

CANYON LEGACY

JOURNAL OF THE DAN O'LAURIE MUSEUM OF MOAB

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Seeking the Summits



*Also Inside: An exclusive interview
with Eric Bjornstad*



Museum
of Moab
established 1958

CANYON LEGACY

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Materials to be considered for publication should be submitted to *Canyon Legacy*, 118 E. Center St., Moab, UT 84532, or call 435-259-7985.

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This issue of Canyon Legacy would not be possible without the contributions of time, energy, photos and written material from a number of people.

First, Steve Bartlett and Stewart Green are thanked for contributing much of the historical information. Steve's upcoming book Desert Towers will be a must-read for anyone interested in the history of climbing in the area. I would also like to thank Stewart for his generous contribution of photographs.

I must thank Eric Bjornstad for inviting me into his home and entertaining me with an afternoon of stories from days gone by. Eric's home is one big archive of desert history, and he was kind enough to let me sort through photos and articles from the past. I also pulled names and dates from Desert Rock, Eric's original guidebook to climbing in the desert.

Photographers Michael D'Anna, Brian Bailey, Brad Brandewie, Kevin Smith, and the late Fran Barnes should all be thanked for their contributions. Drew Bedford, Chris Kalous, and Lisa Gnade helped contribute information and photos. John McMullen did an excellent job with the cartoon of Moab Man and Kokopelli.

Eve Tallman, Ralph Ferrara, and Liz Wattenberg all helped with the editing, and I can assure you all that you appreciate it! Zoe and Moki were very supportive during long hours at the computer.

--Sam Lightner Jr.

Cover Photo: Bill Grasfe rappelling off Elvis's Hammer on Sand Flats. Photo courtesy Brad Brandewie

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The mission of the Museum of Moab is to preserve and display artifacts and information, and to promote research and education that accurately reflect the natural and cultural history of the Moab area.

CANYON LEGACY

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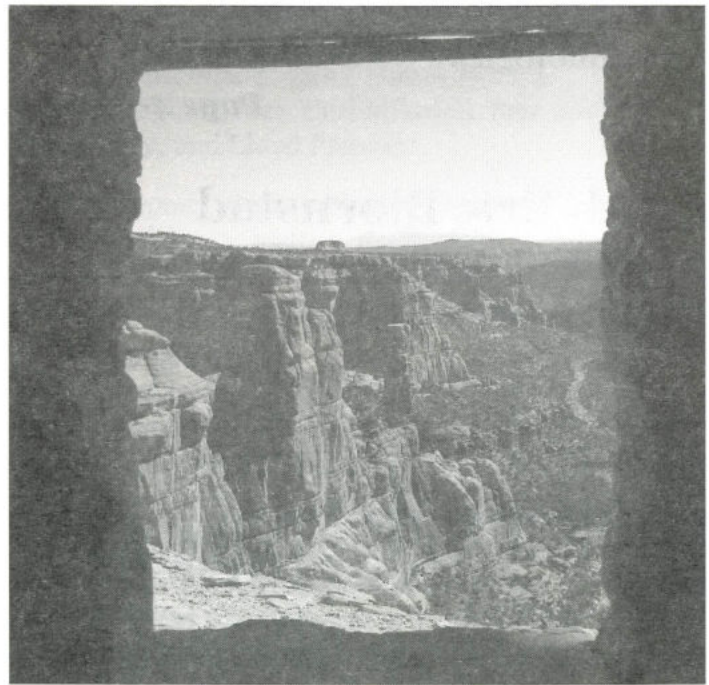
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Seeking the Summits



Anasazi dwellings are sometimes located in such precarious places that technical climbing skills are required to reach them. Photo Courtesy Sam Lightner Jr.



The view from this cliff dwelling in Arch Canyon perfectly frames a desert tower known as "The Dream Speaker." Photo Courtesy Sam Lightner Jr.

The town of Moab has become synonymous in the world with recreation. Mountain bikers, kayakers, jeepers, ATVers and even base jumpers make pilgrimages to our beautiful community. For climbers, Moab is a very special place. The towering sandstone monoliths around Moab draw climbers from all over and are demanding in technique and skill that cannot be duplicated elsewhere in the world.

It is easy to watch climbers at play and forget that aside from the natural qualities the walls and spires possess, there is another deeper and more emotional draw to our desert. The Colorado Plateau has perhaps the world's longest history of climbing. The people who lived here thousands of years ago built homes high in the cliffs. It is fascinating to find the aboriginals' artwork in locations that make one ask "How, and why, did they get up here?" What's more, their cliff-side homes often have windows that frame a particularly picturesque view and seem to show reverence for the most beautiful aspects of the desert.

Clearly the "ancient ones" had an affinity for high places that went beyond just safety, and modern climbers understand that. When climbing in a remote section of the desert, we often stumble across ruins and petroglyphs that are rarely seen, and it is hard not to feel a bond with those who came before us. We don't know what skills they developed and we will never see how the first inhabitants to our area ascended to the heights they did, but as climbers, we do understand why.

This issue of The Canyon Legacy is devoted to the modern rock towers and walls that draw thousands to our town every year. It began as an issue dedicated to all forms of recreation, but it was soon apparent that the region's climbing history would require more space to be significantly explored. If you are not a climber, you might want to read "How It's Done" before diving into the history section. In the future, we hope to compile similar Legacy publications on other regionally popular forms of recreation.

I hope you enjoy it,

Sam Lightner Jr.

Museum of Moab Board Member and Guest Editor

How It's Done

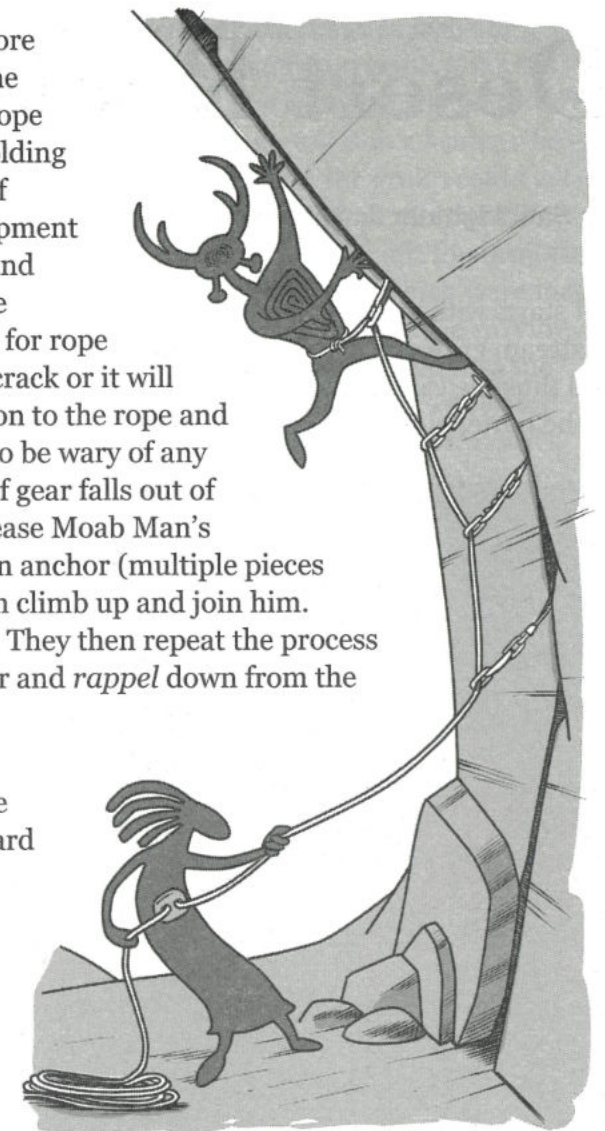
Climbing is usually enjoyed in teams with a leader and one or more followers. In the cartoon we can see that Moab Man is *leading* the climb. He places pieces of equipment in the crack and clips the rope through them as he ascends. Kokopelli is the *belayer*, the guy holding the rope and feeding it through a device that increases friction. If Moab Man falls, a combination of Kokopelli and the placed equipment will catch him. If Moab-Man is five feet above his highest piece and he slips, he will fall ten feet before Kokopelli catches him (double the distance to the last piece for the fall length, plus a little more for rope stretch). Moab Man has to correctly place the equipment in the crack or it will pull out and increase his fall length. Kokopelli has to pay attention to the rope and Moab Man at all times to be ready to catch. Also, Kokopelli has to be wary of any loose rock that Moab Man might knock off. If one of the pieces of gear falls out of the crack (bad), it will increase the distance fallen and thus increase Moab Man's possibility of injury. Once Moab Man gets to a safe place to set an anchor (multiple pieces to assure safety), he can safely take in the rope and Kokopelli can climb up and join him. Kokopelli removes the equipment as he climbs up to the anchor. They then repeat the process until they reach the summit. From the top they can set an anchor and *rappel* down from the tower.

