

A Logan Adventure

GALEN A. ROWELL

I WAVED to the smiling faces in the 5-place helicopter. Sandy Bill gazed resolutely straight ahead. Laura Brant was laughing. Joe Bridges looked happy but bewildered (it was his first wilderness climbing trip). My last image was Jim McCarthy's Cheshire grin fading into the distance as the craft lifted from Watson Lake, Yukon Territory, into the air.

In the morning it was raining. I hitch-hiked to the airport and flew 150 miles in a two-place Super Cub to Glacier Lake, a long, green lake separated from the Cirque of the Unclimbables by five miles and 3000 vertical feet of brush, talus and boreal forest. The helicopter had dropped the others in the high meadow campsite (at a one-way cost of \$1137). The float plane cost only \$120, and we flipped a coin to decide who would ride it. Jim and Laura were eager to avoid the rugged walk; Joe didn't have enough experience in wilderness terrain to try it alone; Sandy and I flipped for the plane. In order to even things out, I contributed toward the helicopter fare, but saved overall. I anticipated a beautiful trek in solitude.

It was a strange feeling being left alone on the shore of a lake so far from civilization. My day pack contained only cameras and a sleeping bag. Mosquitos darkened the air. The valley floor was dotted with beaver ponds. A moose stood in the far corner of one of the ponds and the banks showed signs of bear and lynx. On the slopes above the floor of the valley I began to encounter signs of mountain goat: white gossamer hanging from boulders and brush, yellow urine stains under overhanging rocks. Finally a presence: the feeling I was being watched. Near the top of a talus field a large family of goats bolted from a hiding place only a short distance in front of me. They headed for the rocks and I scrambled after them. Soon I was climbing class 4 rock onto a sweeping 5000-foot granite face. (This is not an exaggeration. The south face of Mount Harrison Smith is a full 5000 feet, although it is broken by ledge systems and the angle averages only about 50°.) I was sure that I could corner the goats and get good photographs, but after climbing about 500 feet I watched them climb out of sight over rock I knew I wouldn't climb unroped. I headed down and crossed the talus field toward the campsite in the meadow, now less than a mile away.

The talus field was very fresh. It had no lichen growth whatsoever and its whiteness matched a scar of many acres on the cliff above. I hopped from rock to rock, as I had done uncounted times before. Suddenly a rock shifted and I reached down for support to keep from slipping. I felt a dull pain at my wrist and was horrified to see that an

unusual splinter of rock, sharper than most arrowheads, had cut an inch-wide gash into my wrist through which I could see my tendon. I washed the wound in a nearby stream and hurried upward. Of all places to have such a freak accident. We were to have no contact with the outside for two weeks, when a float plane was to land at the lake.

Smiles of greeting turned to frowns when the gash was seen. It needed stitching, but we had no doctor or surgical material. I recalled that Joe, a botanist by trade, had bragged about spaying his own cat. He insisted it had only been to save money and was done with the careful guidance of a veterinarian friend. By popular vote, Joe became chief surgeon, stitching the wound closed with a sewing needle and dental floss. I went to sleep worrying about infection. I awoke early to Laura's voice: "Something's very wrong with Jim. He's in severe pain."

We all knew that Jim McCarthy was able to withstand amazing amounts of pain. In 1969 he helped rescue himself from 1000 feet up El Capitan with a shattered arm after a 120-foot fall. While most men would have required a major rescue, Jim was able to rappel and reach the ground mostly under his own power.

When we visited Jim's tent, he told us that his abdominal pain was the most severe he had ever felt. He knew medicine quite well, but was unsure whether it was appendicitis. The pain came and went in flashes as the rest of us stood by, feeling helpless. A large dose of pain killer only dulled it. We wondered what to do.

To our knowledge, no one had ever visited the Cirque on foot. Even the few people running the Nahanni River—about 15 miles away—always started with an airlift to its headwaters. The nearest civilization was a mine about forty miles away. Forty miles of marshes, mountains, icefields and forest.

It was Jim's fourth expedition to the area and he had never seen an aircraft except those he had chartered. We knew that mining exploration and the new Nahanni National Park might bring a few random planes. We also knew that a group from the States was planning to climb about this time. We decided to send someone down to Glacier Lake to wait for the possible arrival of the other climbers. It was our only realistic chance. Sandy headed down.

