orange granite. From the platform we hacked out at the base of our route, the rock looked good, except for a few bands of lighter rock. Drill fests in bad rock? The unknown awaited. The first pitch started with a few wide moves and then petered out to a thin crack. This took blades well until one decided to pivot and sent me on a short flight. I got back up, taped the gobi and hammered a bashi into submission. At the first belay, clouds were appearing. ST headed up the second pitch, a steep chimney which exited to some hooking on portable flakes. The weather turned nasty. Snow flowed off the summit in waves, while the wind drove it like a hawk. With two ropes fixed, we retreated to a snow cave like beat puppies. Cooking in a drenched tent that was continually flattening out had been as much fun as playing Twister with a blowtorch in the center. The challenges never ceased.

Thin cracks and loose flakes created the vertical topography of the next 100 meters. I could either spend two hours nailing or 45 minutes running out some 5.10. Which to choose? I took off my plastic boots and slipped into my On-Sights for some truly *à-vue* climbing. About every four meters a pocket appeared into which I gratefully stuffed camming devices of various sizes. Stemming out to a small nubbin, I cleaned a slot for a #1 TCU with my nut pick. Clipping into the little wonderpuppy, I glanced down at Bob, secure at the belay. It looks good, I thought. I moved up another three meters, but still no good gear. I'd better get moving—nothing happening here. A good flake with a notch for my fingers. Great! I grasped the flake only to have it pop out as quick as a wink. A hurtling "typewriter" headed for Bob, exploding above him and showering him with shrapnel. Luckily, his helmet prevented any mishap.

With four ropes fixed, James and ST led up to the first bivouac while Bob and I wrestled with two bloated pigs (aka haul bags) and a pack. Hauling took on a new dimension of brutality as small roofs and coarse rock hindered progress. Bob and I met James and ST at a blank spot with snow clinging below it. This was our home for two days; we set up portaledges and began cooking noodles and tuna fish, the official expedition dinner. The harshness of the wall disappeared in the horizontal security of the portaledges.

On May 4, we were at the base of the light-colored bands. Lucky us! The intrusions were created for climbers: tight cracks and no loose rocks. Bob led out over a roof, carefully avoiding threatening sword-shaped rocks which would not be welcome on our ledges. On with the sticky shoes, a few wraps of tape and I was off up 5.10 hand jams in a vertical crack. Yee ha! A little more work and we set up the next evening's camp. The Monkey Terraces sit with three dots of snow below the Flying Monkey Roof, a feature visible from the ground. The next pitch looked like awkward nutting in an overhanging dihedral. Always one to avoid strenuous aid, I liberally back-cleaned, adding to the excitement of A2 climbing in the middle of nowhere. ST and James led the next three pitches and fixed the ropes. The climbing was exhilarating, weaving in and out of gullies and chasms. Which one was the correct one?

PLATE 21

Photo by Bob Ingle

Hanging bivouac on Gurney Peak.



The sun set on the spectacular west face of Lewis Peak as we rappelled down the ropes to our Flying Monkeys bivouac. (I knew that Dorothy and the Tin Man were around somewhere. The flying monkeys kept singing with the wind.) Hanging high on the southeast face of Gurney, we looked out over the vast expanses of glaciers and minor peaks to the east. One of the benefits of being on the wall, aside from the fact that it was warmer than on the glacier, was the reception of the Anchorage rock station. Our contact with civilization was shocking. Ads for discount flights to Hawaii, all-you-can-eat restaurants (later to be our nemesis), and perm specials interspersed with generic rock music reminded us we were tied to a wall in Alaska and not on some other planet. The weather reports usually were the opposite of what was happening around us. All unsavory reports of big storms and low-pressure systems meant nice weather. Anticipation was running high. What would the weather do?

The weather dawned thick with fog. It wasn't snowing and the calm wind frosted our exposed ears. We stuffed packs with a supply of candy bars and clipped our Jümars into 1 Imm of security. The first rope passed over the Flying Monkey Roof, spinning us around on a thread half-a-mile above the glacier. A quick snap of adrenaline heightened the mystical morning. After four ropes we joined the ridge. Through cornices with interspersed boulder problems, we laced our way to the summit crest. The clouds surrounded us, but we knew the sun was near. The climbing was relaxing, hiking through boulders at an angle that felt flat after five days in vertical living. A final chimney set us on the summit. This is the summit! I'm in an airplane flying through clouds. Or am I stationary as the clouds race by?

We were sheltered from the wind which was chasing the clouds off the summits of the Kichatnas. We couldn't view the panorama in its entirety, each peak allowing a glimpse of itself one at a time. The east face of Kichatna Spire winked at us while the Triple Peaks carved holes in the clouds. Belayed downclimbing led to the edge of the wall. Rappelling was not tedious as the scenery presented itself anew. The surrounding peaks closed in on us, cathedral-like. The wind created a calling sound as our hushed talk echoed into the chanting of monks. The strips of webbing at the belays looked like smiles above us. Who would visit these slings next? We soon bedded down in our cocoons for a satisfying rest.

The southeast face of Gurney is a steep line, following cracks for its entirety. We placed 27 bolts for belays, none for upward progress.

The next morning was blustery. Snow obscured our view beyond 100 meters. After a bit of oatmeal, Bob and I descended to our camp which was complete with rum and pancakes. ST and James spent another day on the wall, enjoying the view from the comfort of their portaledge.

We arrived back at Base Camp with a week to spare. ST skied over to P 7360 for a solo ascent. One day we skied to the tongue of the Trident Glacier. The alders were budding, the birds were chirping, and we soaked our feet. The smell of vegetation overpowered our senses, a delightful break from the stench of unwashed poly-pro and smelly climbers.

PLATE 22

Photo by Bob Ingle

**Conrad Anker on Southeast Face of
GURNEY PEAK.**



The sky shone blood-red at three in the morning. Not to worry! Doug would airlift us from this surreal playground today, May 17. Ten o'clock rolled in with a thick wall of snow. As most storms in the past 31 days had lasted 36 hours, we were not overly concerned. By the fourth day, it had become a sad joke. On the ninth day we had run out of all food but for 30 cans of sardines. By the tenth day we had read all our books. During this huge snowstorm, Doug Geeting had made nine attempts to pick us up. He was as stressful as we about the situation (although probably not so hungry). On the eleventh night the clouds lifted and Doug flew up the glacier. The whine of the engine was like music. Emaciated, we flew to Talkeetna for a night of merry making and a day of gluttony.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Kichatna Mountains, Alaska Range.

NEW ROUTE: Gurney Peak, 2560 meters, 8400 feet via Southeast Face; May 3 to 8, 1987 (whole party).

PERSONNEL: Conrad D. Anker, Robert Ingle, Seth (ST) Shaw, James Garrett.

