



## AAC Publications

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### **Robbins, 1964**

#### A Great American Climber at His Zenith

**In the year 1964, when Royal Robbins was 29 and at the peak of his powers, he performed an astonishing amount of hard climbing:** the second ascent of two El Capitan routes, the first ascent of the north face of Mt. Hooker in the Wind Rivers (one of the world's first wilderness big walls), a free climbing tour de force through the Rocky Mountains, and the first ascent of the North America Wall, the inaugural route up El Capitan's daunting southeast face. In that year, he was at the top of the world in both wall climbing and free climbing.

Yet Robbins could sense the winds of change. That year he attempted a few routes put up by other climbers that he struggled to repeat or couldn't climb at all. He got married and began to explore his options for making a real living, beyond simply existing as a climber. Yosemite Valley no longer felt like the nexus of both climbing and life. Robbins would continue to make a huge impact for almost a decade—with his new routes and solo ascents, with his evangelism for clean climbing, and with his influential Rockcraft books— but there would never be another year like 1964.

The following excerpt from David Smart's new book, *Royal Robbins: The American Climber* (Mountaineers Books, 2023), focuses on this pivotal time. The story begins in the fall of 1963, shortly after Robbins, Layton Kor, Jim McCarthy, and Dick McCracken climbed the first route up the subarctic southeast face of Proboscis in Canada's Northwest Territories.

**Proboscis gained Royal the attention of mountaineers, but instead of moving on to another alpine objective, he returned to Yosemite, where he nurtured a new obsession: the smooth, overhanging 2,000-foot southeast face of El Capitan, which was emblazoned with an intrusion of black diorite shaped like North America.**

What would become the North America Wall route appeared impossible to most climbers, but Royal had traced a series of faint weaknesses up its lower flanks. The upper half, despite some huge, mysterious overhangs, had more cracks. In the AAJ, he described the wall as "treacherous," "ogreish," and lacking in "elegance and majesty." "We didn't expect to get up this wall in particular," he wrote. "We didn't know where the route went or even if there was a route."

In the fall of 1963, Royal had confessed to Glen Denny that his motivation for big-wall climbing was fading. The North America Wall would demand a tour de force of climbing skills and stand as a masterpiece of his principles of bold, ground-up climbing, hopefully with a minimum of bolts. The Salathé Wall had been graced with cracks where none were expected and comfortable bivouac ledges. The North America Wall, if Royal could do it, would be a masterpiece of his own imagination.

Royal "wanted to create climbs no one else could do," wrote Denny in *Valley Walls*. "Or, if they could, they'd have to do them with more protection than he had used, more aid, more bolts."

In September of 1963, a month before his first reconnaissance on the North America Wall, Royal and Yvon Chouinard costarred in *Sentinel: The West Face*, produced and directed by ski filmmaker Roger Brown. Tom Frost, who had made the first ascent of the climb with Chouinard [in 1960], prusiked beside the climbers with a handheld camera while Brown tracked them from the ground using a telephoto lens on a movie camera. On film, Royal climbs without superfluous movement, flourishes,

or hesitation. He has momentum, but he lamented that the film made him look “stony and cold,” while Chouinard seemed “warm and human.” The glimpse of himself as the great climber had left him wanting.

The film begins with Chouinard climbing a graffiti-covered boulder at Stoney Point in Los Angeles. He falls, and, in scriptwriter Barry Corbet’s words, “A man climbs on the graffiti of his society. He falls, not from a mountain, but into a city.” The lonely bivouac on Sentinel is contrasted with shots of busy city streets. “Relate to me please,” says the narrator, but at no other stage in Royal’s life did the thoughts of the average urban commuter matter less to him than when he was preparing for the North America Wall.

In October, Royal, with Glen Denny, finally made his first reconnaissance. As Royal led the difficult third pitch, “his emotions were fighting against the grip of his logical mind,” Denny wrote later. He told Denny to watch him, to let some rope run out if he fell to soften the impact. A wild fall that ripped out several of Royal’s tied-off aid pins ended just above the belay.

“I dropped the camera and grabbed the rope with both hands,” Denny wrote in his memoir. “It hurt like hell.”

