



AAC Publications

Mt. Barrill: Birthday Party

Alaska, Central Alaska Range, Ruth Gorge

From April 29 to May 1, Teresa Au (my wife) and I climbed a new route on the northeast face of Mt. Barrill (7,650', a.k.a. Barille or Barrille). This was our first trip to Alaska, and we flew to the Mountain House airstrip in mid-April, planning to warm up on moderate routes in the Ruth before attempting classic climbs on the Mooses Tooth and Mt. Huntington. But while skiing below Barrill, we spotted a series of stunning, long vertical ribbons of ice flowing down the entire height of the face.

That must be a classic, but what is it? I wondered. We hadn't seen anything describing this striking line in our pretrip research. "I don't care if it's been climbed or not, or even if it will go," I declared. "It looks amazing—we've got to try it!"

On our first attempt we were moving too slowly. On our second, when we were partway up the route, the early afternoon sun triggered showers of ice from the rock faces above. A small block smashed into my helmet and broke off a large chunk. Fortunately, I wasn't hurt and was able to duct-tape my helmet back together on the spot before rappelling.

Teresa vowed not to return, but after gazing at that glimmering, tantalizing line while resting in base camp, she had a change of heart and was ready for more. Our strategy for our third and successful attempt, beginning April 29, was an anti-alpine start: We slept in and started climbing in the afternoon, so we would reach the slopes that were exposed to icefall once the sun had stopped shining on the faces above. We climbed light, carrying no bivy gear except for a stove.

The climbing started with 60m of high-quality, steep waterfall ice (WI5+), with an exciting, slightly overhanging finish of chandelier ice and some mixed moves. We continued on a steep rock chimney and corner system (M5), with traces of ice—an equally aesthetic pitch, with balancey moves and good protection. We then climbed steep snow for about 250m until we met another vertical ice flow with chandelier ice (WI5+). We switched on our headlamps and kept climbing into the clear, star-filled night. Higher up, I spotted a little cave just big enough for the two of us to crouch inside after some chopping. Fortunately, the night was short and not very cold. We melted a few icicles to cook a freeze-dried meal, brewed up, and dozed for a bit before starting again. We finished the steep ice at first light.

A few moderate mixed pitches then led to a long vertical strip of sn'ice (AI5). The soft, hollow ice was hard to protect, and my crampons and tools would sometimes shear through without warning. My mind raced, but after two pitches the slope eased a bit and the ice became denser. Night fell again, and this time we rested and refueled while standing awkwardly on a narrow ice ledge. We yearned for a brief snooze, but snow started to whirl softly around us, and the icy chill seeping into our limbs made sleep impossible. The climbing had been spectacular, but I now felt a growing sense of urgency to get off the mountain, before either our judgment or the weather seriously deteriorated.

We resumed climbing before sunrise, and after a few moderate ice and snow leads we reached the final pitch before the summit ridge. Delicate moves on verglassed rock (M5) slowed us again, but we finally reached the snowy summit ridge about 45 hours after leaving the ground. It was now snowing heavily, and we were in a complete whiteout as we climbed the few hundred meters of deep snow to the summit. The total absence of visual cues made it hard to orient or even keep balance, but we found our way over the top to the northwestern snow slopes, which offered an easy but avalanche-

prone walk down to the Ruth.

Birthday Party (850m, V WI5+ AI5 R M5, steep snow) had been packed with quality technical climbing from the first pitch to the last. It was the perfect way to celebrate my birthday, which was just a few days before. [Editor's note: The 2016 route begins and finishes to the left of Alaska Primer (Gilmore-Johnstone, 2011), crossing that route twice in the middle section but sharing little ground with it. The author has prepared a detailed route description, including a pitch by pitch guide. [Download the PDF \(36mb\)](#).]

– Nicolas Preitner

Mt. Barrill spelling: Mt. Barrill has been spelled many ways on maps and in published accounts, including various editions of the AAJ. The peak is named after Edward Barrill, who accompanied Frederick Cook on his infamous visit to the Ruth Gorge in 1906, during which Cook staged a photo that he claimed to have been taken on Denali's summit. Cook called his companion Barrille in accounts of their alleged climb of North America's highest peak, and Mt. Barrille is still used on USGS topo maps. However, in a sworn affidavit taken in 1909 (and analyzed in an [AAJ 1989](#) article by Bradford Washburn), Barrill debunks the Denali climb and also corrects the spelling of his name. As a result, we use Mt. Barrill.

Images



Nicolas Preitner leading difficult mixed terrain low on Birthday Party on the northeast face of Mt. Barrill.



Teresa Au follows the delicate mixed exit pitch just below Mt. Barrill's north ridge, in stormy conditions, during the first ascent of Birthday Party.



The northeast face of Mt. Barrill, showing Teresa Au and Nicolas Preitner's new route Birthday Party in red and Alaska Primer (Gilmore-Johnstone, AAJ 2012) in yellow. Other routes exist farther to the left and right.



Teresa Au seconding steep ice during the first ascent of Birthday Party (850m, V WI5+ AI5 R M5 steep snow) on Mt. Barrill.

Article Details

Author	Nicolas Preitner
Publication	AAJ
Volume	59
Issue	91
Page	143
Copyright Date	2017
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions