



AAC Publications

Tom Frost, 1937 – 2018

On August 24, Tom Frost—whose character and influence outshone his remarkable routes—died peacefully after a short battle with cancer.

Frost was the last survivor of the team that made the first ascent of El Capitan's Salathé Wall, the second route up the formation, a climb known for its length and difficulty but also for the excellent style in which it was put up. Unlike the siege tactics used by Warren Harding on the Nose, concluding in 1958, the Salathé team (Frost, Chuck Pratt, and Royal Robbins) only retreated once from the wall, at one-third height, and placed only 13 bolts on the 3,000-foot route during their 1961 ascent. The climb remains one of the most famous in the world and is known for its beauty and natural passage. "The biggest surprise of all was El Cap—what a grand place. We didn't see that from the ground for what it was. It was like a palace," Frost told me.

He was a spiritual man and felt a deep connection, a relationship, with the stone—perhaps even more so than with his partners.

Frost's best-known ascents were done in the early 1960s, including the Salathé, the second ascent of the Nose and the North America Wall on El Cap, and the west face of Sentinel Rock. In addition to his contributions in Yosemite Valley, during his decades-long climbing career Frost established significant routes in the Northwest Territories of Canada and the Tetons of Wyoming. In Nepal, he climbed most of Annapurna's south face (he reached 25,000 feet), made the first ascent of Kangtega, in 1963, and then returned for a new route 23 years later, and filmed (and summited) the second ascent of Ama Dablam.

In addition to his climbing prowess, Frost was a mechanical engineer, and his revolutionary hardware designs contributed to the clean climbing movement in the 1960s and '70s. In 1970, after the Annapurna expedition, Frost borrowed chocks from his climbing partner Chris Bonington and used them for a week on 100-year-old routes in the Lake District. "The cracks were in perfect shape because they didn't use pitons," he said. "I came home and told Yvon Chouinard. I invented the Stoppers and Hexes that came out in the 1972 clean climbing catalog. And that's about it. That's history." Frost also designed the RURP piton and made significant contributions to tools for vertical ice climbing.

In the '80s he continued designing but shifted his focus to the co-founding and development of Chimera Lighting, based in Boulder, Colorado. His designs in both climbing and photographic lighting were pivotal, and in alignment with his ethos and his relationship with protecting and celebrating the natural world.

In the late '90s and early 2000s, Frost, by then living in Oakdale, California, was once again active in Yosemite. With his son, Ryan, he repeated his most significant routes from Yosemite's Golden Age. During this time Frost also started a successful campaign to protect Yosemite's Camp 4 from being impacted dramatically by the national park's rebuilding plan after the floods of '97; the campground eventually was added to the National Register of Historic Places.

I lived in Yosemite during this period, and after a climb with Ryan, at the base of El Cap, he introduced

me to his father. Tom and I stayed in touch until his final months. I interviewed him a multitude of times over the years for various publications, but the significance of our interactions ultimately was much more personal. Over dinners in Yosemite Valley, meetings at his house in Oakdale, and hours over the phone, Frost and I talked about everything from climbing to partners to love. He is the most inspirational person I've known and I hung on every word. He shared everything from the granular, as in what style of aid he preferred—aluminum or webbing—to the 10,000-foot view of his spiritual relationship with El Cap and the earth.

In Yosemite, “I fell in with a bad crowd, my kind of bad crowd,” Frost joked with a deadpan look before releasing his toothy smile, referring to his heavy-hitting crew of Robbins, Chouinard, and Pratt. The four men were lifetime friends. Frost admired each member of his team for different reasons: Robbins for his vision and ethics, and Chouinard for his business sense—the two worked together for ten years. But it was Pratt, a man of few words, who left Frost with a deeper appreciation and spiritual connection with the vertical world. Frost observed how gracefully his friend moved over stone. “He was the most natural climber in the group and he had the strongest spiritual base,” Frost said. “It was beautiful to watch him climb.”

During his climbs on El Capitan, including the Nose in 1960, Frost took a series of black and white photos that have become iconic images of the early days of big-wall climbing. “To have a camera up there in such a pristine place, you couldn't tell anyone had been there except for the lone bolt,” he told me. “And to be there with these guys who knew what it was all about. You didn't have to have a lot of conversation. We were just enjoying the climbing. The seven rolls I shot in that week on the Nose were the best of my stuff. That was just a reflection of the whole magic of what was transpiring.

“El Cap provides the handholds and piton holds, and it teaches us to climb by what it presents to us,” he went on. “Our part is to use good style and to protect the resource, have a good attitude, and be filled with joy and happiness, not filled with warfare.”

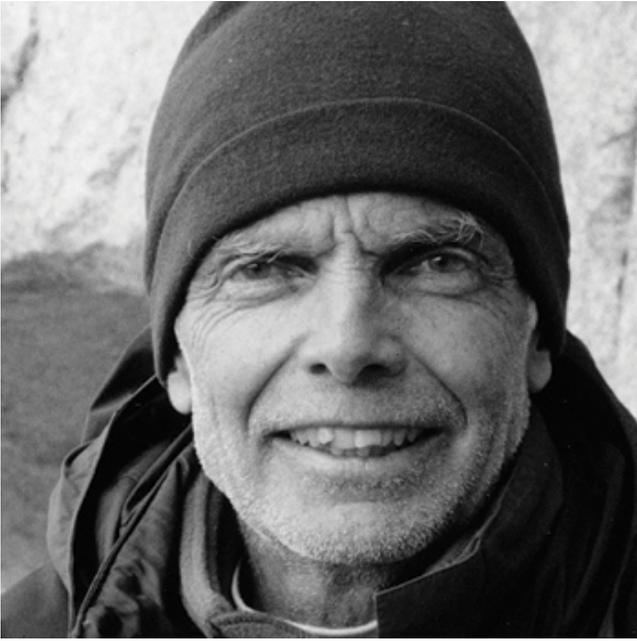
My contact with Frost became most frequent in his final years. During this period he was working on a timeline of his climbs with biographer Steve Grossman and a film crew documenting him—all of which led to reflection on the routes that had the greatest impact on his life. “It's been 50 years since those climbs with Royal, Chuck, and Yvon. What we shared were transformative, life-changing experiences,” he said.

“I realized I was really happy up there, really at home. It was that interaction, that intimate association, the struggle of the climb, that close relationship with the rock—El Capitan—and the Earth. The joy I was feeling had to do with more than just my joy. Mother Earth, who was also part of the team, was pleased with our success and our effort. In the process of learning how to climb, the Earth is a mentor, providing the handholds and footholds. In other words, the Earth is here to provide for our lives and our success in life. When we do well and we're pleased with it, our spirit is also well.”

If I could take home only one thing from my conversations with Frost it's this: “How you do anything is how you do everything.”

– Chris Van Leuven

Images



Tom Frost at a hammock bivouac high on the Dihedral Wall, during the second ascent.

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