“Nice catch,” Royal said.

Royal was now reporting to Summit, Off Belay, and the AAJ, and was conscious of how his activities would be captured on film. He asked Denny if he had taken any good photographs of his lead [before the fall]. “That’s real A5 up there,” Royal said, unclipping the pulled pitons hanging from his belay rope as he prepared to try again. “What a challenge! I’m not going to put in a bolt until I reach that blank spot.”

“His blood was up,” Denny wrote. “He had to conquer that pitch.”

After five pitches, they rappelled. In addition to climbing some of the most difficult-looking rock on the wall, they had successfully experimented with a bag-hauling technique that used jumar ascenders. The new method would reduce the strain of hauling on the leader and free the second climber to concentrate on cleaning pitons. The Yosemite hauling method, invented by Royal, drastically reduced the labor of one of the most hated big-wall tasks.

**That winter, Royal was scheduled to return to Sugar Bowl ski resort near Donner Pass to work.**

The manager, a religious man, told Royal he could only bring Liz [Elizabeth Burkner, Royal’s girlfriend] back to Sugar Bowl if he married her first. Royal and Liz thought it was a fine notion, and on November 17, 1963, Royal and Liz were married.

Royal’s first wedding [a short-lived marriage in 1957] had been at the justice of the peace in Las Vegas; this time, it was at the Swedenborgian Church in San Francisco’s Pacific Heights. The Arts and Crafts building had been completed in 1895. Liz and Royal exchanged their vows below roof timbers fashioned from Pacific madrone trunks that evoked the forests where they had first met. The tiny wedding party included Liz’s friends and family, Royal’s mother, Beulah, and his sister, Penny. The climbers were represented by Mort Hempel, who had felt unrequited love for Liz for a couple of years, a fact that must have made the event excruciating for him, and Janie Dean [a former lover of Royal’s].

Royal didn’t buy a ring, but Liz’s mother supplied one. “I wore it all the time,” said Liz. “There were a few sizes of cracks where the ring came in handy for finger jams.” Dean loaned them her houseboat in Sausalito for their honeymoon.

They were still on their honeymoon on November 22, when President John F. Kennedy was

assassinated. The previous August, Kennedy had made a highly publicized visit to Yosemite, an event mostly ignored by climbers. Royal seldom mentioned politics or world affairs, but like most Americans, he and Liz were deeply upset by the assassination. The 1960s of history had begun.

Life for the Robbinses, as for most Americans, went on with little external change as the war in Vietnam deepened and the civil rights movement intensified. The newlyweds moved into a duplex on a working-class street in western Modesto. Although Royal had lived in tougher neighborhoods, Liz had not.

In the fall of 1963, Royal got his first job at Valley Paint [in Modesto], the Burkner family business. Earl taught him to mix and sell paint. "Royal loved my father," said Liz, and Earl, whose only child was Liz, loved Royal. If Earl hoped that Royal was ready to settle down to learn the family business full-time, however, he was soon disappointed.

Royal had seen what middle-class life could provide. Other climbers had intellectually rewarding careers. Frost was an engineer. Most of the men he had known at the Sierra Club's Rock Climbing Section, with whom Royal began climbing, were white-collar professionals. Royal, who lacked the education to catch up with them, began to wonder how his peculiar skills could improve his way of life.

In 1962, Royal had climbed Royal Arches with French alpinist Lionel Terray, who explained how he made an income from giving presentations. San Francisco travel agent Leo Le Bon, who had brought Terray to California, had come along with them and told Royal about an increasing demand for adventure- and experience- based vacations. [Le Bon later co-founded Mountain Travel and pioneered commercial trekking in Nepal.] Unlike Royal, however, Terray had actively publicized his climbs.

Royal overcame some of his misgivings about self-promotion and put together some slide presentations. He re-evaluated his ambivalence about fame and publicity. "I started thinking in terms of doing climbs mainly for fame," said Royal, "rather than of doing them just for the fun of it."

