



## AAC Publications

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### Mark Powell, 1928–2020

Mark Powell (left) and Jerry Gallwas on the summit of Totem Pole, Arizona, after the first ascent. **Marion “Mark” Lyle Powell, was born in Selma, California. His family moved frequently, and when Mark was 15 years old, his parents divorced and he went with his mother to his grandparents’ farm in Laton, California.** After graduating from high school there in 1946, he enlisted in the U.S. Air Force and served primarily in Alaska; he was honorably discharged just prior to the onset of the Korean War.

Long interested in the mountains, Mark had hiked and scrambled extensively as a boy, often riding tens of miles on his two-speed bicycle to approach his objectives. His technical climbing began in 1954 when he joined the newly formed Fresno Chapter of the Sierra Club’s Rock Climbing Section. He quickly learned the basics and began climbing seriously in the company of more experienced climbers such as Don Wilson and Jerry Gallwas, who remembers:

Mark and I first met during Easter week of 1954 in Yosemite. He was obviously eager to do his first climb in the Valley, and the Lower Cathedral Spire seemed an inspiring start. Mark was overweight and slow but enthusiastic. The summit and the rappel down made Mark’s day; it was enough to inspire him to get in shape by losing weight and climbing regularly. It was soon clear that Mark was committed to climbing at the highest level, and it was remarkable to see both his dedication and skills surpass that of all his peers—he was climbing in a class with Royal Robbins.

Don Wilson and I had climbed with Mark in Tahquitz in 1955, and we invited him to join us for a trip the next Easter to attempt Spider Rock in the Four Corners area. We drove through the night from San Diego in Mark’s chartreuse Ford convertible, arriving at the rim of Canyon de Chelly just at dusk. It was a very cold week in the canyon with high winds. There were many memorable moments, but after a freezing bivouac and an exhilarating summit, we returned to the car late one evening to a victory dinner of a can of peaches and half a jar of pickles.

We planned our next desert adventure for Labor Day. Mark had found a travel advertisement with a photo of Cleopatra’s Needle in northwest New Mexico. On Labor Day weekend, the three of us, along with Don’s wife, Nancy, made the long drive in Don’s VW Bug, a sardine-can experience if there ever was one. The sandstone of Cleopatra’s Needle is incredibly soft, and after Don and I had our turns placing pitons with a hammer and removing them with fingers, Mark put in a bolt just below the summit and led to the top. During the drive home we discussed our next desert objective, and it was clear that the Totem Pole in Monument Valley, Arizona, would be the ultimate prize.

In June 1957, the three of us met in Monument Valley, joined by Bill “Dolt” Feuerer. By the time I arrived, they had managed to climb within one pitch of the summit between rainstorms. Mark had done the bulk of the leading and announced that they had saved the summit pitch for me. The winds were gusting to 40 mph, and as Don and the Dolt prusiked they were blown nearly halfway around the spire. The summit photo of the four of us signaled the end of a marvelous collaboration.

The bonds of friendship and loyalties had begun to stretch, and two weeks after the Totem Pole summit photo, when Mark, Dolt, and Warren Harding arrived in Yosemite Valley, Royal Robbins, Mike Sherrick, and I had already begun the first ascent of the Northwest Face (Regular Route) of Half Dome.

**As a consolation prize, of sorts, Mark, Warren, and Bill chose to take on the enormous south buttress of El Capitan—the line that became the Nose. With Mark doing most of the leading, the team climbed**

1,000 feet in eight days. Due to the traffic congestion in the Valley caused by such a sensational climb, they agreed to suspend their efforts during peak tourist season. Then, on September 20, while approaching one of his favorite long climbs, the Arrowhead Are te, with a novice partner, a foothold broke and sent Mark 40 feet to the ground, resulting in a compound dislocation of his left ankle. Difficulty in initiating a rescue and soil in the wounds contributed to a severe infection, and he was fortunate not to have his leg amputated.

So great was Mark's desire to climb the Nose route on El Capitan that he joined Warren and Bill again in the spring of 1958 to help push the climb higher, despite his still-recovering ankle. By September, Bill had dropped out and Mark spent ten days as part of a party of six pushing the route to 2,000 feet before quitting the effort, feeling that, in his diminished capacity, he was a burden and, further, "was unwilling to cater to Harding's dominance" in that lesser role.

That year Mark married Beverly Woolsey, a climber he had met in Yosemite. They developed a lifestyle of working in the winter and saving money so they could rock climb all summer. Most American climbers at this time were weekend participants, but Mark stood apart in his dedication to staying in peak shape and establishing as many high-standard routes as he could manage before returning to work.

Despite occasional bouts of osteomyelitis and other complications from his ankle injury, Mark continued to establish difficult first ascents through the early 1970s in California, Arizona, Utah, and in the Needles of South Dakota.

Mark pursued his education as well as climbing, eventually earning a B.A. and a master's in geography. He taught geography at Pierce College in Woodland Hills from 1967 to 1995, with a specialty in weather, and served as chairman of the Earth Science Department for many years. In 1974, he remarried to Kriss Lindquist, and they purchased a second home in Idyllwild for climbing purposes. He married a third time in 1999 to Mary McLaughlin, who predeceased him in 2018.

In 2009, Mark's lower leg finally had to be amputated, more than 50 years after the accident. Had Mark not been injured in his prime, the trajectory of American climbing history undoubtedly would have been steeper and its tapestry of achievements far richer. Ropemate and vision- ary climber Chuck Pratt once wrote that Mark "showed us that climbing can be a way of life and basis for a philosophy." In a 2008 interview, Mark acknowledged savoring that great compliment and concluded, "If there is any contribution I made to climbing, that's it. I showed there was a way of life in pursuing it."

**Jerry Gallwas concludes:** Mark and I had not been in touch since 1958 but reconnected in 2009 as I was putting together a document recording my reflections of our adventures climbing the three desert spires. His memory was remarkable, and his red pencil corrections to my drafts extremely helpful.

Any party with Mark included would ultimately achieve the summit, had it been Half Dome or El Cap. The rock climbing community has lost one of its most accomplished and little-published pioneers.

— Steve Grossman, with reminiscences from Jerry Gallwas

## Images



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