The means by which a climber ascends the wall can be broken down into three techniques: free climbing, aid climbing, and free soloing. *Free climbing* is the use of your hands and feet for upward movement while the rope and gear are placed solely as a safety precaution (to catch a fall). When free climbing, the rope is only used if the climber slips off the rock face. A grade of difficulty is assigned by the first ascent team and then a consensus on the grade is met by others who later do the climb. The easiest grade for technical free climbing is 5.0 and the hardest in the world is currently 5.15.

Aid climbing is more technically complicated than free climbing because it is more dependent on the equipment and how it is placed in the rock. The gear is placed, perhaps in a crack, and the climber pulls on the gear for upward movement. Aid climbs are rated from A0 to A5, with the length of the fall (and thus the danger level) dictating the rating. A route rated "A0" means the equipment is quite safe and it is not likely a climber will fall, while a route rated A5 means almost all of the pieces you hang from can barely hold body weight so a fall will likely pull all of them, and you will hit the ground. Some of the hardest aid climbs in the world have been established in the Fisher Towers near Castle Valley.

The final means of ascent is *free solo*. To free solo something is to forego ropes and equipment or any safety equipment. Free soloing is a solitary pastime. It is rare that routes in the desert are free soloed since the rock quality may be suspect and a climber usually needs the rope to descend from the summit.

If you climb to a summit, you cannot walk off and it is rare to downclimb, so a *rappel* must be made. A rappel is done by setting an anchor and then threading the rope through the anchor. The rappeller then slides down the rope (held safely through a friction device) to the base of the climb.



Moab Man and Kokopelli Cartoon by John McMullen

A History of Desert Rock Climbing

By Sam Lightner Jr. with excerpts from Steve Bartlett's *Desert Towers*

It starts with a change in the climate. A stream flows where only desert rock and sand had been before. The stream grows in strength, becomes a large river, and carves out a canyon. The river alters its course slightly, and thus the canyon changes shape, leaving a fin or butte of more solid rock behind. Rain and wind carve away at the butte, pulling down millions of years of strata, until all that's left is the most solid pillar of rock. Then,



Many people feel this petroglyph, located near the mouth of Long Canyon, depicts a would-be climber falling to his death while the gods stand idly by. Photo courtesy Roads Through Time

perhaps millions of years later, someone stands beneath the remnant tower. He looks up and says, "No one has ever been on top of that... I want to climb it."

The Colorado Plateau has, perhaps, the world's richest climbing history. For as long as man has braved our desert, he has climbed. Sometimes he climbed to get prey, sometimes he climbed to get water, and sometimes he climbed to attack or avoid an enemy. But to live here, man had to climb. We all know that the Fremont cultures ascended the walls of the canyons to create their homes. It is likely, though there is no record of it, that the peaks of the La Sals, Henrys, and Abajos were all climbed thousands of years ago. We also know that the people of the past climbed some of the sheerer walls since petroglyphs, such as one found partway up South Six Shooter Peak, are in places that modern-day climbers reach with a serious amount of commitment. Still, there are some places that we can be fairly certain the ancient ones never reached, and those places draw thousands of climbers to Moab every year.

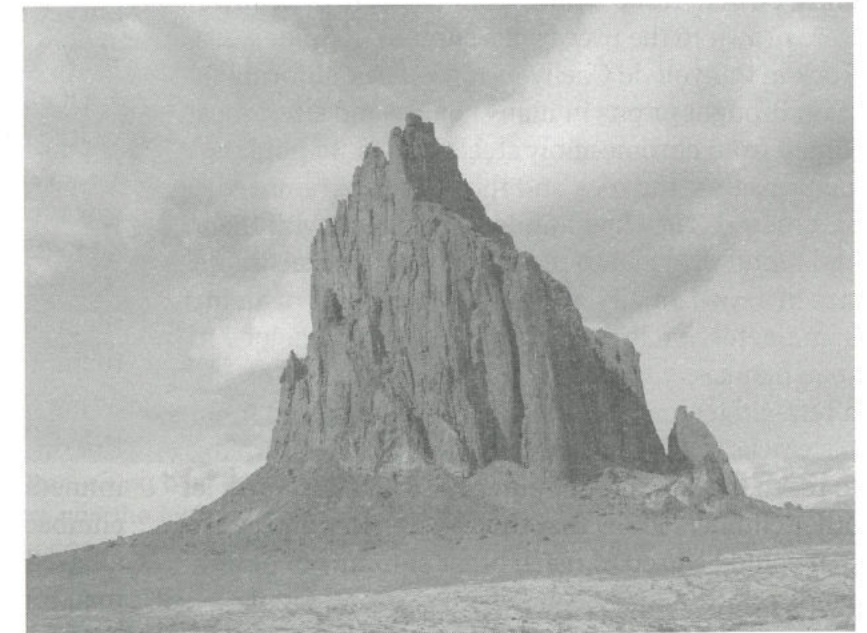
John Otto, the first man to reach one of the desert's more inaccessible summits (in what is now Colorado National Monument), is described in Steve Bartlett's *Desert Towers* as "Colorado's John Muir." As guidebook author Stewart Green puts it, "Otto was out there—way out there in left field. He would fit right in with today's nomadic...climbing

culture." John Otto was acquitted of insanity in a well-publicized trial in 1908. He had threatened Colorado Governor Henry Buchtel. The Grand Junction *Daily Sentinel* again affirmed Otto's similarity to what some onlookers would equate with the "intensity" of modern-day rock climbers by stating, "At first sight he would not impress anyone as being mentally imbalanced, but approach him on certain subjects and he at once becomes wild in his statements." Otto's most intense subject of conversation was on his efforts to preserve the desert and its beautiful cliffs. He almost single-handedly brought about a huge amount of preservation when he convinced President William H. Taft to create Colorado National Monument in 1911. Otto lived in a tent in the Monument for over thirty years and helped to build its trail system that we use today. His most audacious route winds to the summit of Independence Monument, a 550-foot tower of Wingate Sandstone that is the highest spire in the area. Otto banged juniper logs into the cracks and pieces of pipe into holes he drilled, creating a ladder that went to the summit. He erected a flag on the spire's summit on the Fourth of July, 1911. No ropes were used in the ascent, and a slip from one of the logs or pipes would have certainly been fatal. Today, the pipes and logs have been removed, but modern climbers ascend "Otto's Route" using the holes he drilled for handholds and footholds.

As Bartlett writes in *Desert Towers*, "Otto's Route was a one-off event, by someone who was not a climber, more an eccentric visionary. It was one thing to drill large holes and build a makeshift ladder, but real climbers and mountaineers try to take on the challenge of the rock itself, using natural cracks and features." The desert towers, with their vertical smooth walls, were beyond the abilities of climbers in the first half of the twentieth century. Also, the bigger mountains of the world were yet to be scaled using less technical means, so the smaller towers had not yet come into vogue. However, there was one summit in the desert that was so high it was actually its own mountain: Shiprock, in northwest New Mexico. Visible from over forty miles away, Shiprock stands 1,700 feet above the desert floor. Scaling was coveted by mountaineers all over North America, but they would not be able to get to the

summit of this mountain by simply building ladders in soft rock. A modern approach was needed to crack this "Last Great Problem."