After another winter at Sugar Bowl, where the newlyweds were entitled to their own chalet, they returned to Yosemite. Royal went from one big wall to the next, cramming as much climbing as he could into the spring season before his summer road trip and his first paid presentations. A fall attempt on the North America Wall loomed.

He began with the second ascent of the Dihedral Wall [Baldwin-Cooper-Denny, 1962], with Frost, and without fixed ropes. At the post-climb summit celebration, Royal overcame his aversion to smoking to try "grass." "When I first started having the occasional joint behind a boulder in Camp 4, Royal was slightly disapproving," said Joe Fitschen [a regular partner of Royal's and one of the climbers on the second ascent of The Nose in 1960], "but later he came around. I remember going up to meet him on top of El Cap after he and Tom finished the Dihedral Wall. Tom went down, but Royal and Liz and Linnea (my wife) and I stayed on top for the night and laughed and giggled a lot."

In his journals throughout the 1960s, Royal referred to "grass trips," which could be either "good" or "good but strange." Smoking remained a nighttime recreation, associated with conversation, meals, and sex. He scorned people who smoked weed during the day.

Royal was curious, if not game, when it came to hallucinogens. "Drugs? You ask if I've taken any?" replied Steve Roper to a letter from Royal. "Nothing powerful—I shall wait until your return." But Roper was only joking. LSD, said Fitschen, was "too far out" for Royal.

After the post-Dihedral Wall weed wore off, Royal offered a decidedly un-giddy assessment of Ed Cooper's route. He complained that Cooper had removed the hangers and nuts from more than 35 bolts, making it difficult to repeat. He and Frost removed 18 bolts from the wall. Royal suggested

that Cooper had deliberately underestimated the number of bolts on the route in his AAJ report. Later, he said that the climb had no aesthetic qualities, besides its difficulty.

A few days after the Dihedral Wall, Royal and Chuck Pratt climbed Kor and Roper's West Buttress of El Capitan in three and a half days. The route had no long bolt ladders and had been climbed in a style Royal approved of.

In late June, Frost joined Royal and Denny on a second reconnaissance of the North America Wall. They climbed 1,200 feet to a long ledge they named Big Sur. The remaining 800 feet looked loose and strenuous. They made plans to return after Labor Day. In the interim, Royal and Liz packed their gear into their wedding present from the Burkners, a beloved green Mercedes Earl had bought in Germany, and headed out on their first extensive American climbing road trip. This also marked Royal's first engagements as a professional presenter and a shot at making his name known outside Yosemite and the Tetons.

On the granite spires and sweeping buttresses of Wyoming's Wind River Range, Royal, Dick McCracken, and Charlie Raymond made the first full traverse of the Cirque of the Towers and the first ascent of the South Buttress of the Watchtower. On the Watchtower, a stone dislodged by the haulbag barely missed Royal but jammed the rope in a crack. On the seventh pitch, they were caught in an afternoon storm.

"Although this is perhaps the most difficult route in the Cirque of the Towers," wrote Royal in the AAJ, "with perhaps the finest 'line,' the actual climbing did not meet the expectations engendered by the beauty of the buttress. The rock is often poor and the belay spots not well situated."

The vertical 1,800-foot north face of Mt. Hooker was next. For three cold days, Royal, Raymond, and McCracken switched leads and hauled bags. The wind was so strong that Royal struggled to maintain his balance in his etriers as he nested pitons and used hooks on small nubbins. The wall ran with cold water. They spent a night in hammocks Liz had made on her Singer sewing machine. It was a fine adventure, but Royal was unimpressed by the copious loose rock on the climb.

At a picnic table in Custer State Park in the Black Hills of South Dakota, the next stop on the road trip, Royal penned a letter to Roper, fretting about the North America Wall. "I know that Galen Rowell... is seriously trying to cut us out on [the North America Wall]." He also repeated a rumor that Ed Cooper was going to attempt to solo it. Roper, who was now in Vietnam, had other things to worry about; moreover, both he and Royal knew the park service only allowed El Capitan climbs after Labor Day.

The Needles of the Black Hills were, in some ways, the opposite of Yosemite. Face climbing predominated. Piton cracks were rare. The climbs were rarely more than 150 feet long, but they demanded superb technique and nerve.

