



AAC Publications

Recon: Cloud Peak

Wyoming's Off-The-Radar Granite Paradise

Sitting on our ropes on the summit, falling stars zooming around us, I'm afraid I might be freezing to death. I huddle as close as I can get to my partner, skinny Ken Duncan. We are bivying in the boulders, and I would give my left nut for just one layer of fleece. It's late August, but on a windy night at 13,000 feet you wouldn't know it.

We have no tent, no sleeping bags, no bivy sacks, no stove, no jackets, no food, and no water. We have empty stomachs and windbreakers. Eventually I can't take it any longer, and I stand up and start running in place—which only manages to pump the cool blood in my extremities back to my heart. I'm cold as a stone. I snuggle back against Ken. He's shivering, but he's sleeping. Damn him!

We have just completed a new route on the prow of the Merlon, the southeast buttress of Cloud Peak, a massif of gorgeous granite that lies in the heart of the Bighorn Mountains of northern Wyoming. One shot, ground up, no beta, no bolts, no pins. It was harder than we expected and longer than we expected. When we pulled over the top it was dusk and we were so wasted we decided it was too risky to try to find our way off. We would just sit it out for the night.

Waiting in the darkness, shivering intensely, I can't believe I'm doing this again on the same bloody peak. A few years earlier, I'd gone into the Bighorns from the west side with Bryan Bornholdt. We bivied on the way in, got too cold after a couple of hours, and started moving again. We made the first ascent of a buttress on the northwest side of Cloud Peak, but then had to suffer through another frosty, sleepless bivy on our way out.

Now, cowering in the black cold, I promise myself I will never do this again. This is it! I'm wising up. Several weeks later, when the sun finally rises, splitting the eastern horizon like a golden axe, it takes over an hour to warm Ken and me enough to start rappelling. We stumble back into camp at noon, discover the wind has collapsed our tent, drink all our whiskey, drag our sleeping bags deep into the krummholz, and crash.

But of course I didn't wise up. Mountains brainwash you. Cloud Peak's towering granite walls, the shining snowfields, the isolation and consequent commitment—these are what you remember. It's a long hike to get there, so you don't see a soul on a single wall. You have a kingdom of rock all to yourself. There aren't many places like this left in the United States, where you will see more pikas and pine martens than people. Where you can choose a line and climb it and never see a sign that anyone else has ever done it.

Last year I went back to Cloud Peak, again, and did four long routes—probably new routes—in five days. Thirty new pitches, yes! The rock was (mostly) solid, the green meadows beautiful and beckoning below, the sky brilliantly blue. In all the wide world of climbing, from the months-long misery of 8,000-meter peaks to bouldering five feet off the ground in a chalky climbing gym, there is nothing better than unclimbed alpine rock. And this time there were no unplanned bivouacs.

– Mark Jenkins

Geography

Cloud Peak (13,166 feet/4,013m) is the highest summit of the Bighorns. Although popular with hikers and fishermen, the range has seen remarkably little attention from climbers, despite walls of solid granite soaring more than 1,500 feet. Yet over the years a few superb routes have been done—and there is much potential for more.

Uplifted in the Laramide orogeny that created the Rocky Mountains, and shaped by successions of glaciers, Cloud Peak rises more than 9,000 feet above the plains just to the east. The mountain is flat on top but very steep on all sides except the southwest, where a narrow ridgeline allows hikers to access the summit.

The cirque directly to the east has 1,000-foot walls on two sides and holds the Bighorns' largest remnant glacier, a half moon of snow and ice feeding meltwater into Glacier Lake. On the south side of this cirque is a rampart of granite extending to the east, culminating in an independent summit called the Merlon, with fine and difficult routes on its huge southeast face. A 900-foot buttress rises to Cloud's southern summit plateau, just west of the Merlon. The 1,500-foot west face of the peak, a broad cirque near the head of Wilderness Basin, is a complex of spires, slabs, and icy gullies. To the north the summit plateau sharpens into a jagged ridgeline leading over Innominate and Woolsey, two of Wyoming's most striking peaks.

The granite and gneiss making up the massif varies in quality but is often excellent, with fine-grained cracks and numerous chicken heads and other alpine features. That these mountains are not crawling with climbers is a testament to their isolation: Cloud Peak's summit lies about 12 miles from the nearest trailhead, and the high camps are 7 to 11 miles in. The east face is so isolated that the first ascensionists approached by traversing over Cloud Peak's summit and downclimbing a snow couloir to the wall. (Horse packers can be hired to carry backpacks to Mistymoon Lake, 5 miles southwest of the peak, and partway in the east side as well.) The rock climbing season is short: mid-July to mid-September.

