



AAC Publications

Mt. Hooker, Original Sin

Wyoming, Wind River Range

GRAND OBJECTIVES within six hours' drive from your front door are still to be found.

In July of 1964, Dick McCracken, Charlie Raymond, and Royal Robbins spent four days making the first ascent of Mt. Hooker's (12,504') imposing north face, an audacious and groundbreaking climb—one of the first Grade VI walls outside of Yosemite Valley. To this day, the 16-mile approach is more than a step removed from El Capitan's roadside nature and full cell service.

As Jesse Huey and I searched for a worthy, achievable target for this year's "JTG" (Just The Guys) venture, we squinted at photos of the original Robbins line. In 1990, Paul Piana, Galen Rowell, Todd Skinner, and Tim Toulas had completed a free variation called Jaded Lady (1,800', V 5.12-, AAJ 1991) that weaved right and left to avoid the central nose of the headwall, joining the original route about 800' up the wall. [Several weeks before this ascent, Stuart Ritchie, Mark Rolofson, and Annie Whitehouse had spent 21 days attempting the first ascent of this line, freeing all but a short section.] We wondered about the lower part of Robbins' route. Was it too chossy? Too thin? Or, hope against hope, just overlooked? In our tradition of plucking low-hanging fruit, we hubristically packed for a gentleman's adventure to see if we might garner a bit of glory ourselves.

On the morning of day one, we spent all of 20 minutes scoping the wall before affirming to each other that, yes, this was the line for us. Jesse went first, and after a fun initial pitch of 5.9, he found himself executing delicate 5.11 moves with poor protection on a variation to the original start. Not out to prove a point, we added our first bolt. Another 10 feet of solid 5.11 gained a thin corner leading to an alcove belay below the horrifying, "creaking flake" McCracken had written about in AAJ 1965. We debated the relative merits of climbing over or around the Volkswagen-size menace. Thankfully it didn't budge, and Jesse again executed some delicate face climbing to put us at the base of a gorgeous corner—my breakfast for the next day.

After ascending our fixed lines in the morning, I started up with solid pro and delightful edges, still rooted in the ideal that we might free each pitch onsight. A difficult bulge quickly dissolved that fantasy, but after a hang and inspection, I was finger-locking up glorious, clean rock. The corner melded into an arching roof with no perceptible weakness, but ten feet to the right was a tantalizing arête, and a little scrubbing yielded the right combination of holds for a 5.12 boulder problem to cap off the pitch. Wunderbar!

Next up was a hanging corner made of golden, glowing granite. A quick refresher on tenuous aid and beaking saw Jesse at the anchor; I foolishly tried to free climb on top rope before we had cleaned the flaky rock and lichen, practically destroying my only rock shoes in the process. We were now in 5.12+/5.13- territory for sure.

From here a small flake feature snaked out left for 15 feet, giving way to the horizontal line of rivet bolts Robbins had used to traverse to a 5.10 chimney system. (Jaded Lady traverses higher up.) Jesse replaced the first three rivets with two shiny new badges of courage before launching into a bold 20-foot 5.11 runout to gain a Butterballs-esque crack that deposited us at the belay by Jaded Lady's crux traverse.

Now came a question: Should we take our win with six newly freed pitches and finish on Jaded Lady's final 1,000' of mostly moderate free climbing or chance it with a more direct line up the headwall above? Always tenacious, Jesse wanted a direct line, and I cautiously assented to what I thought might be a Sisyphean task.

After a rest day we headed back up. Spirits were high, but an entire day of effort found us only two pitches higher. On the second of these, using aid, Jesse surmounted a giant roof that would certainly not go free. Rapping straight down, he found a barely extant passage through a different section of the roof, with an obvious wide pitch below. Above the roof was one more 5.12 pitch through the featured headwall to join straight into the final crux of Jaded Lady and complete the plumb line.

Over the next few days we sussed the crux pitches and engaged in a heated debate about whether to add bolts to the route's crux fourth pitch. As it stood, the pitch had a couple critical cam placements but otherwise relied on six preplaced beaks for protection. We'd added some bolts to our new variations but not to the original route (except for anchors). We agreed to leave the pitch as it was, but Jesse would have to lead it in the condition he championed!

The final, single-day push felt almost anticlimactic. At the crux Jesse racked up a precise selection of gear—not terribly difficult since there were only a couple of nuts and cams in addition to the six beaks. He flawlessly executed the tenuous pressing, palming, and smearing, and erupted with excitement as he pulled onto the belay stance. Armed with the courage of a top rope, I managed to squeak by with a clean follow.

We flowed through the pitches above, our complete free climb nearly compromised as my foot slipped on the final new pitch of 5.12a on the headwall. Our power was winding down, but we each mustered just enough to put this one to rest and link into Jaded Lady with no falls. We still faced that line's upper crux, a 5.12 corner. It would be unfair to say this was inconsequential, but when you have a Huey on the rack that's just how it is. In exchange for his valiant cornersmanship, I led out the final 300' of meat and potatoes 5.9.

Staring out at that perfect cirque, on that perfect day, with our greatest rock climbing accomplishment below us, we each knew it would never get better than this. Until next year, that is.

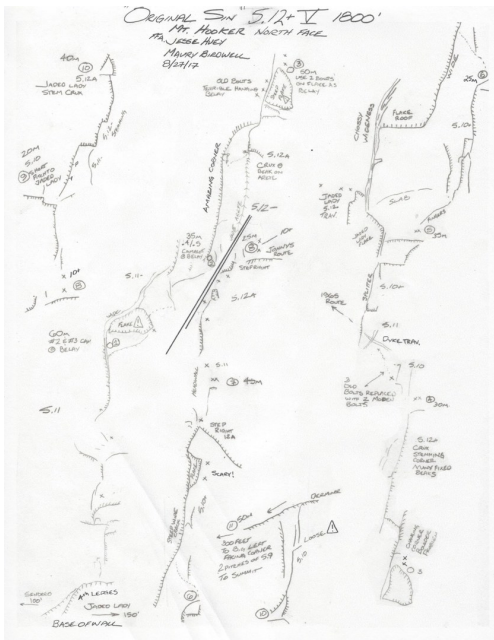
Summary: First ascent of Original Sin (1,800', V 5.12+) on the north face of Mt. Hooker in the Wind River Range, by Maury Birdwell and Jesse Huey. The route frees four and a half pitches of the original 1964 line (McCracken- Raymond-Robbins) and adds five pitches of new variations before finishing on Jaded Lady.

– Maury Birdwell

Images



The north prow of Mt. Hooker: Yellow line: Original Sin (2017), incorporating and freeing parts of the original route (1964), then following Jaded Lady (red line, 1990) to the top. Other routes not shown.



Topo for Original Sin (1,800', V 5.12+) on the north face of Mt. Hooker in the Wind River Range.



Jesse Huey stretches out for a positive hold on the crux stemming corner of Original Sin (1,800', V 5.12+) on the north face of Mt. Hooker in the Wind River Range.



Jesse Huey on the tough boulder problem leading out to the arête on pitch three of Original Sin.

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