The area's reputation as a seedbed of futuristic free climbing and bouldering was greatly enhanced by John Gill, a mathematics professor based in Colorado. Gill had searched the outcrops and boulders of North America for hard boulder problems, applying his prodigious skill, strength, and self-directed passion. His ascents were rarely discussed in *Summit* or the AAJ, but he achieved an attractive sort of fame untarnished by controversy or competition. Royal's main reason for visiting the Needles was to try Gill's unrepeatable 1961 climb on a 30-foot-high, mitten-shaped pillar known as the Thimble, rumored to be the hardest boulder problem in America. [It is now considered a 5.12 free solo.]

Climbing with locals Dick Laptad and Sue Prince in the Tenpins area at the Needles, Royal and Liz made the first ascent of the Tricouni Nail pillar. Royal renamed the pillar Cerberus, following the tradition that entitled the first ascensionist to rename a climb, but the old name stuck. All four

followed Royal up the bald and dangerous Queenpin (5.9). The leaning pillar of Sandberg Peak and the steep-sided cone of the Tent Peg rounded out Royal's first ascents in the Needles.

Royal failed on Gill's route on the Thimble and left a short message in the summit register after climbing an easier route to the top: "Hats off to John Gill."

"I consider my greatest failure to be my effort on the Thimble," Royal wrote later. "I could see that even if I worked on it forever, it was very unlikely that I'd ever climb it. I really came face to face with my own limitations."

At Wyoming's Devils Tower, a 500-foot plug of phonolite porphyry, Royal made the first ascent of The Window with Colorado climber Pete Robinson, establishing an aid route that passed through the tower's biggest overhangs. He also made the first ascent of Danse Macabre, then the tower's hardest climb [now considered 5.10d or harder].

Royal moved on to Colorado, where he teamed up with Pat Ament, whose skill, drive, and admiration for Royal had all increased exponentially. [The two had climbed together the previous summer in Colorado.] Some referred to Ament as Royal's teenage sidekick, but the age difference wasn't quite so apparent at the time. "Pat was so young, and in a way, we were too," said Liz. "He was an eager kid who wanted to excel in things. He worshipped Royal, took to Royal. Royal was always so open to people; if someone wanted to be his friend, he let them."

Together, they made the first free ascent of The Yellow Spur in Eldorado Canyon at 5.9+. In Boulder Canyon, they climbed Final Exam, a 5.10 crack [now rated 5.11a]. They also climbed Athlete's Feat, a five-pitch 5.10+ with a difficult mantelshelf that favored Royal's well-honed granite bouldering skills. [The mantel is now rated 5.11a, with two bolts where Royal had only a low piton for protection.] A top-rope ascent of the hard, thin face on the first pitch of Country Club Crack, now graded solid 5.11, and an ascent of pitch two's overhanging crack with only a couple of points of aid (also rated 5.11 today) marked the next step in free climbing.

After a visit to Estes Park, where Royal made the first free ascent of Turnkornor [a multi-pitch 5.10], Royal, Liz, and Ament headed southwest to climb the desert spires of Castleton Tower in Utah and Shiprock in New Mexico.

A two-day event in Salt Lake City for the Alpenbock Climbing Club began Royal's career as an awkward, if committed, lecturer. "I would typically hide at the back of the room," he wrote in the unpublished essay "Life on the Lecture Circuit," "lurking out of sight behind the slide projector, while I lectured the group about the pictures they were viewing. I didn't fancy myself a public speaker. I was too shy, too solitary, too sullen, and I took myself with way too much deadly seriousness." He was more relaxed in the outdoor sessions at Big Cottonwood Canyon, where he demonstrated Yosemite climbing techniques.

Before he left Utah, Royal and Salt Lake City local Ted Wilson made the first ascents of a direct route on the south face of the Thumb and the Robbins Crack, an unprotectable 5.10 offwidth, both in Little Cottonwood. It was the last new route on his road trip that summer. Climbers in less famous areas enjoyed the whiff of celebrity Robbins routes added to their cliffs so much that by the end of the decade there were rumors he had done first ascents in some areas he hadn't even visited.

