



AAC Publications

Ground Up

An Old-School Effort in Yosemite Valley

Day 0. Fall 2010

Most climbers who flip through the Yosemite guidebook give Mother Earth (VI 5.12a A4) only a cursory glance. It's a route that could define the word obscure in Yosemite Valley, yet anyone who has spent days on El Cap has gazed at Mother Earth for hours upon hours. It takes a proud line up the 2,200-foot western margin of the north face apron of Middle Cathedral Rock. An even prouder group of seminal Yosemite climbers (Chapman, Kauk, Long) established the route the year before I was born in 1978. I thought it might make a great free climb, or just a fine repeat, and with little effort I convinced Jeff Johnson to take a look at the lower pitches.

We ventured up discontinuous cracks and face features. The climbing was stout and brilliant. As we moved upward, Middle Cathedral continued to reveal itself. At each belay I scrutinized the massive flanks of granite to my left and right, looking for other signs of passage. Off to the right I could barely make out the unlikely line of the Smith-Crawford, another route that has always piqued my curiosity. But even more captivating was the uncharted sea of golden rock to my left.

I was introduced to establishing new routes by Jim Yoder, one of the most active first ascensionists in Washington state. Before I was even old enough to drive, Jim taught me the basics of route selection and bolt placement. I tagged along as he and a small crew inspected, cleaned, and equipped routes for others to enjoy. They would often spend all weekend doing this—barely climbing for themselves. At the time it was hard for me to understand this kind of motivation and dedication. To me it seemed like an odd and thankless act. But without a doubt it made a lasting impression.

Day 47. Mid-September 2012

Thankfully, for once, there is no one here. No one to witness my explosion of frustration. No one to see me kick and scream at the wall. No one to see me completely defeated. The walls of Middle and Lower Cathedral are the only ones to bear witness, and they stand as silent as statues of iron and gold. They are indifferent and offer no sympathy (which I have never expected from them). I'm alone in a war of attrition that I rarely feel I'm winning. The war is internal and I can only defeat myself.

I've never been one to set goals. My biggest projects most often start accidentally and innocently, but then seem to grow out of control. An idea evolves into a goal, becomes an obsession, and finishes as an affliction. This route, this war, this affliction is no different. This tendency is possibly one of the greatest traits I have as a climber, as well as one of my biggest downfalls as a person.

Day 14. June 2011

This isn't what I signed up for. The plan wasn't to solo this thing. My feet ache and my calves scream as I slowly raise the hammer above my head. Tap. Tap. Tap. The bit bounces off the granite. My heart bounces in my chest, but it's more like thump. Thump. THUMP! Then I'm soaring through the air, hand drill in my left hand and hammer in my right. Thirty feet later the rope comes taut, and the Gri-Gri attached to my harness catches me. This really wasn't the plan.

Before Jeff and I had even finished rappelling from our exploratory mission up Mother Earth back in 2010, we had hatched a plan to come back the next day and venture into the unmapped sea of granite to the left of Mother Earth and the Smith-Crawford. Calling it a plan was a stretch—most plans involve research, a desired outcome, and execution. We decided to just start at the bottom of a 2,000-foot cliff and go climbing. Pretty simple, really. After 14 days of effort spread out over two seasons, I managed to establish eight pitches. Unfortunately, Jeff injured his shoulder at the beginning of the second season, which left me to my own devices.

Mt. Neveragain: Oups, I Did It Again! (left) and I'm Comin' Again (right), two routes established on the French expedition. I shoulder my pack, slide shut the door of my van, and head up the gentle 20-minute approach to the base. But I only make it a short distance before stopping. I'm struggling to find the motivation to work on the route today. Something is telling me not to go. Internal frustration sets in, but I don't fight it. Back in the van, I head toward Tuolumne and a much-needed break and some socializing. I give myself a three-day vacation.

Day 24. Early July 2011

Renewed after my short break, I charge up the trail. Head down, music turned up. I hardly notice my surroundings. I'm determined to finish another pitch today, and my jumars efficiently slide up the rope as the ground slowly drops away. I look up for the first time and notice something weird: One of my fixed ropes dangles oddly from the anchor above. The rope has been chopped in half. Thoughts race: Did someone sabotage my ropes? Was it rockfall? With no way to continue, I retreat down my nylon highway, trying to piece together what happened. At the base I find a small, fresh-looking block and then another, larger block.

Curiosity leads me east along the base of the wall. Fifty feet from the start of my ropes, I stand on a small rise and see the rest of the north face apron, completely devastated. Dump-truck loads of fresh rockfall are strewn across the base. The sight makes me sick to my stomach. I could have been climbing when this happened. I have nearly 1,500 feet of rope and a whole rack of gear on the wall, but as I head down the trail I wonder if I'll ever come back.

