



AAC Publications

Mt. Woolsey and Innominate: New Routes, 25 Years Apart

United States, Wyoming, Bighorn Mountains

The west face of Mt. Woolsey (12,978'), showing (1) Where the Animals Go (Ochenski-Schunk, 1996), (2) When Old Meets New (Parsons-Schunk, 2021), and (3) Candalaria (Richardson-Schunk, 1995). The normal route up the south ridge is on the right skyline.

Twenty-seven years ago, when we shared the ripe age of 41, Kirk Richardson of Portland, Oregon, introduced me to the potential of Wyoming's Bighorn Mountains. He noted that my Wyoming cousin Edward Schunk had photographed the range for the Bonneys' guide in the 1960s and had a few first ascents of his own.

With Ed's guidance, in 1995, Kirk and I entered Wilderness Basin, a westside drainage north of Cloud Peak. We warmed up on the clean west face of the Innominate and the Gargoyle, two routes from Bonneys' guide. On the Innominate, we found an ancient braided-rope anchor, a possible remnant of a historic 1933 expedition, when W.B. Willcox and teammates made the first recorded ascents of Innominate, Mt. Woolsey, and Black Tooth. Next, we put up a wandering free-solo line on the slabs comprising the north side of Cloud Peak, south of a tarn at 11,170'. Sufficiently emboldened, Kirk and I next chose a plum line falling from the prominent spire on the southern shoulder of the west face of Mt. Woolsey. A sliver of dark rock originates and cascades between the spire's twin angular summits, narrowing as it falls. Its right margin marks our four-pitch ascent route to the southernmost summit. Like other routes in this cirque, the quality of rock varied greatly. To our distress, the climb's hardest moves coincided with a patch of loose rock. We named the probable new route Candalaria (III 5.10), our neighborhood and stomping grounds in Salem, Oregon.

While the getting was good, I returned to the Bighorns in 1996 with George Ochenski and Hal Harper of Helena, Montana. Hal put golden trout on the table while George and I ascended a new four-pitch line, the Southwest Face (II 5.7), to the right of Wilcox's west face route on the Innominate. Six inches of snow had fallen at 11,000' on August 6, and melting verglas made the approach super dicey.

I then suggested to George that we try a line on the west face of Woolsey, just north and above Candalaria—it looked user-friendly and shorter. But George wanted to try the long line directly below the summit, south of the col between Black Tooth and Woolsey. The broken lower third of the wall is capped by a clean headwall with several right-facing corners, including a prominent dihedral in the middle. We started immediately below this dihedral, with a crux on pitch four involving blank ground linking two corners. We descended the route in four rappels and made it back to camp 10.5 hours after departing. We called our new six-pitch route Where the Animals Go (III 5.10).

I couldn't bring myself to publish our photos and routes. There was more work to be done on the west face of Woolsey, and I wanted to be part of it. I left Montana soon after these climbs and enjoyed many adventures in South America and work in Washington, D.C. By the time the pristine lakes and glacial cirques of Wilderness Basin began calling, the challenges of backpacking uphill 13 miles with climbing gear were real. Aging and its close cousin, wear and tear, took their toll. Often when my partners were healthy, I was not, and vice versa.

In the summer of 2021, 25 years after my trip to the Bighorns with George and Hal, I had the good fortune to team up with Robby Parsons, a robust 22-year-old athlete out of Bozeman. Upon our arrival in Wilderness Basin he announced, "The walls look bigger than the photos!" In a testament to previous climbers and fishermen, there were still no signs of camping.

We ascended unroped along the bowl to the right of the southwest ridge that splits the west face of Woolsey. I had saved a pound of backpacking weight by using a length of one-inch tubular webbing for my harness, 1960s-style. As we tied in Robby said, "That's scary retro!" I took the lead on the first pitch, planning to turn the sharp end over to Robby for the tough stuff. In hindsight, I probably had no business leading 5.7 at 12,700' in isolated wilderness. Everything felt awkward, and I stopped after only 100'. It was time to off-load the Ferrari I had trailed from Montana. Robby roared up to the belay and continued on. The swirling clouds lifted above the summit—today there would be no fear of afternoon showers. It was pure bliss and worth the long wait to return.

Robby's joy and confidence were captivating as I paid the rope out on the third pitch. I didn't as much clean this crux pitch as dirty it. Wild stems in a vertical open book led to a four-foot roof. Any residual off-the-couch stamina of my 68 years lasted about 30'. Thereafter I became the load for Robby's 3:1 pulley system. The fourth pitch was cake and we met 10' from the summit, following 400' of roped climbing. We were both grinning. We called our suspected new route When Old Meets New (III 5.10+).

—George Schunk

Images



Robby Parsons and the Wilderness Basin cirque, showing the summits of (left to right) Black Tooth, Mt. Woolsey, the Gargoyle, and the Innominate.



The west face of Mt. Woolsey, the Gargoyle, and the Innominate, showing (left to right): Candalaria (III 5.10, Richardson-Schunk, 1995); West Face, Central Summit, the Innominate (II 5.6, Willcox-Willcox, 1933); and Southwest Face (II 5.7, Ochenski-Schunk, 1996).



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George Schunk and Robby Parsons on the summit of Mt. Woolsey.

Article Details

Author	George Schunk
Publication	AAJ
Volume	64
Issue	96
Page	126
Copyright Date	2022
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions