



AAC Publications

New Routes on Mt. Woolsey, Hallelujah, and Buffalo Back

Wyoming, Bighorn Mountains

Can one guarantee a perfect adventure? It seems an oxymoron, at least by Tilman's edict that if the outcome is certain there's no point in starting a journey. Adventure requires uncertainty; uncertainty requires un-guarantee-ability. And yet, mix the cocktail just right—a little of this, more of that, just enough of everything else—and there you are: the perfect trip, every time.

For the last decade, expedition wizard Mark Jenkins has been inviting me to join him on one of his annual perfect little outings in Wyoming. No matter how many grueling multi-week and multi-month expeditions he does, every year Mark jumps in his car and drives a few hours from his home in Laramie to an obscure cirque in the Wind Rivers or Bighorns. He packs in, puts up a bunch of new routes on 1,000-foot walls, and emerges a week later wearing a huge grin. He seems to have discovered a magic formula.

This year the stars aligned and I finally drank from Mark's potion. Months later the grin is still etched on my face.

So what's the formula? For us, it begins with friendship. Mark's and mine goes back three decades and up never-enough mountains on multiple continents. Dougald MacDonald's and mine, well, pretty much the same. Ditto theirs. Just being together is enough to guarantee a good time. But we crave more than talk in a bar.

The next ingredient is that the trip has to actually happen. Organizing a month together? Impossible. A week away? Bring it on. Then there's money. There are times in one's life when every C-note is accounted for. Distant shores become distant dreams. Pooling gas money? Never a problem.

A proper expedition should be exotic, a far cry from day-to-day life. We met our horse packer in a bar in Buffalo. Above our table were the stuffed heads of every animal known to inhabit Wyoming. Next to us was the same desk that territorial judges sat behind when sentencing six-gun-toting horse thieves in the '80s, 1880s, that is. Our buffalo burgers were served by a Stetson- and jeans-wearing college student from Moldavia. I could go on, but this report has a word limit. Let's just say that no teahouse in Tibet is more exotic than our saloon in the Occidental Hotel. And then entered Wes Smiley, who had just packed in our climbing gear and food as far a horse could carry it. His weather-worn cowboy hat never left his head as he drank the beer we bought him. His hands were as broad and hard as the butt of a hunting rifle. Wes pulled out a Google Earth satellite image and pointed out a dead tree lying flat on the ground. "Sight along this log to the tree it points to. Your stuff is under that tree."

The next day Dougald's little 4WD nearly floated over the ford across Little Goose Creek before crawling up a ridiculous "road" to the edge of the Cloud Peak Wilderness Area. We walked eight miles of trail through pine forests and across an alpine pass until we spotted the dead tree in the Google Earth photo. We sighted along its bleached trunk and, bang, the gear was exactly where Wes said it would be. Another two much-sweatier miles without trail took us into the nameless cirque surrounding the Sawtooth Lakes, where we stopped at a tiny grassy meadow trapped by boulders far above timberline.

Mark and Dougald had been drawn to the Sawtooth Lakes valley after spotting a 12,590-foot fin called

Hallelujah leaping above the neighboring ridges during a climbing trip to Cloud Peak (two valleys to the south) in 2014. We weren't the first climbers to stare at these walls. Guess who beat us to it by nearly half a century? Fred Beckey, of course. He and two partners climbed the biggest face in the area, the northeast side of the Innominate, in 1967. The Iowa and Chicago Mountaineers sent huge teams of good climbers, including Pete Cleveland, Paul Stettner, and Harvey Carter, in the 1950s and 1970s. Long before them a remarkable expedition of Easterners climbed and named the most significant peaks of the Sawtooth Lakes and Spear Lake drainages, including Innominate, Hallelujah, and Woolsey, all of which W.B. Wilcox described in "An American Tyrol," a splendid feature article in the AAJ 1934. Yet, surprisingly, as far as we could determine, many of the biggest cliffs remained virgin. Every line we laid eyes on had never been touched—or at least never reported. The granite was solid and stable, except where it wasn't. Cracks split the faces from bottom to top, except where they didn't.

This being Mark's backyard, we honored his mantra: no bolts, no pins, no hammer. Two lead-worthy ropes in case one gets cut. Climb all day, every day. Love every minute, no matter what.

The ca 1,300' direct east face of Mt. Woolsey (12,978'), showing the route Woolsey When We Get There (10 pitches, 5.10) to twin-topped Rabbit Ears Spire. After rappelling from the spire, the climbers scrambled to Woolsey's south ridge, climbed a long 5.7 pitch to the top, and rappelled the north buttress.

And so it went: Devious lines connected by head-scratching, finger-pumping, toe-sticking adventure climbing. Splitter fingers. Run-out slabs. Dikes and chicken heads. Mossy wet hand cracks. Rock as solid as the best of Tuolumne. Footholds that popped off without warning before exploding next to the belayer. In the end, both ropes were chopped by stones we'd not been smart enough to avoid dislodging.

We summited two unclimbed (best we could tell) spire tops on three virgin (best we could tell) walls. Each route was about 10 pitches and went at low 5.10: Buffalo Gals on the east face of Buffalo Back (ca 12,280'); Grand Delusion on the east face of Hallelujah (12,590'); and Woolsey When We Get There on the southeast face of Mt. Woolsey (12,978'), via the "Rabbit Ears Spire" (you'll see when you get there).

Then we hiked out, better friends than ever and already planning the next guaranteed perfect adventure.

– John Harlin III

Images



The ca 850' east face of Buffalo Back showing Buffalo Girls (8 pitches, 5.10). The seventh pitch ended on a tower, from which the climbers rappelled to a notch, scrambled ca 200', and climbed a long 5.10 pitch up a second tower, escaped by easy downclimbing. The towers were named the Buffalo Horns.



The Grand Delusion (9 pitches, 5.10) on the ca 900' east face of Hallelujah (12,590'). The climbers traversed the ridgeline south to the summit, then rappelled the south ridge (5.6, Carter-Ebert-Jones, 1970).



The ca 1,300' direct east face of Mt. Woolsey (12,978'), showing the route Woolsey When We Get There (10 pitches, 5.10) to twin-topped Rabbit Ears Spire. After rappelling from the spire, the climbers scrambled to Woolsey's south ridge, climbed a long 5.7 pitch to the top, and rappelled the north buttress.



Fording the East Fork of Little Goose Creek en route to the 10-mile hike to the Sawtooth Lakes drainage in the Bighorn Mountains.



John Harlin (foreground) and Mark Jenkins following a variation to the fifth pitch of Buffalo Girls on Buffalo Back.



Preparing to rappel off the First Buffalo Horn during the ascent of the east face of Buffalo Back.



Dougald MacDonald on the third pitch of the Grand Delusion on the east face of Hallelujah.



John Harlin on Rabbit Ears Spire, the spire that forms the middle of Mt. Woolsey's ca 1,300' southeast face.



Mark Jenkins atop Rabbit Ears Spire, 10 pitches up the southeast face of Mt. Woolsey.

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