

# Pilgrimage

by John Sheard

The bus rounded a corner and seemed in danger of overturning as the tourists rushed to one side to get their first glimpse of El Capitan. Trying to play the part of the cool, unmoved climber, I gazed determinedly the other way through a rain-spattered window at the dripping forest slipping gently by.

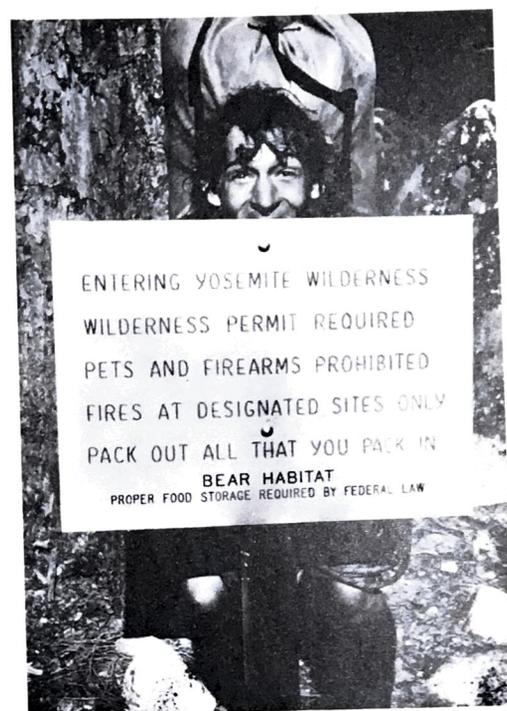
A long journey from England had produced the usual dull, unresponsive frame of mind, and the fact that the rain was falling as hard in Yosemite as it had been in London hardly seemed to matter. I just wanted to stop moving and go to sleep, but my tired eyes were slowly drawn the other way. An eerie silence had fallen, and even the wailing child at my side was subdued to a quiet whimper by something he had seen.

Suddenly I was wide awake, staring open-mouthed like the others at a vertical wilderness of granite thrusting abruptly upward from the trees to lose itself in the mists above. Much bigger than I'd imagined, it seemed savagely unreal. I struggled to find something familiar – a tree, a talus slope, stream, or crack system – something that might give it scale and proportion, but nothing registered. It was simply a meeting of the known, horizontal world of the forest and the unknown, unimaginable vertical wall of granite.

“That’s where our American mountaineers come to practise for the Himalaya,” drawled a knowing voice, and the spell was broken. Man, I could tell you a thing or two, I thought, while settling back into my seat, but depression had fled and my face beamed as the rain poured down.

Dragging my climbing sacks the short distance from Yosemite Lodge seemed as familiar as setting up home on Snell’s field in Chamonix until I squelched to a standstill at the entrance to Camp 4. An imposing office with an important-looking park ranger inside blocked the path to the camp, allowing only tantalizing glimpses of the dripping haven inside. At two dollars a night, it looked like it was going to be a short visit, and my weak comment to that effect resulted in an official finger pointed at a sign restricting camping to a one-week stay. Hell, didn’t they realize I was a climber? But all was well; an official wink of the eye and I thankfully trudged on in search of a resident in need of a paying guest. After setting up my tent and receiving assurance from my new landlord that I could forget the one-week stay limit, I fell into a jet-lagged sleep disturbed only by unfamiliar forest noises.

The following day, as the weather changed to the travel brochure variety that a European climber dreams of but seldom sees, the advantages of California became apparent. With reliable sun, the climbing was a dreamy existence that revolved around good food, ice-



Pearce

- 9 El Capitan, South East Face (*overleaf left*)
- 10 Outer Limits (*overleaf right*)

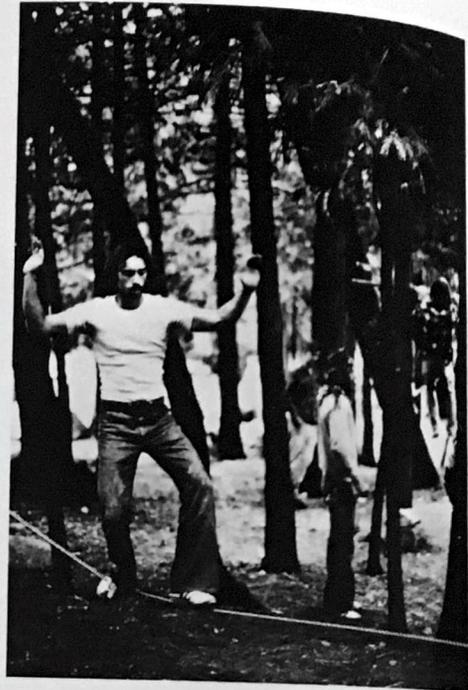
cream, booze, and lazy hours on the banks of the Merced with an inevitable route or two slotted in as the day cooled off. And what routes they were! Cracks varying from long to short, thin to wide, steep to gentle, but always perfect, created an impression that poor climbs don't exist here. Names like Lunatic Fringe, Vanishing Point, Outer Limits, New Dimensions, and a host of others sent the imagination winging on flights of fantasy.