Beginning in the 1860s, Europeans had been ascending the loftiest peaks of the Alps utilizing ropes and various pitons that could be hammered into cracks. In the 1930s, the rope, usually made of hemp, was not strong enough to catch a leader who fell. However, if the strongest of the group could get up a section of rock, known as a pitch, the others could follow with a rope from above and thus enjoy a higher degree of safety. Pitons, all of which were made in Europe from soft steel that bent to fit the curving limestone cracks, could usually be banged into the rock but often could not be removed. As a volcanic plug of welded tuff, Shiprock is riddled in fractures and pockets that accepted pitons. In October of 1939, California climbers David Brower, Bestor Robinson, Raffi Bedayn, and John Dyer, managed to get the first ascent of Shiprock.



At 1,700 feet, Shiprock, located in New Mexico near the Four Corners, was the first summit to draw climbers to the Colorado Plateau. Photo courtesy Sam Lightner Jr.

Shiprock represents the first time ropes and European equipment and skills were brought to the desert Southwest. However, the rock of Shiprock was quite different from that of Moab's towers. The Entrada, Navajo, and Wingate sandstones of the Colorado Plateau are characterized by vertical walls of relatively soft rock. The skills of the time dictated that an ascent

take on a “weakness,” or area that is least difficult, due to angle, number of handholds, or a solid crack system. The least difficult lines that could be taken up the sandstone towers were all far harder than any of the climbing on Shiprock. There were often no hand and footholds, so one had to follow the crack systems. In most rock types, cracks tend to fluctuate in size and often have imperfections affording a grip along their edges. Desert cracks are characterized by long, uniform edges that are often completely parallel for tens to hundreds of feet. In other words, the “weakness” climbers needed for an ascent did not exist.

Then, as now, the standards of rock climbing in America (and, to a large extent, the world), were being set in the Sierra Mountains of California. The sheer granite walls of Yosemite drew a special breed of men, eccentric enough to risk their lives for an ascent and brilliant enough to engineer equipment that could assist in the climb. Don Wilson, Jerry Gallwas, and Mark Powell, three strong climbers from Yosemite, were drawn to the precarious summit of Spider Rock in Canyon de Chelly in 1956. The California team brought pitons in many shapes and sizes, most forged from chrome-moly steel that would hold its shape against the rock and thus could be removed and reused. They had hundreds of pitons with them, and found they had to place many of the exact same size in a row. Small bolts, usually a quarter of an inch in diameter and less than two inches long, helped to span blank sections between crack systems. These direct-aid techniques, using pitons hammered into the cracks to aid the ascent, allowed the Californians to reach the summit of Spider Rock. This, in turn, let other climbers know that there were tools and skills that could be used to reach other summits of desert sandstone.

The history of climbing in America could not be complete without discussing Huntley Ingalls and his obsession with the summits of the Colorado Plateau. An excerpt from Steve Bartlett’s book *Desert Towers* clearly shows how Moab became the center of the region’s climbing.

Back in the summer of 1956, while the Californians were exploring the Navajo Reservation, Huntley Ingalls was driving a dusty jeep, crammed with surveying equipment, around the empty canyons of southeast Utah.

He and his two partners were conducting a gravity survey. They would drive to a given location and measure the gravity, with a large sensitive spring-loaded device. The gravimeter would reveal the density of the underlying rock, and thus whether it was likely to contain metal, and, perhaps, uranium.

World War II had ended with the explosion of two atomic bombs. The material that made these bombs came mostly from abroad, but some had been found in the Four Corners area, the only known U.S. source of uranium. As the post-war arms race developed between the Russians and the Americans, it seemed important to round up domestic sources of uranium for more bombs. To round up more domestic uranium, in 1948, the U.S. government announced they would pay a guaranteed—and premium—price, far into the future.

Almost overnight, uranium prospectors converged on the Four Corners area and began opening new roads into the remotest corners. The US Geological Survey helped any way they could, including hiring crews to go out on gravity surveys.

Of all the places Ingalls visited, it was when he visited the valleys northeast of Moab—Professor Valley, Onion Creek, and Castle Valley—that he finally saw rock formations that really got him excited. Ingalls knew right away he had stumbled onto something big. “Castleton and the Fisher Towers: I couldn’t believe them the first time I saw them; I’d never heard of them. I thought they were just incredible.”

Ingalls met the partner he was looking for, Layton Kor, in 1959. As he wrote in 1989, “There was an immediate rapport between us, and the next day we climbed the Bastille Crack in Eldorado Canyon. I was amazed, even shocked, by his ability. Here was the man for Castleton Tower.”

Kor had an uncanny ability to spot climbable lines on the blankest of cliffs. His first major, new route, The Bulge, in Eldorado Canyon, marched up a steep wall for four devious pitches, connecting vague grooves with consummate skill and sparse protection. After the climb, Kor and his partner, Ben Chidlaw, were back in Boulder by 10:00 a.m.

In 1961, there were only a couple of houses in the entire expanse of Castle Valley. Into this peaceful canyon drove Ingalls and Kor. At the base of the tower, Ingalls and Kor reconnoitered for a few minutes, but settled quickly on an obvious line on the

southeast face. Kor led off with little hesitation. The climbing, though steep, turned out to not be too difficult, and the rock was excellent.

Once on the summit, they started to worry about the weather. Kor recalls, “We really were double-timing it onto the rappels because you could see the thing coming across the desert; just a big curtain of rain and dust and everything.”

They rushed to set up a register (forgetting to leave a pencil), placed a single rappel bolt, and hurried down the tower. Layton, rappelling first, made it to the ground just as the storm hit them. One pitch up, Ingalls grabbed the rope, ready to get on the last rappel, and “BZING!” a strong groundshock ran through the rope. He decided it was safer to stay where he was and sit out the storm rather than try his luck with the rappel. He squatted on the ledge, making himself into a tight ball, just as the storm rolled in. In short order, Ingalls was thoroughly drenched, while Kor hid under an overhang and stayed drier. The storm drifted off after twenty minutes, without lightning actually striking the tower itself—a good thing, because, squatting or not, the deep cracks followed by the Kor-Ingalls is a favorite route for lightning. The only fatality on Castleton Tower, after thousands of ascents, was in 2005, from a lightning strike.

The very next day after the ascent of Castleton Tower, Kor teamed up with [Fred] Beckey and they set off to climb the appealing tower just north of the Rectory. As they approached, they heard noises and were alarmed at finding others already on the tower. It turned out that Harvey and Annie Carter had already started up the Priest. Beckey and Kor raced up the first pitch, and the four climbers joined forces. Another storm arrived as they were descending. While Carter was still atop the chimney, checking that the ropes would pull okay, things became serious. “My



The Titan, rising over 900 feet from its base, is the highest of the Fisher Towers and the highest tower in the Moab area. The Fisher Towers are composed of Cutler Sandstone. Photo Courtesy Sam Lightner Jr.

hair was standing on end. Oh boy.” Next thing, he was hit by lightning and knocked out cold. “Felt like someone blindsided me. I came to, and I remembered what I was doing. I was supposed to be rappelling, and I punched the rock.”

After the Priest’s first ascent, Castle Valley was left in peace for the rest of the year. The next spring, Kor, seeking to widen his climbing experience, went to Yosemite. Carter returned to revisit the Castle Valley area. In the next few years, he would climb first ascents of nearly every summit worth doing in the Castle Valley area, but first he had a score to settle: Castleton Tower. He missed the first ascent, but he

was determined to get the second. And to go one better, he was determined to climb the tower free. In May, belayed by Cleve McCarty, Carter set off up the crux pitch. McCarty recalls, "Harvey was going to avoid (aiding on) that bolt at all costs." The cost was almost a lot higher than expected: Carter remembers, grimly, that this was "the one time it felt like my hands gave out. I could have died."

Harvey Carter's choice of not pulling on his equipment to get up Castleton set a new standard for climbing in the desert. His bold ascent placed a premium on free climbing, where your hands and feet do the work, and the ropes and equipment are only there to catch you if you fall. Carter was not the only man in world who valued this approach, but he did raise the bar for desert climbers. Free climbing one of the towers, even at the then absurd difficulty of 5.9, was more respectable than using aid (hanging from the equipment). Carter's approach of free climbing, rather than aid climbing, would later be the standard that the world's climbing community would embrace.

