



AAC Publications

Mt. Chamberlain Area, Crabtree Crags, New Routes

California, High Sierra

On September 9, Scott Sinner and I hiked 12 miles from Whitney Portal to the base of Mt. Chamberlain. Going from sea level to over 13,000' with a 60lb pack knocked me down a peg, and I slept for 14 hours. We camped on the eastern shore of the upper, and largest, Crabtree Lake, and just a few hundred yards from the base of the main north face of Chamberlain. The next morning we decided to take a look at the handsome wall just west of Chamberlain's north face. This wall is east-facing, approximately 700' tall, and is located just right (west) of the regular descent gully from Chamberlain. The wall is called the "Crabtree Crags" by Bart O'Brien in AAJ 1993.

Two obvious crack systems split the east face of the Crabtree Crags, and with no obvious signs of travel on either, we chose the left-hand line. A hand- to fist-size crack leads up a few long pitches to an alcove, where the crack pinches down to a short fingers section. Several rope lengths of fun, moderate romping lead to the top of the formation. Well protected and with lots of blue-collar 5.9 crack climbing between a few short cruxes, this route makes a nice warm-up for Chamberlain suitors: Portzline-Sinner (700', III 5.10-). From the report in the AAJ 1993, I would guess the Harden-O'Brien route is located a few hundred feet down and right of our route, at the northeast toe of the wall.

The following morning, September 11, we awoke early and stumbled in the frigid dawn to attempt Asleep at the Wheel (V 5.12-, AAJ 2002), a masterpiece by Mike Pennings and Jimmy Haden on Mt. Chamberlain. We bailed after a few pitches, but were impressed by the immaculate rock quality and purity of the line. Tails between our legs, we packed up and walked west down the valley, following the outlet of Upper Crabtree Lake downstream for about one mile. Once at Lower Crabtree Lake, a north-facing wall just above caught our attention. A single laser-cut crack splits the right edge of this clean buttress. "Look at that hand crack!" Scott exclaimed. But as we hiked toward the base of the wall, the features exploded in scale: What I'd thought was a stem box in the first pitch was actually a 15'-wide slot, and the splitter we first noticed was, well, bigger than hands. We reconnoitered the first pitch (5.10) and left the rope hanging to give us a warm-up the following morning.

Our hand crack turned out to be a flaring squeeze chimney. The sting of committing groveling (5.9 R/X) was only soothed by impressive rock quality and occasional knobs. Above we found more excellent, varied climbing up dikes and cracks. A short, steep boulder problem out of an alcove (5.11-) set us up below a crisp tips splitter, unseen from below. Scott grabbed the rack and gave 'er, free climbing until his skin split and he was forced to aid 8' around a suspect block (5.11 C1). The next pitch was a long, steep corner, with a 50' section on lower quality rock that required aid (5.10 C1). Engaging climbing for a few more pitches took us to horizontal ground.

We ended our climb at the tip of the formation, but the terrain continues gradually upward beyond it. We traversed off to the east (climber's left of the route), contouring on a broad bench and then descending steep fourth-class slabs. The route could likely go free at 5.12, or the aid sections could be bypassed by an attractive crack system just to the right. We placed and removed one piton, and left nothing behind. We named our route Skinny Girls (1,000', IV 5.11 C1) after our girlfriends, who would have fit in the squeeze chimney better than we did. It is a highly recommended outing in a pristine setting, surrounded by striking unclimbed lines.

– Dustin Portzline

Images



The east face of the Crabtree Crag, located above the Upper Crabtree Lake, showing the Portzline-Sinner (700', III 5.10-). The one other reported route on these formations is the Harden-O'Brien Route (AAJ 1993), which likely starts a few hundred feet right of the line shown.



Skinny Girls (1,000', IV 5.11 C1) is located on the north-facing wall just above Lower Crabtree Lake. It climbs the obvious crack system from bottom to top.



Looking down the third pitch of Skinny Girls.



Scott Sinner leading the fifth pitch of Skinny Girls.



Scott Sinner leading the seventh pitch of Skinny Girls (1,000', IV 5.11 C1), on an unnamed 1,000' wall above the Lower Crabtree Lake.



Scott Sinner looking up at the Portzline-Sinner (700', III 5.10-).



The broad north face of Mt. Chamberlain (left) and the Crabtree Crabs (right), viewed from near Upper Crabtree Lake. The scree-filled descent gully from Mt. Chamberlain separates the two walls.

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