



AAC Publications

Cloud Peak, East Face, Medicine Crow

Wyoming, Big Horn Mountains

After several years of aborted trips, Alex Marine and I climbed a new route on the east face of Cloud Peak (13,166') in early July. Our route begins about 100' left of the 1986 route, A Shimmering Abstraction (Ilgner-Petro), the only other climb known to have been completed on the main east face. [An easier route was climbed left of the main wall in the 1970s, and another route is in progress on the main face and is expected to be completed in 2017.] After a three-day approach from the east, including two days shuttling loads from Mead Lake to Glacier Lake, we climbed the stunning, taffy-swirled wall over four days, mostly following a ghostly white dike. It was a treat to piece together an all-free line.

Given the wall's reputation for few continuous cracks and the melted-out snow couloir that was formerly the standard descent, we opted to fix lines and establish bolted rappel stations. We climbed ground-up for three days, retreating each day to our tent by Glacier Lake as afternoon storms arrived. We summited on the fourth day and rappelled the route, using our six new two-bolt rappel stations (two 60m ropes), the bottom four of which double as belay anchors.

One section in the middle of the route is marred by loose flakes and blocks, which could likely be cleaned further on rappel. Overall, however, this particular section of several-billion-year-old gneiss, uplifted relatively recently in the Laramide Orogeny, is cut remarkably well for climbing.

Medicine Crow (1,100', 5.11+ R) goes clean except the first pitch, which required several knifeblades to make it safe. (No fixed protection was left on the route.) We climbed the route in eight pitches: 5.9+ R (~150'), 5.10 (200'), 5.10+ (~100'), 5.11+ R (100'), 5.9 (200'), 5.9 (200'), 5.7–5.9 (80'), 5.11 R (~100'). The movement is exciting and athletic, with heady face climbing interspersed with chimneys and laybacking. Holds and gear mostly reveal themselves just when needed. On the crux fourth pitch, through a golden roof, Alex jumped off after nearly dislodging a large flake directly above the belay. We cleaned the flake, and on a second go some hidden crimps allowed passage. We did not bother to redpoint this pitch, so a ground-up clean ascent still awaits. The crux moves protect well, but there is a long runout on 5.10 terrain guarding the belay.

Above pitch six the route shares much ground with A Shimmering Abstraction. Our fun and improbable final pitch tops out through a series of nested roofs directly on the lip. We believe this finish is different from the 1986 route, but it's hard to say for sure.

With the addition of our rappel route, we believe that approaching from the west would now be the best option. If approaching from the east, it may be best to arrive early in the summer to avoid the dangerous rockfall on either side of the glacier that can occur in warmer conditions.

We named the route after the inspiring Dr. Joseph Medicine Crow, the last surviving Crow war chief and a celebrated historian, who passed away shortly before our climb. The Bighorns have long been sacred ground to the Crow Nation and others. Nine days on ancient rock only recently emerged from the earth was strong medicine. Many thanks to Arno Ilgner and Steve Bechtel for their assistance and information on conditions in the Bighorns, and to the AAC for a Live Your Dream grant.

– Spencer Gray

Images



The 1,000-foot east face of Cloud Peak, showing the two full routes up the wall. (1) Medicine Crow (Gray-Marine, 2016). (2) A Shimmering Abstraction (Ilgner-Petro, 1986). The 1986 route line was placed farther left in AAJ 2015. Cloud Peak's 13,166-foot summit is out of picture to the left.



Alex Marine approaches the east face of Cloud Peak, in Wyoming's Bighorn Mountains.



Morning sun hits the expansive east face of Cloud Peak, with Glacier Lake below.



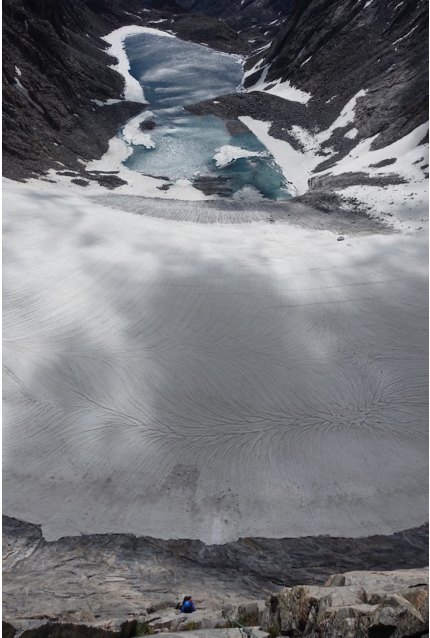
Alex Marine following the first pitch of Medicine Crow (1,100', 5.11+ R) during the first ascent. Gray and Marine's route marks only the second full line on Cloud Peak's main east face, which they completed after four days of effort.



Alex Marine leading pitch two of Medicine Crow (1,100', 5.11+ R) on the east face of Cloud Peak.



Looking up the second pitch of Medicine Crow (1,100', 5.11+ R) on the east face of Cloud Peak. Gray and Marine climbed ground-up, establishing a bolted rappel route along the way. They fixed lines and returned to the ground each night.



Looking down from high on the east face of Cloud Peak, with the Cloud Peak Glacier and Glacier Lake far below.



Alex Marine pulls the final roof on Medicine Crow (1,100', 5.11+ R), the second complete route established on the east face of Cloud Peak.

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