From Desert Towers: Huntley Ingalls was not very interested in finding more climbs in Castle Valley. He'd already done the biggest and grandest of the towers there. In the back of his mind, he wanted to try climbing the enormous formation at the east end of the Fisher Towers, but it looked so intimidating, he knew he had better get a few more normal-looking towers climbed first. He knew from his gravity survey wanderings where to find another rock spire similar in size and situation to Castleton Tower: North Six Shooter in the then remote canyon of Indian Creek. Ingalls recruited a couple of climbers new to the desert: Rick Horn and Jack Turner. The North Six Shooter climb did not go smoothly; part way up, a sandstorm arrived, and the climbers fled back to Boulder. Next weekend Ingalls returned, this time with Horn and Steve Komito, and finished.

Ingalls had now been on the first ascents of two classic towers and felt ready for something new and adventurous: trying the enormous mud-covered formation he'd eyed up in the Fisher Towers.

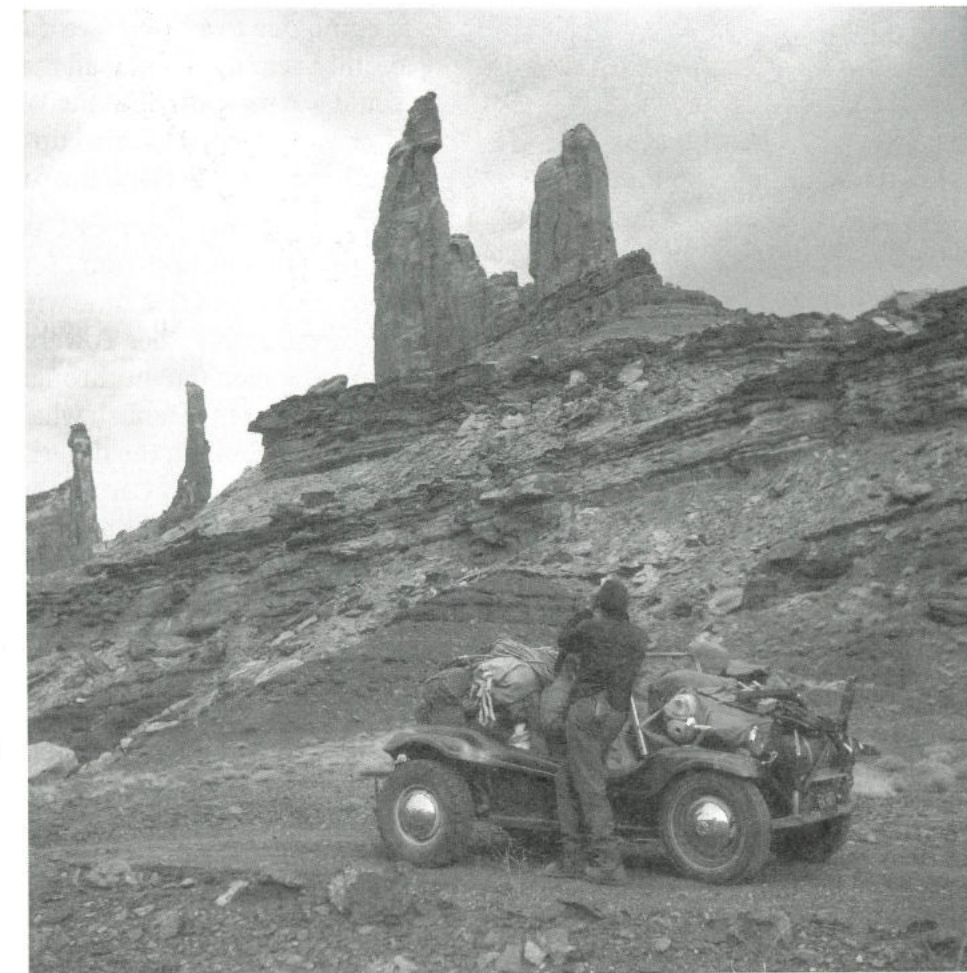
At the time, there were only a handful of desert climbers. Everyone knew everyone else, and the desert was wide open to any climber with some urge to look around. For Huntley, the exploration was the fun part. "I only climbed four towers, but they are four of the best towers in the desert," he says proudly. He is astounded at the popularity of Castleton, and comments ruefully, "I think if I were a climber today, I would climb elsewhere." Looking back at how things were in the early sixties, he says, "The really incredible thing is those things were just down there for the taking."

Ingalls wanted the best partners possible for the climb, and he found them in Layton Kor and George Hurley. Kor "was driven," recalls Ingalls, and one of the strongest climbers of the day. Hurley was "cool under fire, like Neil Armstrong." The team needed a name for their futuristic tower. Unable to come up with one on their own, they went with the suggestion of Kor's girlfriend at the time, Carla Selby, who dubbed it The Titan, after the Titan rockets the U.S. was building.

The team's route took a line on the formation's north edge. After fixing ropes for two days, they completed the route with one bivouac. The first half of the climb follows a fine, continuous crack system, as good as any in the Fishers. Kor led these pitches, and all the rest to boot. "Well, Kor was much faster," remembers Ingalls. "He also had reservations about the climb and other people leading it."

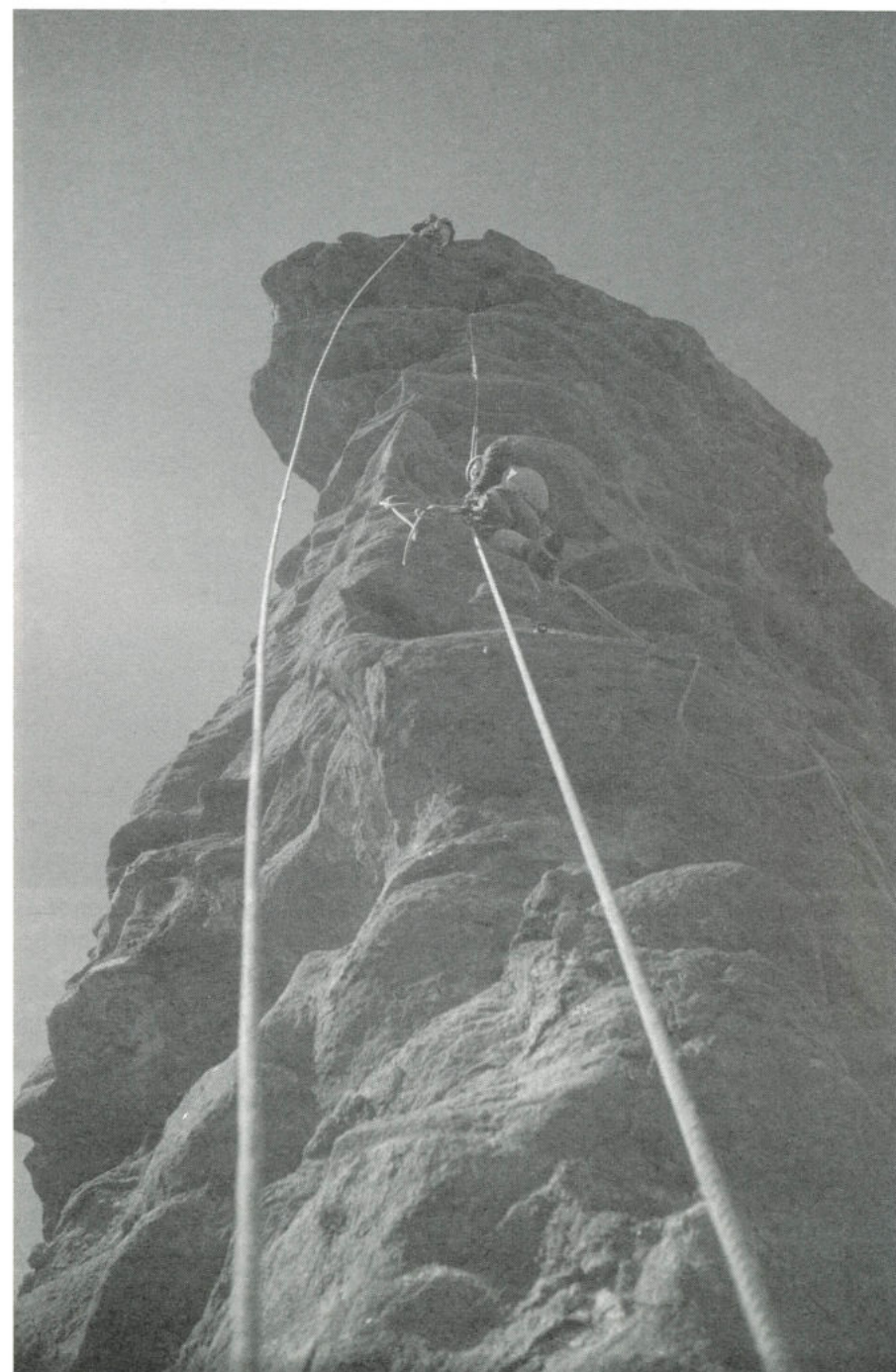
Today, their Finger of Fate route is by far the most popular way to the summit. I asked Kor what he thought of the popularity of their climb. He screwed up his face, "Ugh! It was so dirty; I never wanted to go back." Remembers Ingalls, "We thought [our route] would be nothing more than an esoteric sideshow."