**In August, Glen Denny contracted dysentery on the first ascent of Jirishanca Norte in Peru** and told Royal he wouldn't be able to join the North America Wall climb that fall. Royal decided not to postpone until the spring.

"By this time," said Royal, "things had gone so far that I was getting greedy. I was anxious to get [the North America Wall] before someone else did.... I dislike certain elements in my personality."

Pratt and Frost were already committed to the team. The loss of Denny meant that the plan to have two parties share the work on the wall was in jeopardy. Royal invited Chouinard, and told Ament he could come if Chouinard didn't make it. As Chouinard, fresh out of the army in 1964, wrote, it was to be his first big wall: "I mean it was a miracle that I was asked to come along really, but Royal, Royal was the captain on that one," he noted. Royal, however, secretly dreaded repeating even the parts of the climb he had already done and was likely relieved when Chouinard led the third-pitch crux.

In the Black Dihedral above Big Sur Ledge, the leader had to clear loose rock and clumps of grass as he climbed. On October 17, their seventh day on the wall, they bivouacked under the Black Cave. "It looks like a tenement house on a work day," said Chouinard, "hammocks every which way, blue parkas, hauling ropes splayed out, shoes all hanging in a haphazard fashion from anchors." A helicopter filmed them at the bivouac, and Chouinard's parents saw him climbing on television for the first time. The next day, a storm moved in, the rain trapping them beneath their overhang and soon soaking them to the skin.

Mort Hempel sung folk songs over their radio at night, reminding them of the pleasures of Camp 4. Royal hadn't been away from Liz this long since the Proboscis climb. He wrote in the AAJ that "jocose badinage" at the bivouac sometimes took a darker turn. "You remember your nightmares," said Pratt to Chouinard, "and I'll remember mine, and each morning we'll trade. OK?"

When they set out again, wet, overhanging rock led to the Igloo cave. A half foot of snow awaited them on the summit the next day. There were no reporters and no champagne toasts. In the summit photo, the climbers look drawn and dirty, their smiles wan. They had just watched the haulbag full of gear they threw off the rim get stolen by a passing driver.

During the climb, a reporter for the *Modesto Bee* called Glen Denny. "I was surprised when they told me that Royal had called them ahead of time," said Denny, who knew Royal's views on publicity. "Apparently, he had changed his attitude."

The newspaper stories about the North America Wall, however, came and went in a few days, leaving Royal with little lasting fame or satisfaction. Climbers who sought publicity and the error-prone reporters who provided it remained favorite subjects of disapproval.

Royal's report in the AAJ was his most creative piece yet. "But what was Yvon doing on a nightmare-inducing wall like this?" he asked. "If there was ever anyone who has an eye for elegant routes on esthetic walls it is he. A poetic soul, Chouinard really rather disdains the analytical mind, for he hates to see beautiful things ripped and torn...."

"Pratt, on the other hand, had already climbed three great routes on El Capitan, though never one like this. Chuck's fantastic native talents and unassuming demeanor make him the finest of climbing companions.... Like Jack London and Thomas Wolfe, Pratt is an incorrigible romantic and suffers from the anguish which is a corollary of that *Weltanschauung* ["world view"]. Perhaps Chuck loves climbing partly because rock walls, unlike humans, are without malice."

Only Royal, with his extensive and idiosyncratic reading habits, could have put the authors of *The Call of the Wild* and *Look Homeward, Angel* in the same camp.

He concluded with philosophical musings heavy with the language of closure. "The earth in turn would be a mere dot on the sun, and there are suns many thousands of times larger than that fiery orb giving us life. Mankind is truly insignificant. Man's fate, indeed, is to have to swallow these truths and still live on. If one could only find meaning to make these hard truths of insignificance and omnipresent death acceptable. Where to find this meaning? Again the search...and we climb on."

Camp 4's literary experts called the article overblown, but it resonated with many aspiring climbing writers. "The NA [North America Wall piece] changed, and inspired my whole life," wrote British climber and writer Edwin Drummond to Royal, "with its awesome vision of belonging, arising out of the spirit of the climb...." Ken Wilson, another British writer [and influential editor of Mountain magazine], praised the climb, setting the foundations of British interest in Yosemite and its greatest climber.

