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Yosemite in the Fifties: The Iron Age

Dean Fidelman and John Long

Yosemite in the Fifties: The Iron Age. Edited by Dean Fidelman and John Long. Patagonia Books, 2015. 176 pages. Hardcover, \$60.

Lavishly arranged and edited by Valley legends Dean Fidelman and John Long, *Yosemite in the Fifties* is a heady blend of source photographs, pristinely documented archival objects— never have rusty pitons looked so polished—and short essays, many of which are trip reports culled from the pages of the *Sierra Club Bulletin*. It's hard to imagine how a climber's coffee table could do better.

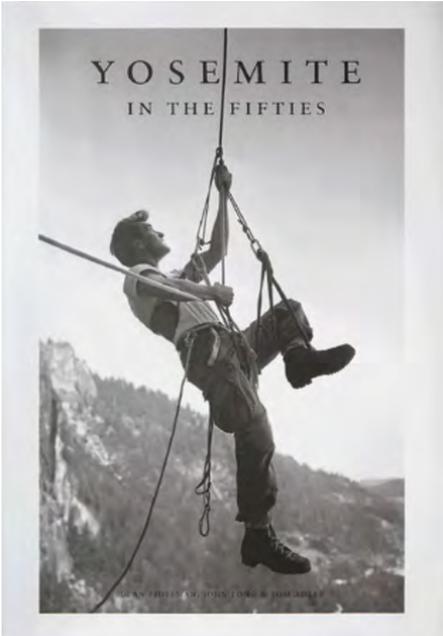
As the title makes plain, the focus here is the so-called "Iron Age" of Yosemite Valley climbing. This period, roughly bookended by the first ascents of Lost Arrow Spire in 1946 and the Nose in 1958, marked the birth of big-wall climbing in the United States. As Long puts it in his introduction, it was "that critical span of years found in any adventure or exploratory pursuit...where technology is a limiting factor." Steve Grossman's "The Tool Users," one of the more compelling essays, explains how John Salathé's improved 40/60 carbon vanadium steel pitons, along with his introduction of expansion bolts and prusik ascension, radically altered the scope of possible ascents on Sierra granite. These advancements, Grossman argues, were as much the creation of the place itself as they were of Salathé—purpose-built for local endeavors.

Being more a compendium than a history, the writing is mixed, both in source and in quality. Some climbers report their ascents briefly, some go on for pages. Some focus on the variety of gear utilized, others on how damn thirsty they were, with the cool, flowing waters of the Merced far below a frequent lament. Ranging from Ax Nelson's moralizing over the "false stimulus of alcohol" in the late '40s to Wayne Merry's wry appreciation of Warren Harding— "He trained on red jug wine for every climb that I can remember"—the collection also displays the wide range of beliefs and sentiments that drove some climbers up these cliffs, and, perhaps more often, the ideas they used as justification when they came back down.

In its photographic exhibition the book is meticulous and detailed, demonstrative of not only the full range of climbing technology of the time, but also the humane capabilities of documentary photography. Robbins' scrupulousness stands out in small details. Homemade shoulder pads for unthinkably petrifying rappel techniques. Hand-forged angles and knifeblades and D-rings. A gallon can of Dau's Good Styletone paint—for hauling water? Rubber soles nailed onto military surplus boots. For these wild explorers, such objects were both cutting-edge and normal, their everyday companions. For us, they're out of this world.

– Isaac Zizman

Images



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