The long, thin cracks epitomized Yosemite climbing for me – clean and spectacular, with the body hung out in space from locked finger-jams, making repetitive moves, quickly and without boredom in a calculated rush to the next resting place and protection point. Pitches of comparable grade were seldom so sustained back home, but here, as the effects of an English winter wore off and life once again started to enter the old body, they could be anticipated with a rare confidence. As strength and stamina returned, our climbing times improved so that longer routes could be done, but since getting up always seemed like a waste of a day to me, inevitable night-time epics were the main outcome.

A blind descent of Rixon's East Chimney finally made us see the error of our ways. Sitting side by side on the top branch of what might have been the belay tree, we listened to the music floating up from Yosemite Lodge and peered up to the inky darkness where our ropes were jammed for the fifth time. Wearing only head bands and shorts, it looked as if we were doomed to a chilly bivouac, and we stared helplessly at each other like two wing-clipped owls.

Finally, desperate body-wrecking struggles in the roof of the chimney freed sufficient rope, so that when midnight struck we could slide hesitatingly down to what we prayed was the ground. Lack of skin due to our half-naked nocturnal wanderings seemed to justify a prolonged session of sunbathing and boozing and a chance to take stock of the Valley life.

Yosemite represents many things to many people: to the hippy, and perhaps the climber, a chance for a hassle-free communion with nature helped by an apparently never-ending supply of dope; to the bum, a chance of cheap living and even profit-making by cashing in empty beer cans at five cents each; to many Americans, the chance to spy on the countryside from the air-conditioned comfort of their camping vans; for still more, a weekend at the lodge and brief glimpses of frightening cliffs from the restaurant windows. To some, Yosemite offers a chance to live and work in idyllic surroundings, where the bellicose youth can howl at the stars while the wiser provide hilarious boozy barbecues where Harding slides along the fat T-bones to make room for his two sausages.



Camp 4 training

Crack-A-Go-Go



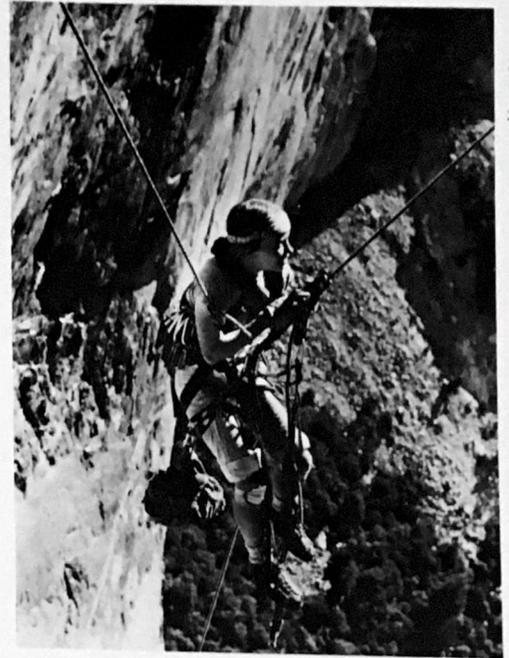
And for the committed climber? All come here eventually when curiosity becomes too strong, but there are many other reasons that might explain the divergent nature of Yosemite climbing. Some come as part of a grand tour of the States, and particularly of the climbing areas, sneak in a few routes and quietly depart. Some appear in September with enormous amounts of equipment, attracted by the fabled big walls and interested only in alpine-style ascents. Some come with the intention of collecting as many of the high-quality free climbs as they can comfortably cram into their holiday. Others, using the fitness which comes from daily climbing, are eager to push the escalating standards even higher, to levels rarely seen outside America. Still others will dwell here throughout the year and, as the seasons change, apply themselves to problems ranging from boulders to free climbs, short to long, and finally to ascents of horrendous A5 El Cap routes – these are the complete Yosemite climbers.

