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MORE YOSEMITE TALES

by Tom McCrumm

TOM EVANS' tales of Yosemite [UP ROPE, Oct./Nov. 1973] end with Chips Janger and Pat Milligan doing the East Buttress of Middle Cathedral Rock. This climb, a grade IV, 5.9 AI or 5.10, is indeed a classic of the Valley. At the end of September of last year, Tink Peters and I did this climb as the last climb of a two-month vacation that took us through the Wind Rivers, the Tétens, the Wasach Range, the Utah desert and canyons and finally to Yosemite.

Having never done a grade IV before, an early start seemed a must -- and a hard thing for me to do because I'm so used to being awakened by the sun on my tent when I am staying in the Valley. After a few 4th class pitches, 7 am found us roping up at the start of the East Buttress -- early morning starts are bad enough for me, but this climb had an awkward 5.7 overhang to get over as its first move off the ledge; it was obvious I'd better get warmed up right now and get into the swing of things soon. Tink romped up the first pitch after me, and got a stance sitting in the limbs of a shaky tree. The next two pitches were up inside corners and flakes involving 5.7 laybacks. I had been warned of the laybacking on the flakes; "they're thin as soda crackers, an' freaky as 'e'l" said Eddie Birch, Roger's brother. He was too correct -- the climbing involved laybacking up a series of half-inch thick flakes about 2-4 feet around; and I hadn't the slightest idea how they were attached to the rock because they all squeaked and moved when pressure was put on them. These first three pitches brought us up to the base of the 30-foot bolt ladder. This is the AI section which can also be climbed as 5.10 face climbing ("real 5.10," to quote Steve Wunsch!). A short-lived vain attempt at getting up a few feet free quickly prompted me to climb the bolt ladder. At the top of the bolt ladder were a few hard moves leading up to the 5.9 ceiling. Having been weaned on Shawangunk ceilings, I expected to see something stick out about 4 feet over which I had to climb 5.9. The "ceiling" as it turned out was only 18 inches, and a few strenuous moves got my hands into some good jams overhead. Another short pitch with some 5.8 brought us to the easy pitch of the climb, an 80-foot 5.5 traverse around to the north side of the buttress. As I led out this improbable exposed traverse I uttered my usual gripe when I'm faced with traverses on rock "God, I hate traverses". Fixed pins in all the right places helped me keep (cont'd. on p. 3)