The North America Wall showed that fixed ropes were unnecessary and that bolts could be minimized by daring aid climbing. A small, skilled team, cut off from the ground, could climb a new route on El Capitan. There were climbs in the Italian Dolomites that were about as hard and long, but none had been climbed in better style. The torch of climbing tradition had been passed from the Old World to the New.

**In 1964, the year Royal climbed the North America Wall**, a generation for whom spending a week aid climbing was admirable but not tempting took over the Yosemite free climbing scene, showing just how forward-looking Royal's free climbing summer road trip had been.

Twenty-four-year-old Frank Sacherer, who simply would not do a climb if he had to aid it, kept a list of climbs he wanted to free. He charged up cracks with scant protection, and terrified his seconds by keeping the rope slack so that they had to free climb just like him.

At Tahquitz, where Royal had recently been the undisputed master, Tom Higgins put up Jonah, a six-pitch 5.10+. "It was very hard," wrote Royal, "and I was determined to get up it, because Higgins had done so. I got up it, but I remember it as the hardest climb I had done up to that point."

At 29, Royal knew he was no longer the best climber in California. He would make a few more great climbs, but nothing to rival what he had already done. He would no longer reside for months in Camp 4. He now came when he had a specific climbing agenda, and left when he was done.

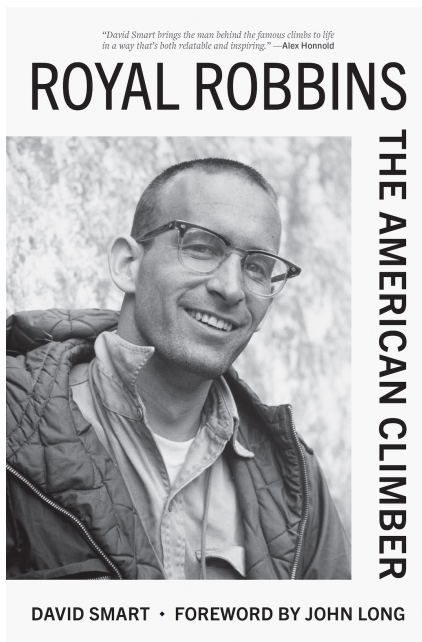
Royal ended the third volume of his memoir, entitled *The Golden Age*, with the 1964 season. A new stage of his life was about to begin. He concluded his account of the North America Wall with a quote from American alpinist John Harlin II: "Such beauty...turns satisfaction to pure joy."

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** David Smart, who lives in Toronto, is the founder and editorial director of Grippled and three other magazines. He is the author of two previous award-winning biographies, *Emilio Comici: Angel of the Dolomites* and *Paul Preuss: Lord of the Abyss*, as well as multiple climbing guidebooks, two novels, and a memoir, *A Youth Wasted Climbing*.

## Images



Robbins during a North America Wall reconnaissance. Photographer Glen Denny, his partner on the earliest recons, suffered rope burns while catching a long Robbins fall on the difficult third pitch. "His blood was up," Denny wrote.







Royal Robbins (left) and Tom Frost during the May 1964 reconnaissance of the North America Wall, which eventually would become Robbins' crowning big-wall achievement.



The famed "tenement house" hanging bivouac in the Black Cave on North America Wall, with (top to bottom) Tom Frost, Robbins, and Yvon Chouinard (mostly hidden).



Charlie Raymond during the first ascent of the north face of Mt. Hooker in Wyoming's Wind River Range.



Liz and Royal Robbins (on right), climbing with a friend in the Black Hills of South Dakota.



Robbins bouldering in South Dakota. His goal in the Black Hills was John Gill's unrepeated highball boulder problem on the Thimble (now considered 5.12), but Robbins was unable to do it, writing later, "I really came face to face with my own limitations."



Liz Robbins leading the Ruper Traverse in Eldorado Canyon, Colorado. The 1964 road trip was a free climbing tour de force for Royal and a chance for Liz to experience classic climbs and first ascents in several Western states.

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