



AAC Publications

Ice Out

A memorable late-winter trip to Newfoundland

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the holy grail of ice climbing in the Northeast was rumored to have been found in western Newfoundland, where the Vikings first landed in America nearly 500 years before Christopher Columbus. But the Southern Knights had sworn a secret oath and were keeping a tight lid on it. So the Northern Knights had to start from scratch, reminiscing about their summer travels and sightings of high, damp walls in the area, and checking for clues on topo maps. Deep in Western Brook Pond, they found cliffs nearly 700 meters high that might yield the secret.

When a pond is 16 kilometers long, it gives you an idea of the scale in Newfoundland. The finicky coastal weather usually leaves the fjords' inland walls inaccessible, protected by deep, open-water moats that rarely freeze. I hired bush pilot Rick Adams and armed him with a penciled fly-by route to search for steep ice. It was found. As a bonus, the pond surface appeared to be frozen solid to permit an over-ice approach.

At the time, in March 2004, I happened to be working in Corner Brook, less than two hours away, so I drove on up. Coincidentally, a lobster fisherman named Clarence Roberts from nearby St. Paul's had just ventured—for the first time in 43 years—onto the Western Brook Pond ice with his snowmobile, checking the thickness with an ice auger. I happened to spot him pulling into his driveway with a snowmobile in the box of his big pickup, and I asked on the spot if he would mind giving me a lift. Within five minutes we were zooming back out for a reconnaissance. He would later prove to be one of the legendary kind souls of Newfoundland.

Photographic proof of big ice climbs and a fast and safe approach was shared with Benoit Marion and André Laperrière, two brave and faithful knights from the Hochelaga bourgade (Montréal). But by the time we all made it to Newfoundland, a thaw cycle had undermined the pond ice and Clarence didn't want anything to do with ferrying us out there. We were on our own, but had planned for it with skis and a large fiberglass sled to haul our gear for a week of exploration.

Benoit Marion at the crux (pitch five) of Captains Courageous.

The climbing was truly awesome, and we got up three major lines, thinking they were all first ascents, but it turned out they were all second ascents when the Southern Knights shared their secrets. Benoit and I first climbed Angishore (275m, WI5), a route at the south entrance to the pond. All three of us got six pitches up what turned out to be Captains Courageous, but veered left too high and had to rap down. Benoit and I then climbed a spectacular 300-meter route (White Drift, WI6) on Pissing Mare Falls, soloing the three bottom pitches to avoid hangfire from the two-meter-wide ice umbrellas above. Finally, the knights Laperrière, Marion, and Mailhot gave their best in an epic battle up Captains Courageous, climbing 11 full 60-meter pitches (660m, WI6 M6, according to us—we never got to see the Southern Knights' secret saga book). There were large spindrift avalanches on the last three pitches; we rappelled in the dark; and we weren't able to cook supper because we were holding tight to the tent, battered by high winds.

The warm weather blowing in—and early April on the calendar—was a clear sign we had to break camp on the breaking pond ice at daybreak. Soon afterward, as I was scouting the route ahead, with over 165 meters of water under the clear black ice, the hangman's trap opened and I fell into the drink. My rapidly deployed outstretched arms held me at armpit level at the edges of the gaping hole. I was wearing crampons because the high winds had completely cleared the snow from the ice

surface, and this might have been a blessing—easier to deal with than submerged skis.

I was out like a cork and rolled my right hip onto the surface in an effort to distribute my weight on the thick but decaying ice. I yelled back to my partners to don skis and bring mine. We were trapped by huge walls on both sides of the fjord, with many kilometers ahead to firm ground. We beelined for the shortest way to the lowlands, ultimately hopping on moving ice sheets near the shore, but frankly not getting any wetter than I already was. I don't remember being cold—likely I'd dried up quite a bit just from moving along on a fine spring day.

We sure were glad to be on land again, sitting on big rocks in the bare grass with that near-freeedom grin of escaped convicts. The going was easy for a long while until we arrived at a large stream of rapidly flowing water. The only option was tight, snow-free bush, where we certainly could not haul our sled. André had a tiny bit of battery power left in his cell phone, and I called Clarence.

"Oh, hello, Jacqueline, this is Bernie. How are you?"

"Oh, I'm fine, how are you?"

"Oh, I'm fine, we had an awesome time and climbed these three world-class ice routes in your backyard. May I speak to Clarence, please?"

"Sure!"

"Hello, Bernie, how are you? We were worried about you with this warm weather."

"No worries, we are fine, but we're stuck behind the Parks Canada boat hangar; the river is open water and we cannot cross."

"Ohhhh!"

"Clarence, do you have a canoe?"

"Bernie, let me think about this...."

After about 90 minutes, we heard the sound of incoming motor vehicles. Clarence's brother, Malcom, appeared first, clad in fishing waders and hauling a 16-foot canoe, which he quickly paddled over to us, solo, like a pro. (He was a quick learner, we later learned.) A first load was ferried across the river, along with a safety line made with one of our climbing ropes, and after a few crossings, all of us had reached the far side. They had towed in a huge log-hauling sled, on which we installed the canoe and all our gear, with our sled on top, all cinched together with straps.

André hopped behind Malcolm on a four-wheeler while Benoit and I sat behind Clarence on his snowmobile, and off we went over the wet, beige ground, all five of us with big happy grins on our faces. I leaned closer to Clarence's ear and yelled, "There is no more snow, you are gonna damage your machine!" To which he replied with the classic line, "Oh don't worry, Bernie, I just imagine it's all white!"

About the Author: Bernard "Bernie" Mailhot, 62, is a retired mechanical engineer reincarnated as an outdoor guide, mostly backcountry skiing in the Chic-Chocs of Québec's Gaspé Peninsula.

Images



Benoit Marion at the crux (pitch five) of Captains Courageous during what turned out to be the second ascent.



Clarence Roberts (front) to the rescue!



André Laperrière heading in on solid ice on Western Brook Pond. A week later, the ice was not nearly as solid.

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