Fifteen minutes later something miraculous happened. A helicopter landed next to Jim's tent. If this had happened at a time without injury or illness, we would have cursed the motorized intrusion into our wilderness experience (even though our own arrival was by just such an intrusion). Now it was a blessing. Aerial prospectors had seen the glint from our pots and pans in the meadow. They decided to come down and see who we were. Jim and Laura left with them that evening, leaving three of us in the mountains. Doctors in Watson Lake and Whitehorse both diagnosed a gallstone attack. On his return to New York, Jim's doctors could find nothing wrong. Months later he had not had an operation

or a recurrence of the pain. Sitting in the tent in Tombstone Meadow, we could hardly know this and we imagined that Jim was probably having an operation in a tiny North Country hospital.

On the afternoon of Jim's departure Joe and I climbed Terrace Tower by a new route on the northeast corner. My wrist was not very painful, but I found it hard to climb with it stiffly taped. The maximum difficulty was F6. It was a new experience for Joe: route-finding in wild mountains.

The next day we set out for our main objective: the southeast face of Parrot Beak Peak—nearly vertical, capped with a cornice and over 2000 feet high. The climbing was wet, rotten and ugly. The only logical line followed cracks that funneled melt water from the summit snowcap, which was much larger than in normal years. We gave up. Saddened by our discovery that the Logans were not a dream world of perfect rock and perfect cracks, we rested in camp.

Directly above us was an incredible buttress on Mount Harrison Smith, rising vertically for 2000 feet to a jagged ridge that led another quarter mile to the snowy summit. One day we fixed four pitches of F7 to F9 climbing. The following day we began the climb with a heavy haul bag. Soon we were back in wet, overhanging aid cracks. Wildflowers grew out of crevices and as Sandy climbed past he often mentioned their Latin names to us. Joe, the botanist, became so frustrated cleaning the hanging ecosystems from the piton cracks that he constantly referred to the same flowers as "\$#@!ing grunge."

Our latitude was similar to Anchorage and days were 18 hours long in late July. It took us 16 of those hours to nail 3½ pitches of frustrating climbing. Fingernails were worn to the quick from digging to uncover cracks. Mud and dirt rained down from the leader, making the day also uncomfortable for followers. We bivouacked below a small overhang in a drizzle. Joe was so tired that he failed to get himself situated in his hammock. He didn't sleep and was soaking wet in the morning. He was so weak that he did not think he could prusik behind us even if we did all the leading and hauling. We did not know an easy way off the mountain, and it appeared that the normal route was encrusted with unstable snow lying on flat slabs. We voted to go down.

After two failures we were really depressed. Our dream of tasting the Lotus that Sandy, Jim and Tom Frost had found on Lotus Flower Tower was shattered by the injury, the sickness and two dismal failures. Only the weather was cooperating. I had been caught in an eight-day storm in the Logans in August 1972, but now we had only occasional showers.

More than a week remained and we looked for other objectives. We were intrigued by Bustle Tower, a steep, pointed tower directly behind Terrace Tower. Its west ridge appeared to have ledges and plenty of cracks. With a rather late start one morning, we gave it a try. We followed steep snow into an unstable gully from which we escaped to the

right. Soon we were on Lotus Flower rock: firm granite with large feldspar crystals at just the right places for foot and hand holds. Pitches that would have been direct aid on the other routes were F7 or F8 free climbing on vertical rock. The route just kept going. Always a belay ledge, usually with a carpet of thick, yellow moss. Sometimes route-finding problems, but always a solution. Two-thirds of the way up the face, Joe could not find his way past a headwall. Finally I tried and used the only direct aid on the climb to make a ten-foot tension traverse. This is the only pitch that veers right of the ridge; all the others are on it or to the left.

The sun set at nine P.M. as we were still 400 feet below the top. But in the far North, darkness comes a long time after sunset—when it comes at all. We climbed on. An F9 overhang in a dihedral proved to be the crux of the climb and we gained a knife-edged ridge leading to what appeared to be the summit. Two pitches on the ridge put us on top of a tower, but lower than another one previously hidden from view. We reached the highest point at about eleven P.M. It became so dark that we had to bivouac in a windy cave not far below the summit.