As yet, only Americans qualify in the last category, but the playground is apparent to all who climb here. It starts in the camp-site, where make-shift gym apparatus sprouts from convenient trees, ensuring that the locals stay in shape for whatever schemes lurk in the backs of their minds. It continues around the Camp 4 bouldering circuit where experts perform mantels that the visitor prays will never be found on actual routes. Then on to Swan Slab, where a five-minute walk allows the carefree bouldering approach to extend to two-pitch routes in theatrical roadside settings, with climbs akin to many in Wales and the Lake District. From there to the many crags and pinnacles, offering major routes comparable with Scotland's longest, screened from view by the narrowest strip of untamed forest which deadens the noise of the crass commercialism below. Finally the rocky backcloth supplies long free climbs on mountainous Sentinel and Cathedral, together with newer developments brought about by clean ascents of former aid-routes, and the hard aid-routes themselves, which originally brought Yosemite to the attention of mountaineers the world over and are still being developed.

Herein lies the unique nature of Yosemite, for where else in one small valley are the many distinct aspects of modern rock climbing concentrated and brought to perfection?

The climbers are as difficult to categorize as the vertical world they have created. Of course the ethically-pure climbing athlete, who can do one-arm pull ups all day long and who backs off routes if his second pulls on a sling, exists here. But so do junkies, alcoholics, degenerates, scroungers, comedians, and miserable buggers. There are even a few normal people.

There are climbers who never touch aid and those who grab it by



Nannery

North America Wall

Catchy



Wintringham

the armful; climbers who say they climb 5.11 but really climb 5.9; and those who climb 5.11 but claim they don't to avoid camp followers. Finally, there are those climbers who don't claim anything but just do as they see fit, and those who set up codes of conduct and then denounce.

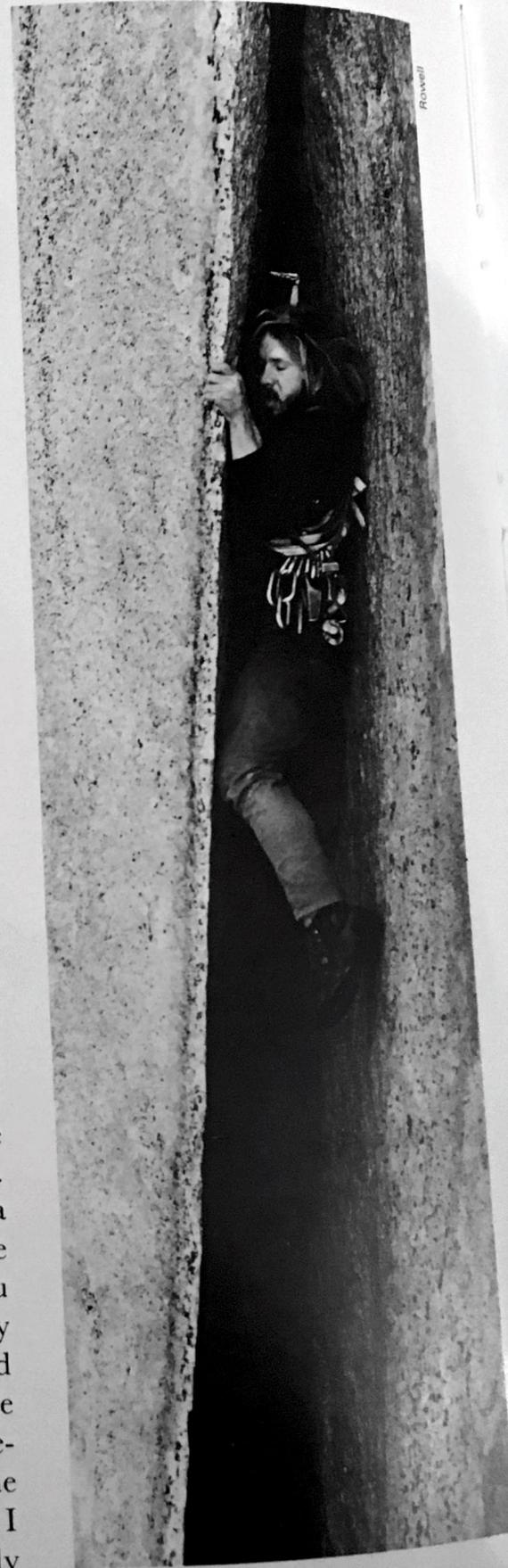
All types of climbers are here, and mostly in the bar. At one table the argument rages about what constitutes a free ascent, and at the next table a local resident drawls: "I don't give a damn whether they do it free or use a goddam ladder, as long as I don't have to read all their bullshit in these goddam magazines." Americans, Canadians, French, Swiss, Brits and Germans – they are all here. A sweaty, chalky, finger-sore, multicultural society thrown together by the common longing to climb rocks.