One of the more spectacular summits in the desert became a project of two years to reach. The tower



Fred Beckey and Eric Bjornstad borrowed dune buggies from local guide Lin Ottinger to carry their equipment to the base of Moses in Taylor Canyon. On their first trip into Taylor Canyon, the team climbed Zeus, the smaller tower just left of the higher Moses. Photo Courtesy Stewart Green

we now call Moses, which at one time was called Monkey Rock, stands in the remote Taylor Canyon in Canyonlands National Park. At 650 feet from base to summit, it is the tallest of the Wingate Sandstone towers. Lin Ottinger, who led tours of the area in his Volkswagen van, first spotted the tower from a plane. He passed the location on to Eric Bjornstad who then convinced the indefatigable Fred Beckey to come in for the climb. (Beckey is a living legend among rock climbers. His name is on first ascents of mountains all over the world, and at 87, he is still a full-time climber.) The two men, accompanied by local photographer and writer Fran Barnes, made their way to the spire on old jeep roads. Standing at its base, with the vertical and overhanging walls of Wingate looming over 600 feet into the sky, they decided that the two days they had for the ascent would not be enough. Instead, they climbed a neighboring smaller tower later dubbed Zeus, and planned to return the following season. The next year the two were unable

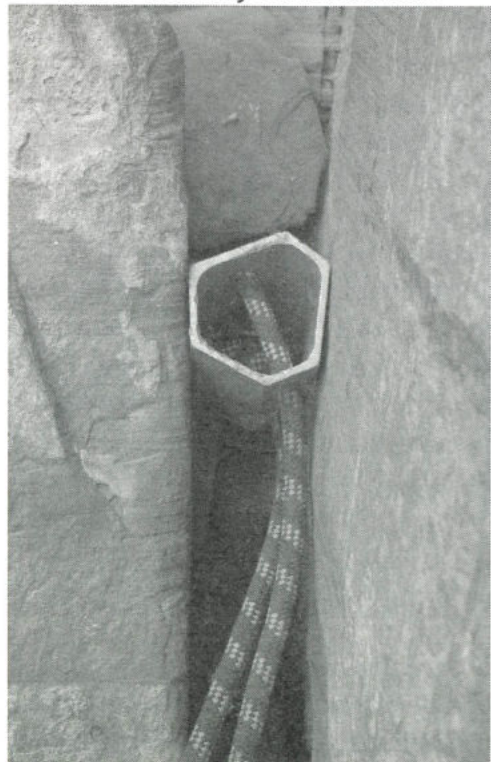


Huntley Ingalls took this photo of George Hurley belaying Layton Kor on the last pitch of the Finger of Fate, the first route to the top of the Titan. The team's first ascent, done over four days in May of 1962, was featured in National Geographic Magazine. Photo courtesy Huntley Ingalls



The concept of “clean climbing,” where wedges called “hexes” and “nuts” were placed in constriction points in a crack, became the preferred method of ascent in the early 1960s. Desert crack climbs were still very dangerous as the cracks often go great distances without changing size and thus allowing the safe placement of the “clean protection.”

Photo Courtesy Stewart Green



to climb due to a heat wave during Beckey’s visit, which led to another year of waiting, all the while hoping that other climbers would not seek and find the Wingate giant. Finally, in autumn of 1972, the two men teamed up with Tom Nephew, Gregory Markov, and Jim Glavin to claim the first ascent via the spire’s north face.

In April of 1971, Harvey Carter, accompanied by Ken Wyrick, Robert Sullivan, and Tom Merrill, again raised the bar for desert climbers, though this time with an aid-climb. Their team ascended the Titan in the Fisher Towers via a completely new and original route. The men fought through snow storms and high winds but managed to establish what was then the most difficult and dangerous climb in the desert. Looking back on this climb, we can see that Harvey Carter’s ascent of what his team deemed the Sundevil Chimney was another watershed event. By choosing to take an alternative and more difficult route to the summit of the Titan, when the Finger of Fate route was already established, Carter was setting the stage for future generations of climbers to come and search for their own lines. The Sundevil Chimney route was rated, on an aid climbing rating scale of A0 to A5, as an A4, meaning it had the potential for 100 foot falls. The establishment of this route, which was much more difficult than the original line, meant you were no longer in the elite for just climbing the Titan. One could now climb the 900 foot tower and be asked, “Which line did you follow, the original or the harder route?” Carter’s ascent was another example of the competitive one-upsmanship that characterizes the goals of climbers today.

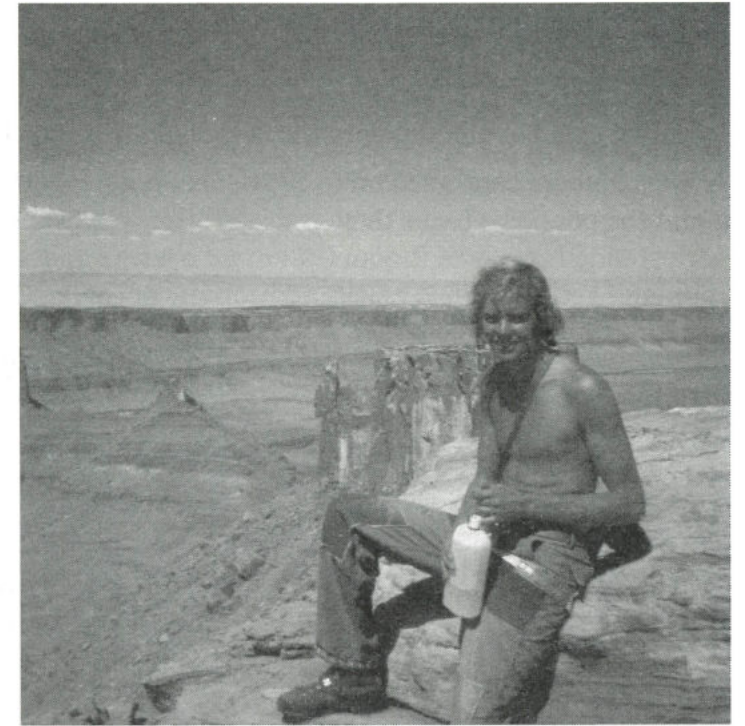
Advances in equipment helped to change the way climbers approached a new climb. New ropes made of nylon, which could stretch without breaking and thus absorb the shock-loading energy of a fall, had come out in the late 1950s but really became affordable in the late 1960s. Alterations in their design so as to better catch a climber continued, and by 1970, the concept that the rope would catch you if you fell was accepted (provided you placed the other protection equipment correctly). Designs of “sit harnesses” evolved from just tying the rope directly around the climber’s waist, making injury less of a certainty in the event of a fall. More precise skill could be applied to the rock with improvements that came in footwear. Stiff and heavy leather boots designed for hiking were no longer worn by free climbers. Instead, soft, smooth-soled shoes that fit too tight to hike in but gave the wearer some sense of the rock under their toes were carried to the base of a climb.