A rosy sunrise began at about 4:30 A.M. We scrambled down and rappelled a long, icy gully. As the first rays of orange hit the glacier at the foot of the tower, we coiled ropes and headed for camp. Finally a success. Bustle Tower had no record of previous ascent. It must have been a point missed by Bill Buckingham, who systematically climbed most of the summits of the region in the early Sixties.

Our sleepless bivouac had been without down jackets or bags. We slept most of the day and the next night. By seven the following morning we were scrambling on the great slabs of the south face of Mount Harrison Smith, starting from a talus fan about 1500 feet above the toe of the wall. Goat sign was continuously with us for the first 1000 feet of climbing. We jokingly began rating sections G1-G6. We finally roped up for some honest G6 and found no goat sign on the other side of a long traverse.

Sandy commented with awe at the scope of the wall, "It's big, like the ocean and the sky." We were in the middle of a square mile of granite cliff. Far below, the Brintnell River poured its tawny load of silt into Glacier Lake. A brown current diffused into the brilliant green. At the head of the river, peaks rose above a hanging icefield. Rain squalls moved down the canyon in our direction. To the east, barren hills gleamed creamy white through a rainbow and a fringe of forest. Somewhere over there was the Headless Valley, where 40 people died mysterious deaths in different ways at different times.

By eight P.M. we had climbed 2500 feet, about half roped and half scrambling on steep, slabby granite. We reached a ridge at the top of the wall. We were still about 500 feet from the summit, but the going appeared to be all third class. Encroaching darkness, drizzles, and the complicated descent forced us to end our route on a detached pinnacle.

Knowing the upper wall as we now do, the ascent from the lowest base to the summit can probably be accomplished in two days by a light party. Taking excess gear on this complicated face would drastically slow a party and force belays on class 4 sections which we climbed unroped.

We rappelled, leaving many anchors and slings, reaching camp in darkness and drizzle.

The next morning we had a premier performance. Joe awoke at six A.M. and spotted a lone mountain goat near the base of our buttress route on Harrison Smith. I ran across the meadow in my underwear, first appearing to be unconcerned about the area where the goat was, but finishing with a full-scale charge. The goat did exactly what I hoped he would do. He climbed straight up the rock, following our exact route up one F7 pitch and a higher F8 pitch. The three of us watched all morning and photographed with my 500mm lens. The goat performed flawlessly, leaping to small stances, mantling on small holds and displaying musculature that would make a weightlifter jealous. It was deflating to watch the goat rest on a sloping ledge directly below our rappel sling.

At the bottom of the face we discovered the decomposing body of another goat, one that presumably had fallen from the same vertical crack system. Here was an animal that takes chances, just like human mountaineers. His reward was an aggressive alpine life, an animal counterpart of a timberline pine—pushing the fine edge of the limits of existence.

Soon time and weather dictated the end of our climbing. In a drizzle we carried heavy loads toward the lake and returned for more, since Jim and Laura had left most of their gear in the meadow. After two days at Glacier Lake a plane whisked us to civilization. Too loud and too fast, we returned to a world of Winnebagoes, pizza and Standard Stations; close, yet so far from the wildness that gave birth to all life.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Cirque of the Unclimbables, Logan Mountains, Northwest Territories, Canada.

ASCENTS: Terrace Tower, new route via northeast corner (Bridges, Rowell) July 21, 1973, NCCS II, F6

Parrot Beak Peak, attempt on southeast face (Bridges, Bill, Rowell) July 23, 1973

Mount Harrison Smith, attempt on northeast buttress (Bridges, Bill, Rowell) July 24-26, 1973

Bustle Tower, first ascent via west ridge (Bridges, Bill, Rowell) July 27-28, 1973, NCCS IV, F9, A1

Mount Harrison Smith, new route on upper south face, ending on top of ridge, not the summit (Bridges, Bill, Rowell) July 29, 1973, NCCS IV, F8

PERSONNEL: Harthon Bill, Laura Brant, Joe Bridges, Jim McCarthy, Galen Rowell