Climbing History

Technical climbing in the northern Bighorns began in July 1933. An article in the following year's *AAJ* by W.B. Willcox, entitled "An American Tyrol," described an expedition into the valleys north of Cloud Peak that resulted in the first ascents of several high and difficult peaks, including Black Tooth, Woolsey, Hallelujah, and Innominate. These mountaineers did not attempt the steep walls of Cloud Peak, just to the south.

The first climbers to visit Cloud's east face probably were Keith Becker, Charlie Blackmon, and Bob Nettle, who approached from the west over the saddle between Cloud Peak and Bomber Mountain and circled around the Merlon. According to Ray Jacquot, who interviewed Becker, it was early September and the Cloud Peak Glacier presented black ice embedded with bits of black rock—a surface on which it was prudent not to fall, as Jacquot put it. They traversed the glacier along the foot of the east face but found little hope of a climbable line, even one involving direct aid. Instead they climbed the northernmost snow couloir leading to the summit plateau, thus likely completing the first climb out of the eastern cirque, but avoiding the major difficulties.

Fred Beckey, who, unsurprisingly, visited the Bighorns several times, also took a look at the east face but declared it was "too flawless of piton cracks for a decent route." Instead, he climbed a route up the eastern prow of the Merlon, with Joe Faint and Galen Rowell, in 1969. However, Beckey and his partners were not the first to climb the Merlon. That honor went to Wyoming climbers Dart Davis, Ray Jacquot, and Chuck Satterfield, who did the first ascent of the great tower in 1961, climbing the sharp eastern arête.

Throughout the 1960s and '70s, the only routes in the east cirque were snow and ice couloirs, including an ascent by Robert Bliss and George Hurley, who, in 1973, climbed a "hidden couloir," likely the one that slants up to the north directly under the summit. In July 1974, Gary Poush and Dave

Stiller made a spirited attempt on the big rock face left of this couloir and directly under Cloud Peak's summit. Approaching from the east, they climbed up the Cloud Peak Glacier and third-classed a few hundred feet of rock before roping up. "We did one or two easy fifth-class pitches up to a ledge system, where we spent a memorable night in the midst of a noisy and lengthy light show," Stiller said. After a stormy night, they climbed a couple of moderate pitches before traversing across ledges into the neighboring couloir and following it to the top. The rock face they attempted may still be unclimbed.

The west side of Cloud Peak got its first known technical routes in July 1970, when Rex Hoff and Gale Long climbed two full-length routes, following major weaknesses left and right along the face, the first of which involved some ice climbing and the second some aid.

Other early technical ascents were completed but not recorded, including some by Scott Heywood, now a fishing outfitter based in nearby Sheridan. "In the summer and fall of 1976 and summer of 1977, we did some routes on the prow and the east face," Heywood said. "We did not name these routes, nor report them, and the details are fuzzy for me. I think we did an obvious line on the Merlon, approximately 5.9, to the right of the other routes on the main face, plus a number of the other pinnacles in the area."

In the mid-1980s two climbers came to Cloud Peak determined to climb the first route directly up the east face. Arno Ilgner and Steve Petro camped on the summit before descending the northern couloir to the Cloud Peak Glacier, and then spent several days working on Shimmering Abstraction (V 5.11). Highly skilled and enjoying all the advances in equipment of that decade, the two lifted Cloud Peak's standard of technical difficulty by two full number grades. The climbers placed about six bolts to protect face moves and also used pitons. Steve Bechtel, who made the second ascent with Mike Lilygren during the 1990s, said the route goes hammerless, but with an R rating, and that the 30-year-old bolts "should be considered suspect."

Other routes in the cirque have been attempted, including one by the late Craig Luebben and Annie Whitehouse. But no other full-length rock climbs are known. Climbers have focused greater attention on the slightly more accessible walls of the Merlon. Heywood and possibly others climbed routes on the lower-angle rock on the right side of this face, but Dennis Horning and Jeb Schenck were likely the first to probe the middle of the southeast face. Around 1975 they climbed about four pitches, aiming for the big chimney that drops from the summit, using bolts to protect run-out face climbing up to mid-5.10.