In the early 1970s, noting the pin scars that were made by repeated use of pitons in California granite, a trend towards “clean climbing” began to grow. The concept of clean climbing was that climbers, both free climbing and aid climbing, could use constriction points in the rock to wedge various pieces of protection rather than hammer in a piton and scar the rock. The clean climbing concept was heavily pushed by Yvon Chouinard,

owner of Chouinard Equipment and the soon-to-be Patagonia company. Clean climbing was not only less damaging to the rock, but also had the advantages of being faster and more easily done with one hand. These last two advantages were more important to free climbing when the waning endurance of a climber’s arm strength was a constant concern (with aid climbing, you hung from the equipment and thus could rest). Unfortunately, clean climbing was often not a viable option in the desert as the long, parallel nature of the crack systems did not create constriction points for the chocks (early designs from Chouinard’s shop: pieces of aluminum slung with nylon webbing and slotted into the rock’s constriction). Pitons were often still necessary, and for some aspects of climbing they always would be, but clean climbing was considered the better approach to the sport and was the better option for free climbers. It became a goal to attempt to climb anything as “clean” as possible, using pitons only as a last resort.

All of these tools added up to make free climbing—the use of just your hands and feet for upward movement—the mode the younger generation of climbers chose to apply. Reverence for how much of the route was free climbed, as well as just what route was taken, began to be as important as the fact you had climbed at all. In essence, desert climbing was developing a sense of style, competition, and ethics. Climbing to the summit was a good accomplishment, climbing to the summit via free climbing was a better accomplishment, and free climbing to the summit via a more difficult route was the ultimate form of ascent. Aid climbing and the use of pitons were still considered necessary techniques to reach the top of many towers, but free climbing was considered the purest form of ascent and was gaining in popularity.

In November of 1971, five months after Carter’s team completed the ascent of the Sundevil Chimney, the next generation of climbers showed the direction desert climbing was taking with a new route on Castleton Tower. Reaching the summit was still important, but the particular route you climbed and the means by which you did it (free climb or aid climb) was just as important. Jimmy Dunn, Earl Wiggins, Ken Trout, Ed Webster, Stewart Green, and Billy Westbay knew how to aid climb, but they truly embraced free climbing. Inspired by the difficult climbs being established in California and Colorado, the team of Dunn, Westbay, and Stewart took on



An exhausted Stewart Green sits atop Castleton after the first ascent of the tower’s West Face. The ascent of the West Face route was the sixth overall ascent of Castleton and was then one of the most difficult free climbs in the country. *Photo Courtesy Stewart Green*

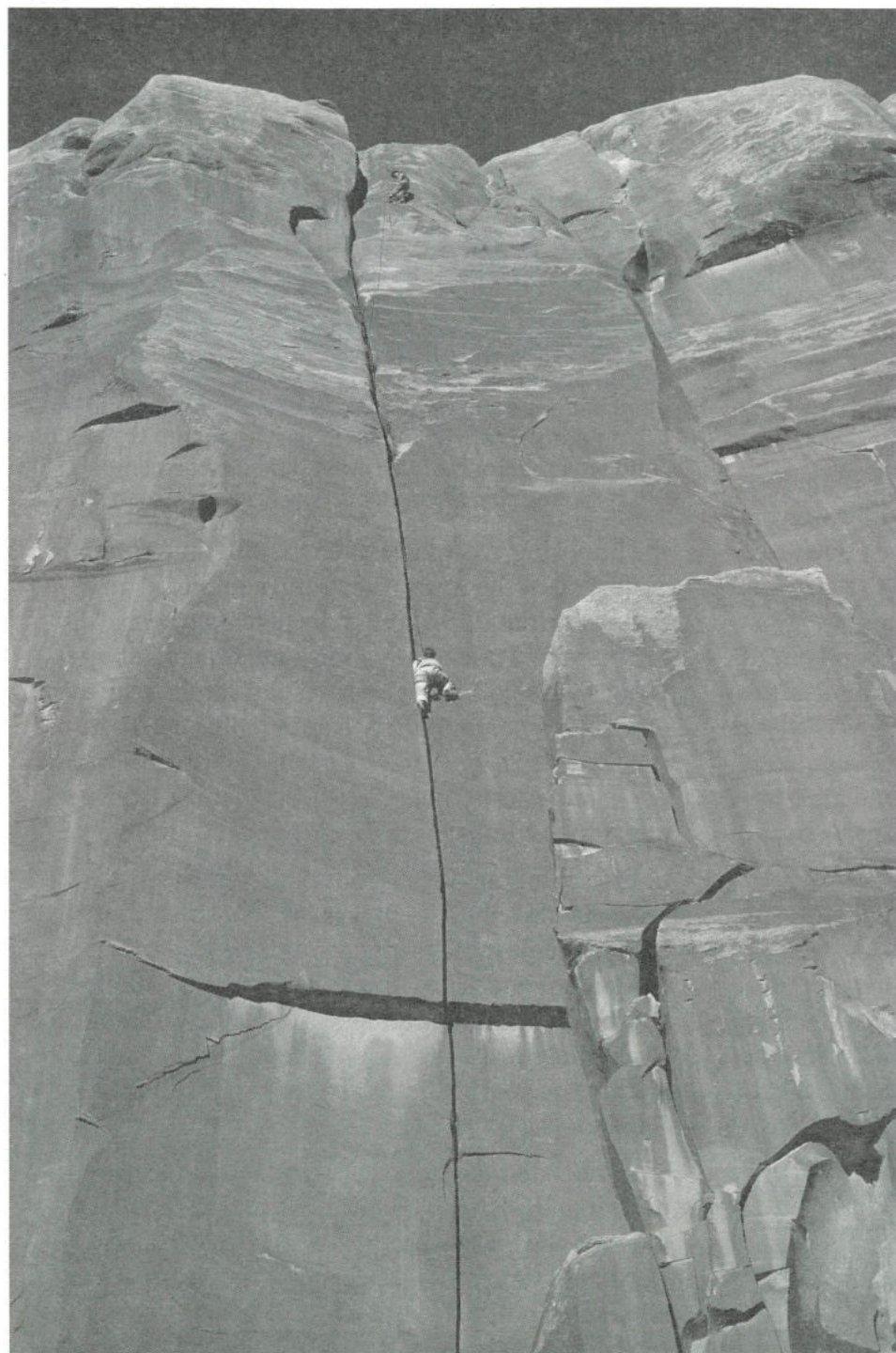
the imposing West Face of Castleton. Free climbing almost all of the route, the group completed an ascent that was groundbreaking in its bold approach. “Jimmy led that third pitch with almost no gear in... it was basically a solo,” said Green (“solo” implies the term free-solo, where no safety equipment is used). At the grade of 5.10+/5.11-, it was a true test of strength and nerve and was perhaps one of the most difficult and dangerous climbs in the country.

Free climbing was not only the style most respected by climbers, it was also considered to be the most enjoyable form of climbing. It required less equipment and more fitness and finesse, making the sport a more athletic endeavor. This new approach to climbing reached a tipping point—where an entire shift in the sport would follow—with the first ascent of Supercrack.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, climbers were occasionally driving Highway 211 along Indian Creek to reach the Six Shooter Peaks and the Needles District of Canyonlands. It is impossible for anyone, climber or not, to drive this canyon and not marvel at the beauty of the Wingate Sandstone walls. In 1971, Jimmy Dunn, Billy Westbay, and Stewart Green, en route to North Six Shooter, were blown away by the

beautiful corners and cracks in the walls of Indian Creek. Stewart Green described how the young climbers felt in 1971, "Look at that one! Look at that! Wow, what a cool crack! And then we reached Supercrack. That was an unbelievable crack. The most perfect crack we had seen. The one that begged to be climbed. We scrambled up to the base and bouldered onto the ledge below the crack. It was perfection."

The climbers continued on to North Six Shooter, getting the sixth ascent of the tower, but talking all day about the possible climbs they had seen. They realized that safely protecting a leader on an ascent of the perfect-sided cracks of Indian Creek was nearly impossible. But the seed had been planted, and the climbers could not get the perfect cracks and corners of Indian Creek out of their minds.