Day 25. May 2012

Nearly a year after the rockfall, I'm ready to return. Ready might not even be the word—it's more of a need. I clear my schedule as much as possible, turning down jobs that would advance my career, fatten my wallet, and take me to Mt. Everest, Morocco, and other faraway places. I need to be in Yosemite and finish what I started. At the base of Middle Cathedral, I attach a Mini Traxion to my old rope and start up again, tagging 800 feet of new line to replace the damaged cords.

Day 30. May 2012

I've learned to break everything into manageable sections and routines. I find that timing myself helps with the motivation. Forty-five minutes for the first 1,000 feet of jumaring. Then a 15-minute break. Then one hour for the remaining 800 feet of steeper jugging. The whole process becomes automated, and I try to focus on the immediate task, not letting myself become overwhelmed or lonely. Today is a workday, no real climbing. I've hand-drilled close to 100 bolts for this route. Most of them start out as 1/4" by 1 1/4" bolts, and they all need to be upgraded to 3/8" bolts for free-climbing. At a minimum of 30 minutes a bolt, I'm looking at 50 hours of drilling on this line. I'm hoping to replace 10 bolts today.

Day 35. June 2012

Progress continues glacially. Ground-up, self-belayed climbing is anything but fast. It's easy to look over my shoulder at El Cap and question my choices. With its simple access, trail to the top, tick

marks, pre-stashed camps, move-by-move beta, and daily Internet reports, El Cap has turned into the ultimate granite playground. There's little glory to be found on the other side of the Valley, but I crave the unknown, the untrodden, and the possibility of failure. Middle Cathedral offers heavy doses of all three.

When I return to the Valley and people ask how the route is going, I can tell they wonder what I'm doing up there. Some joke that I must be installing the longest bolt ladder in Yosemite. Others ask why I'd bother with such chossy rock. It's easier to agree with them than to explain. Occasionally people ask why I even bother climbing ground-up. I respond that I honestly never considered an alternative. One of the fundamental joys and challenges I find in climbing is to start at the bottom of a wall and try to get to the top. If I had opted to carry 2,200 feet of rope to the top of Middle Cathedral and start rappelling, I would have cheated myself out of a great opportunity to fail. And without a great opportunity to fail, I would have no chance at a great success.

Day 40. Fall 2012

One hundred feet of moderate climbing leads to manzanita bushes, sandy slopes, and the top. Along with Jeff, who is healthy again and back on the team, I scramble to the summit. There were so many days that I deeply doubted this would happen, and now the top is more a relief than it is a cause for celebration. Regardless what happens next, the route is at one stage of completion. But the project is still far from finished. Numerous pitches required aid, and the ultimate goal is to free-climb them all, some of which might be beyond my ability. I'm not sure if I'm actually getting any closer.

Day 50. Late Fall 2012

There was a time when I loathed project climbing, mostly because I didn't understand it. The process initially appears to be one of simplification and narrow-mindedness, with the sole goal of chasing higher grades. Without a doubt this mentality exists, but it is far from the only aspect of redpointing. During every hike up the trail, every trip up my fixed ropes, and every attempt to lead the crux pitches, my experience grows and becomes more acute. I've learned to take joy in knowing the route so intimately. Simple things such as knowing which rock will roll under my foot on the approach, or telling the time from the shadow that Middle Cathedral casts across El Cap Meadow. Or knowing that if my hips shift slightly to the left and my right heel turns in too much I can't hold the right-hand pinch long enough to move my left hand. These things can't be understood without an investment of time and commitment. And the more I invest the more I gain.

Day 55. Late Fall 2012

It's the fifth day of my free attempt, and time is running out. I have a flight out of Fresno and weeklong job starting in two days, and then a month's work in the Middle East right after that. It's hard to remain positive. I haven't managed to free any of the three crux pitches, and no amount of effort or desire may change that. Two of the cruxes, "The Index 11d" and "The Athletic 12c" are within reason, but "The Boulder Problem" still seems far out of reach. I've given it well over 50 attempts in the last two months, and I wouldn't be surprised if it takes 50 more for me to do it.

My friend James Lucas has been my regular belayer on my free attempt, and he does his best to keep me from going crazy with bad jokes and abundant stoke. As I repeatedly fall off the Boulder Problem, he urges, "Come on, Mikey, come on!" He has a belief in me that I no longer have in myself. Another try. Then another. I inch closer but come up short again. We head up to the last crux pitch, the Index 11d, a sequence of insecure smears, subtle backsteps, and thin liebacks. I do much better on this pitch and almost manage a clean ascent. My second go is even better. The thought of actually sending helps with morale.

Back in the portaledge I weigh my options. I should be rappelling tomorrow and calling it quits, but

I'm concerned that if I don't finish the route this season it may never happen. The climb has already stressed my relationship to the breaking point, and disregard for my photography career isn't wise. The choice is obvious, though. I call my client and cancel the next shoot. Thankfully the producer is a climber and understands my desires. I've just bought myself another week.