In the late 1980s, Matt Cupal and a partner picked the plum on the Merlon: the striking Nose-like prow that forms the left skyline when the formation is viewed from the east. Cupal remembers neither the date nor even his partner's name. But the route was so good that he went back on his honeymoon about five years later and did it again.

In 1994, Steve Bechtel, Mike Lilygren, and Bobby Model began working on the steep wall to the left of the Horning-Schenck attempt. They placed bolts to protect run-outs on the difficult upper pitches, along with bolted belay anchors. On their free push they climbed to within about 100 feet of the top before rain-soaked rock turned them away. Two years later they came back and freed the full route in a day.

"A mathematician would describe the steepness of the Merlon as increasing at an increasing rate," Model wrote in the *AAJ*. "The route starts as easy fifth class and gradually becomes more difficult. The top pitches [all] are 5.11, with four of the pitches at 5.11+.... The climbing was challenging and varied, ranging from hand jams to puzzles of razor-sharp crimps. The top portion [had] a vast array of water-sculptured chicken heads and huecos, spaced just far enough apart to make the climbing interesting." Their route, Super Fortress, has been repeated by at least two teams, who have verified its difficulty and quality.

Although the Merlon's southeast face had been climbed at least six years earlier, and attempted long before that, the 1996 team thought they were making the first ascent. "The funny thing was that although Dennis, Matt, Mike, Bobby, and I were all friends, we had no idea anyone had ever tried the southeast face before," Bechtel said.

This theme has been repeated numerous times in the Cloud Peak massif. In 2008, Ken Duncan and Mark Jenkins added their own line to the Merlon. Unaware that the prow had been climbed by Cupal and partner two decades earlier, they chose a line just a bit to the left of Cupal's, completing their 12-pitch route, No Climb for Old Men (5.11 A2), in a long day, with a very cold open bivouac on top.

In August 2014, Jenkins and Dougald MacDonald spent six nights below Cloud Peak and climbed several previously undocumented routes, including the 900-foot south buttress of Cloud Peak (Rust Never Sleeps, 5.11a). But one route they thought might be new probably was climbed in the 1970s by Scott Heywood and partners: the splendid, 1,200-foot southeast arête (5.8), just left of the Merlon. Such is the nature of Bighorn climbing.

Possibilities

There's still only one known rock route in the big eastern cirque. The wall to the left of Shimmering Abstraction is taller and steeper, and like the Ilgner-Petro line it likely would require some bolt protection. The north side of the Merlon promises at least one good 1,000-foot-plus line at its east end. The steep face above the cirque's northern couloirs also may offer a route.

There is still potential for routes on the southeast side of the Merlon—the Horning-Schenck line remains uncompleted, for one. The southwest-facing wall to the left of the Merlon's prow, about 1,000 feet high, is the steepest wall on Cloud Peak believed to be unclimbed. It has obvious, continuous crack systems. There is room for several more routes on the 900-foot south buttress of Cloud Peak, with the steepest and best rock on the left side.

The broad, complex west face of Cloud has not had a new route (published) since 1970, although Jenkins and Bryan Bornholdt climbed a ca 1,000-foot 5.11 pillar guarding the northern edge of the cirque. Though continuous lines are not obvious on the west face, the wall is dotted with huge slabs of solid-looking rock and several major pinnacles.

The 600-foot formation protruding from Cloud Peak's southwest ridge, above Paint Rock Creek, is broken down low but steep and solid in the upper half, with many potential lines. The 2014 team climbed a six-pitch route (The Man Who Feared Marmots, 5.10+) in the middle of the face, which they dubbed Paint Rock Buttress. The eastern wall is overhanging and could yield a 5.12 or 5.13 route. This cliff is easily reached from a camp by Mistymoon Lake.

Given Cloud Peak's isolation and the silence surrounding past expeditions, it's very likely that some of these potential routes already have been climbed, with no trace left behind.

– Dougald MacDonald

FIRST ASCENT OF THE MERLON

By Raymond G. Jacquot

Sometime in the period from 1959 to 1961, I uncovered in the University of Wyoming Coe Library a 1906 USGS publication entitled *The Geology of the Big Horn Mountains*, by N.H. Darton. In this volume were some spectacular black and white photographs of the high country around Cloud Peak.

Several of these revealed what we came to refer to as the southeast buttress of Cloud Peak, although the top of the buttress is separated from the peak by a sharp notch. Sometime after our climb this feature became known as the Merlon.