The first ascent of Supercrack (also known as Supercrack of the Desert) was a monumental achievement. In this picture Ed Webster belays Bryan Becker from above on the first ascent. Photo Courtesy Stewart Green

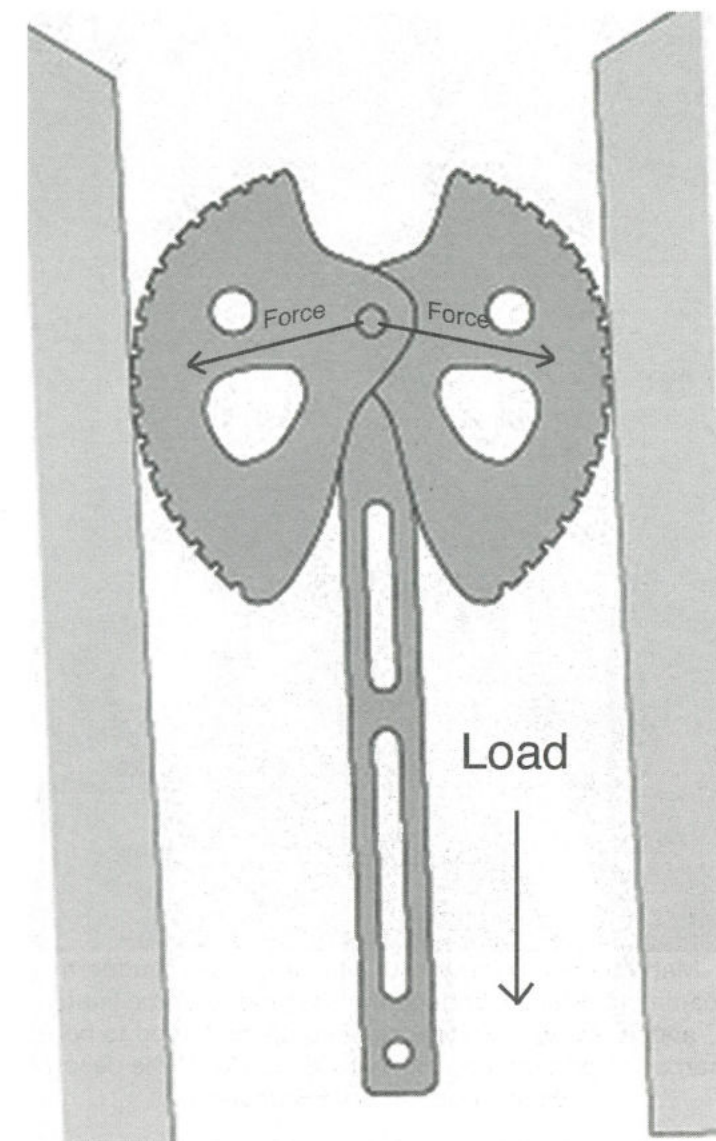
In 1974, Westbay returned and climbed through the lower blocks of the wall to reach the base of Supercrack. He did a few movements up on it, but thought better of taking on the next ninety feet. Finally, in November of 1976, Earl Wiggins, Ed Webster, and Bryan Becker, along with Stewart Green, who was taking the day off from climbing to film the climbers with a new camera, made their way up the scree slope to the base of the crack. Earl Wiggins led the perfect pitch, placing only a couple of hexcentrics for "psychological protection" in the first ninety feet. A fall onto the rope would have undoubtedly pulled out the protection, and Wiggins would have hit the ground and died. He reached a change in the crack's size, placed some protection, and brought up the rest of the team. They continued on, getting protection at stances and ledges, and topping out on the rim in a few hours. Supercrack had been climbed, and at the legendary grade of 5.10

The visionary ascent of those climbers precipitated a monumental shift in the focus of climbing in the desert. The previous generation was consumed with the summits of the region and used all means to reach them. Hand-sized cracks, where the feet and hands fit perfectly in as a wedge and allowed upward movement, were noted as the best sections of the towers

for free climbing. With the climb of Supercrack, the younger generation had climbed something with no intention of reaching a summit. The climb was done purely for the pleasure of the physical movement and the location, not to reach the objective that had been the original focus of the sport. Says Green, "I actually talked to Layton Kor about this a couple weeks ago [Spring 2009]. Layton said he had no thought about just climbing the cracks. He was all about towers and standing on those small summits." With the ascent of Supercrack, two endeavors—tower summits and exciting free climbing—were now both a draw to climbing in the desert.

The climbers spending their spring and fall seasons in the desert were still a small, tight-knit bunch, so word quickly spread of the team's ascent of Supercrack. Soon free climbs, done on a particularly challenging section of a wall, were being established throughout the region. The walls above the River Road and Potash Road were frequented by climbers who rarely even went to the rim of the canyon, but instead to a ledge or a simply a rope-length up the cliff, through the most pleasant section of free climbing. They would establish a rappel anchor there, descend, and climb the next appealing fissure in the rock. More cracks and seams began to be scaled in Indian Creek Canyon, and with each ascent, the climber who did the route was a bit stronger and better prepared for the next climb.

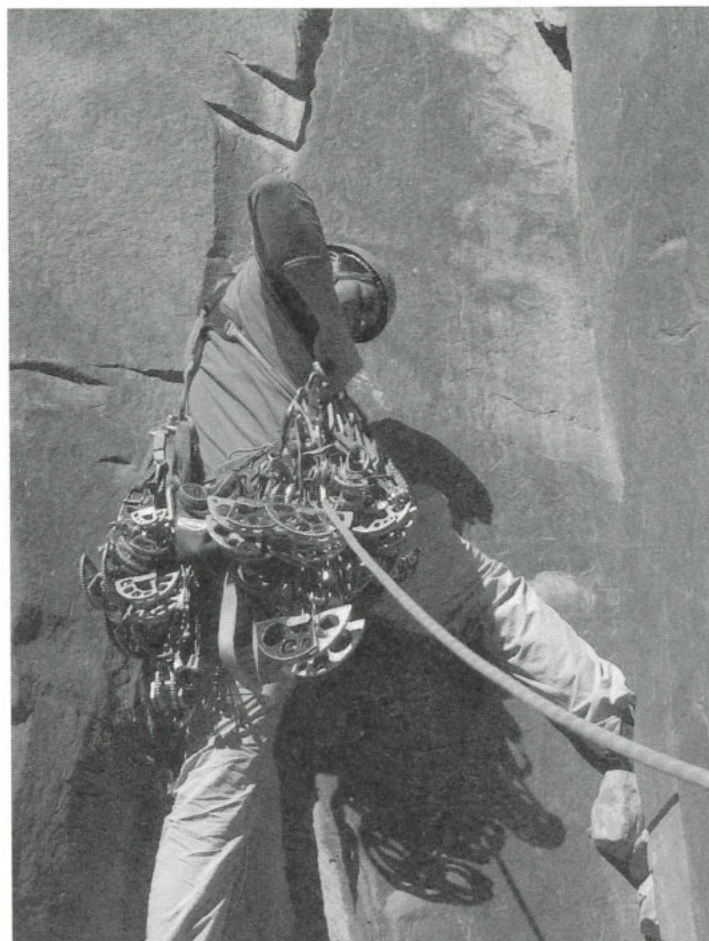
Once again, in the late 1970s, the influence of climbers in Yosemite Valley had an impact on the sport evolving in Moab. One man in particular, Ray Jardine, changed everything for climbing in the desert. Jardine, an aerospace engineer and extremely talented rock climber, had begun to experiment with how rock climbers could protect themselves in a parallel crack. By the mid-1970s, Jardine had come up with a number of designs, but finally settled on one that utilized a spring-loaded cam with a logarithmic spiraling lobe. The lobes transferred a downward pull into outward force (against the walls of the crack) and held the unit in place. Each cam unit, which Jardine referred to as one of his "Friends," could be placed by retracting a trigger and then easily removed later by pulling the same trigger. Jardine showed the spring-loaded camming devices to his buddies in Yosemite, but they thought the lightweight aluminum protection "looked a bit sketchy" and refused to climb with them. Jardine, however, understood the forces and the



Ray Jardine's invention of the "Friend," a spring-loaded camming device, allowed climbers to protect the long, perfectly parallel-sided cracks of the desert. Numerous companies have since gone on to copy Jardine's ingenious design.

physics involved, and he put his Friends to the test on the most difficult unclimbed cracks of Yosemite. When Jardine managed to climb a route he dubbed The Phoenix, which took on the unbelievable free climbing grade of 5.13-, everyone took notice.