Day 57

Success in climbing is a complex web of many variables: the properties of the rock, atmospheric conditions, equipment, preparation, knowledge, strength, motivation, and belief. Now, 1,600 feet off the Valley floor and seven days into my planned five-day ascent, I have little ability to control anything except my motivation and belief, and hardly a fragment of these remains. But until nothing is left I have to keep trying. Trying to get my foot to stick, believing I can reach the next hold. Burn after burn I explode out of the corner of the Index 11d. Again I match feet, backstep, slide my shoulder up the corner, match feet again, push harder—and this time I reach farther. My tips take purchase, as does my belief.

Day 58

One single hard move remains. One shitty gaston I can't hold. I've fallen off this move more than a 100 times already. In what is surely a final move of desperation, I slightly change my sequence. A nominal shift of my hand unlocks the move, and again I reach farther. Joy and satisfaction completely overwhelm me. The Boulder Problem is laid to rest. Things fall into place, and I make quick work of the Athletic 12c. Tomorrow, all I need to do is struggle up the last few pitches, which I know I will.

Day 59

There is a weird emotional vacuum after reaching the summit. For the last two years Middle Cathedral has been my muse and my foe. It provided challenge and commitment that I struggle to find in other parts of my life. I learned to thrive off the pressure and the possibility of failure. And now, as I lay here for one final evening in my portaledge, it's hard not to wish the experience would continue.

Just before going to sleep I get a text from Tommy Caldwell, saying congratulations and asking about the route. He's interested in checking it out with Jonathan Siegrist. I don't even know how to respond.

When I get down to the Valley, I swing by their campsite to give them the details, and I'm genuinely shocked when they say they want to go up right away. The only problem is that I still haven't cleaned up the route. Most of my fixed ropes and directionals are still in place, so I set my alarm and made a plan to jug ahead of them, cleaning the ropes as they climb. I go to bed worrying about what those guys will think. Will they fly right up the route? Or does it warrant the fight I had to give it?

Day 61

From my perch up on the fixed lines, I have a bird's eye view of Tommy tick-tacking up the small, perfectly sculpted holds on the first hard pitch of the lower slab. When he reaches me at the belay, he has a grin from ear to ear. He and Jonathan make quick work of the next pitches, and then slow as the wall kicks up into the crux leads at two-thirds height. Jonathan fights for the onsight on the Boulder Problem but falls after committing to the wrong sequence. As I finish rappelling, I look up and see Tommy and Jonathan's headlamps click on. They are battling it out on the final crux, giving it everything they've got. It makes me happy to see that my muse and foe may live on.

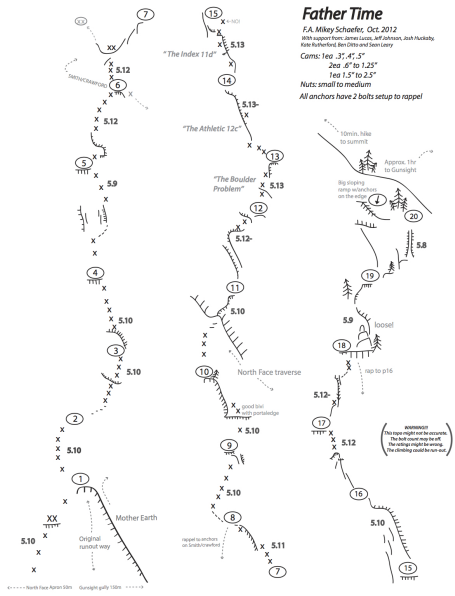
Summary

First ascent of Father Time (VI 5.13b) on Middle Cathedral Rock, Yosemite Valley, California, by Mikey Schaefer. After a ground-up ascent that spanned 60 days of effort over three years, Schaefer finished redpointing all 20 pitches on October 18, 2012.

About the Author

Raised in Washington state but now living in central Oregon, Mikey Schaefer is a professional photographer and widely traveled climber. In 2013 he completed another longstanding goal: new routes on each of the seven major summits of the Fitz Roy massif skyline in Patagonia. During 2009 he put up another new route on Middle Cathedral, Border Country (IV 5.12), with Jeremy Collins and Dana Drummond.

Images



Topo for Father Time, a new route (2012) on Middle Cathedral Rock, Yosemite Valley, California (JPEG).



Latching the jug on the Boulder Problem. Schaefer originally thought the pitch might be 5.13+, but a new sequence brought it down to "about 5.13b."



The north face of Middle Cathedral Rock, showing Father Time.

Article Details

Author	Mikey Schaefer
Publication	AAJ
Volume	55
Issue	87
Page	60
Copyright Date	2013
Article Type	Feature article