In early July of 1961 I had just returned to Casper from a ten-day backpack trip to the Wind Rivers with Ken and Karen Endsley and Pat Johnson. I arrived in Casper to find Chuck Satterfield eager for a Fourth of July trip. He had been in touch with Dart Davis, who was home in Buffalo on leave from the U.S. Army. We decided to go to the Bighorns to have a look at the Merlon. We met Dart in Buffalo and took his family Jeep up the four-wheel-drive road into Soldier Park, where the backpacking would begin. It turned out the clutch was nearly out of the Jeep, so we parked it a short distance west of Hunter Ranger Station and hoofed it to Soldier Park, then over the Ant Hills to Elk Lake, where we spent the first night.

The following day we packed up to the second lake above Mead Lake and had lunch. We then carried our technical climbing gear up around Emerald and Sapphire lakes to the base of the slabs leading to the east arête of the Merlon. We had to hurry to make it back to our camp by dark.

We rose early and went rapidly back around the lakes to the base of the climb and our gear cache. We left our ice axes at the base of the slabs for use on the return trip, and this turned out to be the first of several mistakes we were to make that day.

Once on the arête, the climbing initially was fairly easy, on broken rock for several pitches to the base of a vertical wall. Chuck led this elegantly, with good piton protection, utilizing a series of small, solid edges in the granite—it was a very exhilarating pitch (5.7). Another easy pitch took us to the base of a chimney just to the right (north) of the ridge crest. The chimney was steep but not difficult and landed us on the top of a pillar separated from the mass of the rock by a gap of three feet. After the step across this gap, a steep wall led to a belay on a sloping ledge beneath a small overhang. The final pitch dealt with the overhang and took us to the lower east summit. We passed a gap about 50 feet high on the west side and arrived on top about noon. We built a cairn and left a film-can register to note our first ascent.

At this point we made our second mistake of the day. Just west of the summit was another notch separating us from Cloud Peak itself. The west side of this notch was overhanging and monolithic, so continuing to the summit was out of the question. From the notch a couloir descended to the south, and it looked like one long rappel would put us on the snow. When we arrived at the snow we found it hard and not amenable to heeling down. Since we had left our ice axes behind, this dictated about five more rappels, each one requiring some hardware, sling material, and valuable time to rig. When we finally exited the couloir the light was fading. We had left much of our stock of pitons and slings in the couloir. We hurried to retrieve our ice axes and make our way back to camp.

The following day we packed out following a route across the east side of Bomber Mountain to Clear Creek, which led us back to Soldier Park. We got a good view of the east face of Bomber Mountain, which we were to address a decade later.

Editor's note: In July 1971, Jacquot and Art Bloom, Howard Bussey, Rex Hoff, and Bill Lindberg completed the first ascent of the east face of Bomber Mountain, just to the south of Cloud Peak.

CLOUD PEAK'S EAST FACE

By Arno Ilgner

In the mix of life we can lose ourselves. I was lost in mid-1980s while I lived, worked, and climbed in Wyoming. At the time, we took pride in Wyoming climbers doing first ascents of Wyoming walls. One

such wall was the east face of Cloud Peak. Steve Petro and I had climbed many first ascents at the local crags around Casper, and we teamed up with a fellow climber, Kirk Breuer, who had his pilot's license, to fly around Cloud and take photographs. We studied those photos intensely and wanted to make an attempt in 1984. That year, though, was full of chaos. Steve and I both lost our jobs and our wives, and I moved back to Tennessee. The east face would have to wait.

Steve did a recon of the best approach and got a close-up view of the face in 1985. Then, in August of 1986, I traveled back to Wyoming. The timing was right for us. We packed enough supplies for a week and hiked 12 miles, approaching from the west, to a bivy on the summit. Photographs had shown two couloirs on the north end of the east face. The northernmost one proved to be low angle, allowing us to descend to the base with enough climbing and bivy gear for the route.

We'd picked a line from our aerial photographs that started about 80 feet right of a prominent, left-angling black dike. Looking up, we saw smooth slabs that transitioned into small roofs as the wall steepened, finishing with slightly overhanging dihedrals. Our line followed weaknesses in the rock, and we felt confident we'd find adequate protection. We also felt confident that we could deal with any run-out sections. By the mid-1980s we had at our disposal pitons and bolts, as well as cams and shoes with sticky rubber. We also had elevated free climbing standards, standing on the shoulders of earlier climbers to find a possible route on the face.