"Kurt and me climb Glacier Apron Point. Left foothold, right handhold, left handhold, falling. Left foothold, right foothold, right handhold, falling. Very, very good. Tomorrow Kurt shall ride bicycle down Glacier Apron Point. Not dangerous, only last metre is dangerous. Cigarette for me?"

"Yesterday Kurt and me climbing Outer Limits. Falling." Jesus, even hard-up Germans!

Outer Limits was a name to collect, and it was in the unforgettable atmosphere of preparing for such a famous route that I received my introduction to tincture of benzoine, a sticky brown liquid in which to soak your hands before thrusting them into the chalk bag. God, it felt good. Tapes – those unique American aids to skin preservation were securely held in place with the same stuff, but since I found that overtightening them resulted in hands suddenly falling nerveless to my sides, I declined their use. A sad loss.

After several weeks in the Valley, life began to take on a more relaxed style as the frantic daily snatching of routes eased up, so much so that I almost missed out on two vital elements of Yosemite climbing. Flared chimneys and face climbs had been ominously absent from the tyrant list of recommended routes that had led me through the Valley. The chimney omission was solved by a body-wrecking ascent of a powerful line just behind Camp 4, which I could happily have done without. Unfortunately, these routes usually take superb lines, so if you feel drawn, don't do an easy one or you may feel tempted to try another in the hope that it might be better. Try to climb a 5.10c and if you're at all sane, you will be cured of them for life. This is where training and American muscle really pays off. For a skinny Yorkshireman, more suited to hanging from fingertips than body wedging, the whole thing was strenuous to the point of desperation. Thank God I wasn't leading. Twenty-five feet took nearly an hour, continually



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accompanied by a feeling of total insecurity as sneering bolts slid by in agonizingly slow motion.

For face climbing, the uninitiated turns immediately to the Glacier Point Apron with its ridiculous smoothness and low-angle. However, down the valley lies the Apron of Middle Cathedral where we found the real gems and another aspect of Yosemite climbing. The routes are more than just physically different from the powerful crack lines with their strenuous obvious moves. Here the harder climbs produce a feeling of tension and a need for intense concentration. They are quiet, lonely experiences where the voice seems to lower as if in respect to the rock itself.

Quicksilver appeared on our list, and its lowly 5.9 grade suggested a pleasant introduction. The end of the first pitch revealed the true nature of apron climbing on Middle. It was much steeper than the better-known Glacier Point but it had compensating holds, so that progression became a series of precarious balance moves on awkward, unobvious footholds, with the constant worry that a false line could lead to irreversible climbing. And I felt somewhat insecure as I peered from the corner of my eye at the remote and fragile protection bolts. I was amazed that a 5.9 grade was given to such a potentially serious route! Pitches two and three seemed to blend into 200ft. of worrying movement that required constant control.

Just around the corner, the longer but easier routes of East Buttress and the Central Pillar of Frenzy, with their multitude of cracks and face holds, were superb introductions to what must be the finest area of long free routes in the Valley. Indeed, to be alone on East Buttress in the late afternoon, the sun cutting diagonally across the face to illuminate the red and yellow rock and the Cathedral Spires shimmering above the silent pine forest, left memories of the California wilderness which are slow to fade; this wilderness a mere ten-minute walk from the highway.

All too soon the summer was over and the slow pace of the new found Valley life had to accelerate to that of the world outside. I took a last sad look from the Wawona tunnel at El Capitan and the Cathedrals – the silent, proud sentinels over peaceful Yosemite, with man's vulgar interference hidden beneath a calm carpet of green.

Staggering around Los Angeles International Airport with the inevitable huge sack and soaking clothes, I watched the 747s hurtle out into the lashing rain, tilt upwards, and disappear into a thick mist at an altitude of 100ft. If it never rains in Southern California, I thought, what the hell's going on in Yorkshire.



Middle Cathedral Apron  
Flared chimney on 10.96 (opposite page)