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JAN AND HERB CONN

NEWS OF THE P.A.T.C. MOUNTAINEERING SECTION

Vol 45 no. 3

August 1992

White Oak Canyon Trip: Craggin' and Dippin'

by Alex Tait

On July 19th, I led a trip to climb the fabled crag at the third falls up White Oak Canyon in the Shenandoah National Park. I have rendered the cliff and recorded the climbs we did that day because I don't know if this has been done. The club has gone there numerous times and I thought it would be good to start keeping track of what's there. No first ascents claimed, but some of the rock looked unclimbed for many years.

Vic Kohl, Ralph Johnson and Bill Farand joined me in this excursion, and armed with a somewhat vague description from Jeanette Helfrich, we embarked on the trail. From a hike there last year, I remembered it was a short walk up the creek to the waterfalls, but that was only to the first falls. By the time we'd past the first and second official falls—and the dozen unofficial ones—any rock outcropping we came across looked like the crag we wanted to climb. But perseverance and sweat brought us to the cliff at the third falls.

To find it, hike farther up the canyon than you think you need to until you are almost to the third major falls. The trail will turn back to the right and you go straight ahead on a trail that is just as obvious. This trail leads to the base of the crag and the regular trail actually leads right to the top.

We were impressed by the size (60 to 70 feet in the middle) of the cliff and set to climbing. Bill led the obvious off-width crack to the center with a litany of grunts and grinding of skin-- rockburn. I followed, repeating the route and the groans and we declared it a fine climb and a well-protected lead. The small crack (no holds in it!) branching to the left of the Rockburn Crack yielded a tougher variation on top-rope.

Meanwhile, Vic and Ralph top-roped the face to the far right of the crack and the face and ledges to the immediate right of it, finding enjoyable climbing on both. The left side of the far right face was particularly good. On the left side of the main section of cliff, a wide steep ramp angles left. Vic and Ralph top-roped this route, finding an old rusty piton on the way. People were here quite a while back. This route has a nice finish up the face to the left or a harder, dirtier direct finish through the notch at the top.

One of the pleasures of climbing at White Oak is the great swimming hole about 25 feet from the base of the cliff! After a few sweaty climbs in the summer heat the cool water is great. Actually, the entire run of the creek in this canyon is filled with swimming holes and skinny dippers.

At the highest point of the cliff is a potential route that is obvious from a ledge about 20 feet up