



## AAC Publications

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### **Mt. Barrill, Cobra Pillar; Mt. Bradley, south face, The Pearl; Mt. Dickey, southeast face; repeats and speed ascents**

Alaska, Ruth Gorge

"I just simply say, 'Don't spend your time doing something that's horribly dangerous, just to make a first ascent,'" Brad Washburn said late in life, on the occasion of his 67<sup>th</sup> trip to Alaska. "Enjoy making the second and third ascents of thrilling old routes...It's getting whittled to smaller and smaller differences between the new and the old. The new route here is only a hundred yards to left of the other one. This becomes what the French call a *variante*. It's not a new route at all."

Washburn knew what he was talking about. His first-ascent résumé featured both epic adventures, like Mt. Lucania, in 1937, as well as the West Buttress of Denali, in 1953, which would become one of the most popular big-mountain routes in the world. After Washburn's climbing career ended, his aerial photography and maps guided successive generations of climbers up new routes. And as unclimbed real estate dwindles, alpinists' appetite for virgin geography has only increased in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Renan Ozturk, Alex Honnold, and I rendezvoused in Anchorage the third week in May. Renan and I had spent the last several seasons focused on our own first ascent: the Tooth Traverse. While tiptoeing across the eastern rim of the Ruth Gorge, we couldn't help but stare at the uncompromising walls lining the other side of the glacier—surely one of the greatest displays of mountain terrain anywhere in the world. Our goal this year was to climb some of those features, and we felt more inspired by the efforts of those who came before us than by any remaining untouched line.

We flew to a base camp below Mt. Dickey on May 23. "I want to dig something," Alex enthused as soon as the plane departed. "I've never shoveled snow before." I scanned his face, looking for some trace of sarcasm. Alex, a native son of Sacramento, California, was entirely sincere. He'd never shoveled snow before.

Indeed, the addition of Mr. Honnold to the team was a bit of a wildcard. Although known to be a pretty good rock climber, this would be his first foray into big-boy alpine terrain. Renan secretly suspected his background as a free-soloist and speed climber in Yosemite was exactly the sort of skill set needed to take on the west-side line-up: The rock quality is often so poor that the climbing feels like soloing, even with a rope and rack.

"So, what are we going to climb tomorrow?" Alex asked our first night on the glacier. With Honnold, I saw, this is the constant chorus, and climbing with Alex reminded me that the wonderful thing about alpine climbing is you don't have to do a new route to have new adventures: Descending Mt. Barrill after climbing the Cobra Pillar (2,600', 5.10 A1) in a 19-hour ascent, Alex and I had the opportunity to make our first-ever rappel off a dead-manned crampon pouch [Zack Smith and Ozturk made a 12-hour ascent and 20-hour round-trip climb of the Cobra Pillar in 2009. The first ascent by Jim Donini and Jack Tackle took five days in 1991.]. Repeating the Pearl (4,000', 5.12 A0) on the south face of Mt. Bradley in 40 hours round-trip, for the second ascent, we were forced to cross a narrow gully that catastrophically flushed about once every 10 minutes, the route *The Sum of Its Parts* (Doucette-Rossi, AAJ 2013). Alex sent the route's A3 crux pitch in something more akin to 5.12 A0 R. Eighteen-year-old copperheads can still hold body weight, he discovered. [The first ascent of the Pearl (Neswadba-Orgler-Wutscher, AAJ 1996) on Bradley's south face took five days in alpine style. Andi Orgler and partners made many other fine ascents in the Ruth Gorge from the late 1980s to the mid-'90s.]

Dickey beckoned as well. But as Alaskan luck would have it, a low-grade, low-pressure system arrived, leaving us stuck in a soup of snow flurries and second-guessing. Days passed. "Can we do something today?" Alex kept asking. Even if the weather cleared, there was a lingering problem: In three days of climbing, we had destroyed three lead ropes. We needed a fourth to be delivered before we could launch up any route.

The fog disappeared after five days of sedentary glacier life. At 11 a.m., a Talkeetna Air Taxi plane landed bearing a new cord for us. Alex needed to be on a plane the very next day, but in a surge of blue-sky optimism we decided to make a Hail Mary attempt on Dickey. Nineteen hours after setting off up the 1974 route (5,100', 5.10c A0), at 10 a.m., we stood on Dickey's summit. Alex put in a heroic block leading us through the night. It was to my knowledge the first time one of the big, technical routes on Dickey had been climbed in a day. [The first ascent of the southeast face of Dickey, a.k.a. the 1974 route, (Roberts-Rowell-Ward, AAJ 1975) took six days round-trip.] We jogged down the descent route in a few hours. Alex was on a plane back to Talkeetna by six that evening.

Freddie Wilkinson

## Images

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