



## AAC Publications

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### **Mt. Breitenbach, North Face, Cowboy Poetry**

Idaho, Lost River Range

**Twenty-one years ago, I camped beneath the north face of Mt. Breitenbach (12,140'), the fifth-highest peak in Idaho, on a six-day solo backpacking trip through the Lost River Range.** Of course I wanted to stand on the summit, but climbing the face was so far beyond my skill set at the time that it was really an abstraction.

Fast forward to 2010, when I began my alpine guiding track with the AMGA and learned how to safely and efficiently climb these sorts of objectives. I came to realize that conditions are everything on these ephemeral alpine routes in the high desert of Idaho. Now, in my mid-40s, with a family and obligations, I don't have the free time that I had in my 20s, but I do have the skills, experience, patience, and, dare I say, wisdom that age brings.

So this year, when the stars aligned, conditions were right, and the forecast looked promising, it was time to pardon myself from the day-to-day duties and try to make it happen. Always up for an adventure, Paddy McIlvoy, co-owner of Backwoods Mountain Sports in Ketchum, joined me for an after-work approach on June 21, via a combination of driving on high-clearance two-track roads, mountain biking, and hiking. We got to the base at last light, with just enough visibility to study lines and make a plan.

The only completed route on the north face was the Grand Chockstone Couloir (Boyles-Olson-Weber, AAJ 1983), which climbs ramps, gullies, cliff bands, and a couloir to just east (looker's left) of the summit. We decided to try a new line, and after 13 hours from camp to camp, I'm proud to say we succeeded.

Cowboy Poetry (2,800', IV 5.7 R AI2 50° snow) climbs the most obvious couloir toward the lower east summit of the peak. After soloing the first 1,000' of snow, the first crux came where the main couloir jogs left, and we found a mix of choss, thin ice, snow, and thankfully solid rock for a few dry-tool moves.

The next several pitches were some of the most scenic and classy alpine pitches on snow I've ever encountered. These led to a steep headwall, but I managed to sniff out a ledge that traversed left and ended in an 80' blunt arête with run-out 5.7 climbing—lots of exposure, minimal and questionable gear. Thankfully we brought rock shoes!

The rock pitch ended on a chossy ledge below the giant headwall, disconnected from the summit couloir. Here we made a 40' rappel to connect into the final hanging summit couloir. Three more pitches of steep snow led to the east summit. In total we did eight roped pitches. We did not go to Breitenbach's true summit, as both of us had been there before via other routes, but instead started our descent from the high point east of the true summit.

Though I had guided the east-northeast ridge of Breitenbach before in summer, we found the descent this way not as straightforward as anticipated. We encountered steep snow that pinched into melting ice dribbles through cliff bands, and opted to do two rappels rather than risk downclimbing.

To my knowledge, this route has been attempted but not completed. I believe the first crux and the

run-out rock pitch above may have turned back previous attempts. I found a rusty piton with a tattered sling after the first crux at the dogleg—my guess is the party bailed when they encountered the rock pitch.

The only other route on the wall, the Grand Chockstone Couloir, has had only a few repeats. Other potential lines exist, but timing the conditions is difficult and essential on this remote alpine face. Of note, the winter of 2019 was a big one, with a cool, wet spring.

– Marc Hanselman

## Images



Marc Hanselman soloing the initial snow couloir during the first ascent of Cowboy Poetry (2,800', IV 5.7 R AI2 50° snow), the second known route up the north face of Mt. Breitenbach (12,140'), in Idaho's Lost River Range.



Marc Hanselman making a short rappel from below the upper headwall into the final snow couloir during the first ascent of Cowboy Poetry (2,800', IV 5.7 R AI2 50° snow) on Mt. Breitenbach (12,140').



Paddy McIlvoy making the rappel into the hanging couloir that led to the summit ridge during the first ascent of Cowboy Poetry (2,800', IV 5.7 R AI2 50° snow) on Mt. Breitenbach (12,140').



Paddy McIlvoy following a steep snow traverse on the fourth pitch of Cowboy Poetry (2,800', IV 5.7 R AI2 50° snow) on the north face Mt. Breitenbach (12,140'), in Idaho's Lost River Range. This was the second completed route up the face.





The left portion of the north face of Mt. Breitenbach (12,140') in Idaho's Lost River Range, showing the line of Cowboy Poetry (2,800', IV 5.7 R AI2 50° snow). The blue arrow indicates the short rappel made by the first ascensionists. The Grand Central Couloir (see AAJ 1983) begins on snow ramps out of frame to the right and finishes on the slender, aesthetic couloir in the upper right portion of the photo.



Marc Hanselman leading the second roped pitch during the first ascent of Cowboy Poetry (2,800', IV 5.7 R AI2 50° snow) on the north face of Mt. Breitenbach (12,140').



Paddy McIlvoy coming up the second pitch of Cowboy Poetry (2,800', IV 5.7 R AI2 50° snow) on the north face of Mt. Breitenbach (12,140').



The north face of Mt. Breitenbach (12,140') in Idaho's Lost River Range.



The upper headwall encountered on the first ascent of Cowboy Poetry (2,800', IV 5.7 R AI2 50° snow) on the north face of Mt. Breitenbach (12,140'). From here, Marc Hanselman and Paddy McIlvoy headed left on the obvious snowfield to climb the blunt arête on the left side of the photo, atop which they made a short rappel to access the final snow couloir.

## Article Details

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