The granite provided plenty of crisp, square-cut edges. The climbing was a little run-out, but moderate in difficulty. We found protection at regular intervals, drilling only about half a dozen protection bolts. We swapped leads as we made our way up the steep slabs, free-climbing each pitch. I've often wondered why certain climbing partnerships work so well, and I've learned that nature requires balance. If I'd been just like Steve (or if Steve was like me), we probably wouldn't have made such a great team. Steve applied his analytical skills. "If we need to bolt belays," he told me, "we'll put the bolts vertically so the top bolt can give us protection for the next pitch." I applied my intuitive skills; I knew where the line of weakness went for the route. I could just go, even if there was a section that didn't have protection.

The first day we climbed a few pitches and descended to bivy on the glacier. The second day we carried our gear up the face and found some run-out 5.11 climbing at mid-height, but nothing super-serious. We climbed through small roofs to gain a big, grassy ledge system by the end of the day, where we set up our bivy. What a beautiful spot! Guys generally don't say much, but Steve and I shared the pleasure we felt from our day of climbing. We could feel the satisfaction of climbing well and the symbiosis of our team. The stars exploded into view in the dark Wyoming sky. We slept well.

Next morning the sun basked the wall in warmth. Clouds were building in the east, creating a reddish hue. We only had about 300 feet of climbing left, but needed to get going so we wouldn't be caught in the coming storm. The wall steepened, overhanging slightly in the last section. Protection was more abundant in the cracks of the dihedrals. I led the last pitch. Snow fell and the wind blew as Steve topped out and joined me. We tore down our base camp and gunned it for the car.

The climbing really wasn't that challenging for us. The real challenge, as always, was to find a way to enter the unknown, to take that first step. We could trust each other and the solid foundation that climbing provided for us. Many years have passed since then, but climbing is still my foundation. It helps me find my way when I feel lost in the chaos of life. How fortunate we are to have climbing. How fortunate we are to have unclimbed walls where we can enter the unknown.

SOUTH PROW OF THE MERLON

By Matt Cupal

We did this route way back in the distant past, probably my fourth year in college, which would have been 1988. I met a guy climbing in Vedauwoo (Wyoming), and we decided the Bighorns sounded remote and fun, so off we went. We hiked in from the east, from the Hunter Creek area, taking the Solitude Trail over the ridge and down into Mead Lake. From there we hiked up past Diamond and Sapphire lakes to the Merlon.

It's been a long time, but the route went at about 5.11a, taking a line slightly to the right of the tip of the south prow. We did it all free and all on clean gear, placing no bolts, starting about 6 a.m. It starts out with easy climbing up slabs. At about mid-height we moved into a right-facing corner system with some chimney climbing. Gear was generally good, though small, as is the nature of that rock. Most of the climbing was in the 5.9 to 5.10 range, except we did have one crux pitch midway up the wall that felt like 11a. I led that pitch, and the belay anchor at the top was just three good RPs above a steeply sloping ledge. I distinctly remember my partner having to hang as he got close to the belay, which was not a comfortable feeling at all, given my less than bomber gear.

The last pitch is burned in my memory. The belay was down in the middle of a large ledge. I climbed up and right on an easy, clean, unprotected face, aiming for a flake about 60 feet up. I managed to find a marginal stopper behind the flake, then moved up another 60 feet of easy but scary slab to the vertical summit rim. This was 10 feet of maybe 5.10 climbing, and I placed a solid No. 9 stopper in the middle. I faced the decision of free climbing and risking a fall onto a single piece or standing on the gear and reaching for holds above, but then risking popping the piece and taking an unthinkable ride. With trepidation, I chose to stand on the piece, and that created a terrible and inelegant beached-whale move, groping in wet moss, to flop onto the summit.

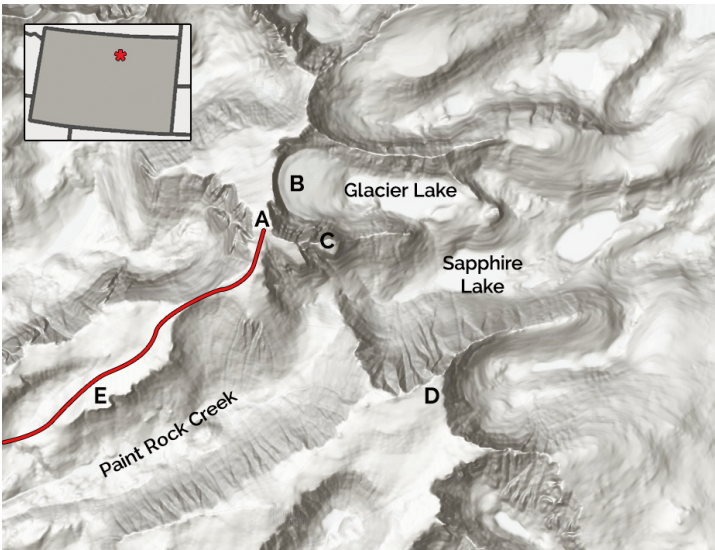
I topped out at 10 p.m. There was still a scratch of light in the sky. I had forgotten my headlamp (thank god I got done climbing before dark), so my partner set up all of the rappels. We must have gotten off route on the rappels because we spent way more time on ropes than we should have. It took us until 6 a.m. to get back to our tent.

I don't remember the name of my partner. I never climbed with him after that trip, and we had met not long before. I actually did the route twice, and the second time was easier to remember. My now ex-wife, Deb Cupal, and I went up there on our honeymoon in August 1996. We climbed a couple of small things and attempted some larger faces, then repeated the Merlon south prow. It took us two tries. On the first go we got to about two pitches below the large step and I got off-route—too far left—and got into really thin climbing. The second attempt went better. We had a nice snowstorm as we neared the top, but we got back to the ground with daylight left over.

Images



The east face cirque above the Cloud Peak Glacier. Shimmering Abstraction (5.11, 1986), the only known rock route in the cirque, is marked.



Cloud Peak's summit is about 12 miles from the road. (A) Cloud Peak, with the southwest ridge hiking route marked. (B) East face. (C) The Merlon. (D) Bomber Mountain. (E) Paint Rock Buttress.



Steve Petro during the first ascent of Shimmering Abstraction (5.11).



Mike Lilygren during the second ascent of Shimmering Abstraction. Steve Bechtel [Right] Morning on Cloud Peak's east face.



High on Cloud Peak's southeast arête, a 1,200' route that may have been climbed as early as the 1970s but was never documented.



Sunrise from the top of the Merlon.



The south buttresses of (A) Cloud Peak and (B) the Merlon. (1) Rust Never Sleeps (10 pitches, 5.11a, Jenkins-MacDonald, 2014). (2) Southeast arête (1,200', 5.8, climbed in 2014 but first ascent unknown). (3) No Climb for Old Men (12 pitches, 5.11c R A2, Duncan-Jenkins, 2008). (4) South prow (5.11a, Cupal and partner, 1988). (5) Super Fortress (5.11+, Bechtel-Lilygren-Model, 1996). (6) Attempt (ca 1975) by Dennis Horning and Jeb Schenck. (7) Scott Heywood and partners (ca 5.9, 1970s, exact line unknown). (8) East prow (5.7, Davis-Jacquot-Satterfield, 1961). Lines on the Merlon are approximate. The steep, shadowed southwest face of the Merlon has no known routes.



High camp below the Merlon, the ca 1,250-foot buttress southeast of Cloud Peak. The big prow's climbing history is obscure, and at least two parties, in the 1990s and 2000s, mistakenly thought they were doing first ascents.



Mike Lilygren during the second ascent of Shimmering Abstraction.



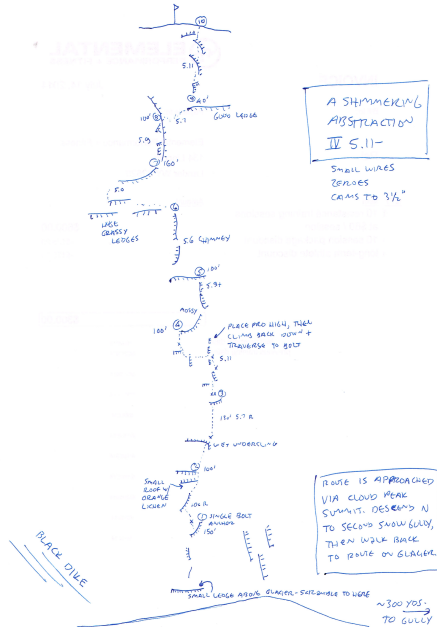
enkins midway on Rust Never Sleeps (10 pitches, 5.11a, 2014), likely the first route up Cloud's south buttress.



Steve Bechtel on Super Fortress. The top seven pitches are 5.11.



The first ascent team approaches the Merlon (the large, left-leaning tower) in 1961. The east face of Cloud Peak is visible behind and right.



Top of Shimmering Abstraction, Cloud Peak.

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