Friends, which could protect a climber in a parallel-sided crack, made it possible to safely ascend the long, perfect cracks of the desert sandstone. In 1977, Jardine reached an agreement with the British climbing equipment company Wild Country, and in the Spring of 1979, the first Friends appeared in the Utah desert. "People were incredibly dubious of the holding power of a Friend," says Ed Webster. "We actually had a prototype of a cam on the first ascent



Matt Pickren wrestles with a healthy rack of modern camming devices. Though the gear has become lighter and far safer, many pieces of equipment need to be carried to protect the long, parallel cracks of the desert.

Photo Courtesy Brad Brandewie

of Supercrack, but Earl wouldn't use them. It took us a while before we were willing to put our weight on Friends, much less fall on them." However, the brilliance of the design could not be ignored, and eventually everyone was trying to get their hands on Friends. Combined with the dynamic (stretching) rope, safer harnesses, and even more improvements in rock-climbing boots, free climbing in the desert was no longer a death-defying adventure. It could now be done with a more comfortable level of security for the leader.

Knowing death wasn't pulling at their heels meant more difficult climbs could be attempted. Talented, young climbers like Chip Chace, Leonard Coyne, Pete Gallagher, Mugs Stump, and Kyle Copeland began showing up in the desert with the intent of free climbing the hardest routes. Steve Hong was a standout in the group as perhaps the strongest free climber. "Once I'd done the main, established towers, I didn't really think about finding new ones,"

says Hong. "We had all these perfect cracks to free climb, all to ourselves." Often the climbers didn't even go all the way to the rim of the canyon as the first ascensionists of Supercrack had done. "The rock deteriorates pretty badly as you get near the rim of the canyon," continues Hong, "so we would just put in an anchor and come down after completing the best section of climbing. That just became the norm." In 1982, Hong was pushing the grades of free climbing as hard as anyone in the country. His establishment of the route Quarter of a Man was probably the first 5.12 in the desert. Just a few years later Hong also established Tricks are for Kids, a 140-foot finger crack. Graded 5.13, it would long be recognized as one of the hardest crack climbs in the world.

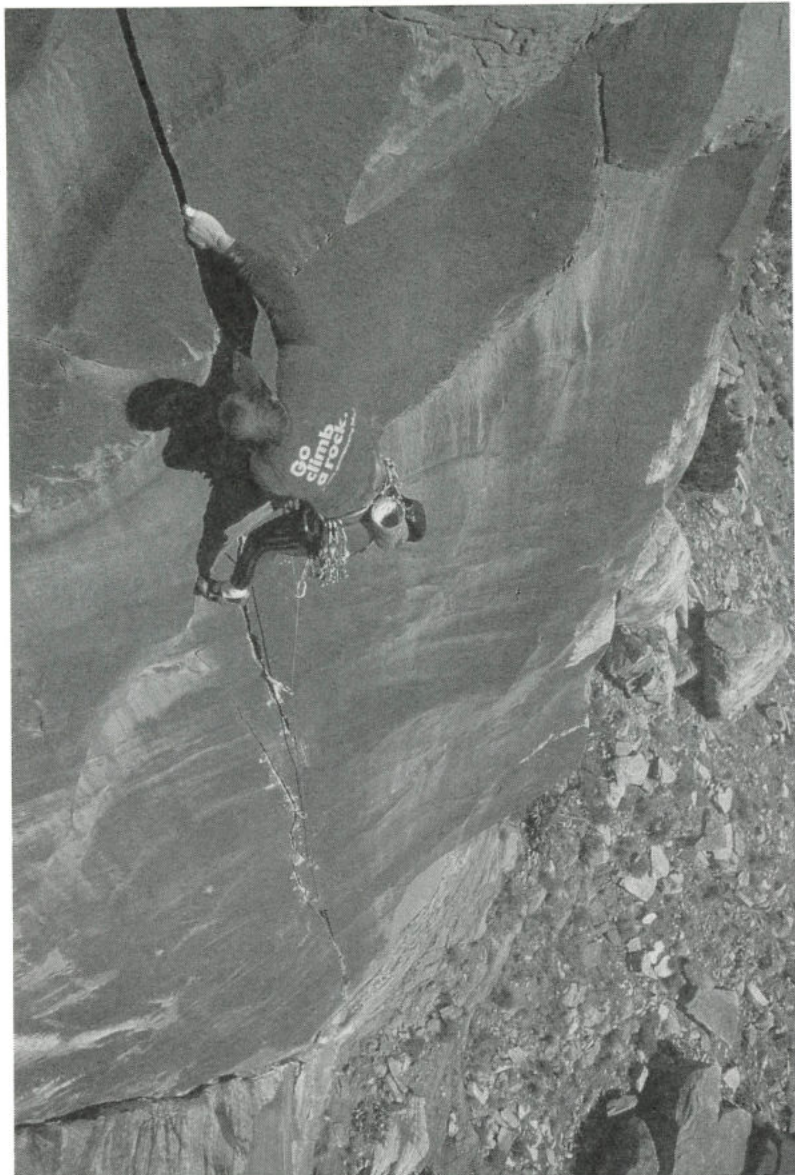
The new-found strength was not just used on the walls of Indian Creek. Climbers took the new tools to new heights by taking their skills and equipment back to towers that had previously been climbed by aid. In the fall of 1979 Ed Webster and Steve Hong borrowed Friends from fellow climbers so they could free climb a route on Moses. Webster had first climbed the route the previous season using aid. By returning the following season to free climb the route, he and Hong showed what method of ascent was most respected. Chip Chase and Jeff Achey free climbed the previous section of aid on the Priest in 1981. Later that spring Chase and Charlie Fowler free climbed the original Beckey/Bjornstad aid line on the north face of Moses. Ascended in six pitches, with a pitch of 5.12 climbing and two pitches of 5.11, the route Pale Fire (the name given by the two who free climbed it) was recognized as perhaps the most difficult tower free climb.

The 1980s saw the emphasis on free climbing at many different venues. More routes were established in Long Canyon, on the River Road, and others along the Potash Road. The climbers would arrive in early fall and stay until the snow fell, establishing new routes and ascending towers. Known as "Desert Rats," many of the climbers lived a nomadic life of chasing sun and rock and working as mountain guides, or perhaps in construction, when they weren't able to climb. It was a lifestyle of leisure, but at the poor end of the economic scale.

In 1988, Moab local Eric Bjornstad released a guidebook to the region titled *Desert Rock*. The book was a collection of route descriptions from Shiprock and the Navajo Lands to Indian Creek and the areas around Moab. *Desert Rock* also paid close attention



Ed Webster and Buck Norden stand atop Moses in Taylor Canyon. In 1979, just a few weeks prior to the taking of this picture, Webster and Steve Hong managed to free climb the Primrose Dihedrals route on Moses. The Primrose Dihedrals remain the most popular route to the airy summit of Moses. Photo Courtesy Stewart Green



Steve Petro ascending Pink Flamingo, a 5.13 finger crack on the Supercrack Butte at Indian Creek.
Photo Courtesy Brian Bailey

permanent, safe form of protection that climbers could clip carabiners to when a natural crack (and thus a Friend placement) was not available. Like Friends in the desert, the use of bolts as a safety tool allowed climbers to make great leaps in ability. In 1970, the very hardest free climbs were rated 5.11, but by 1990, climbs rated 5.14 were being established, and climbs rated 5.12 and 5.13 were ascended daily with little fanfare. Bolts as the main form of protection were not, and are not, the main form of protection used in the desert. However, their use elsewhere allowed climbers to safely gain strength and then take on more daunting objectives.

Free ascents of the biggest routes in the Moab area, those being on the Fisher Towers, were soon made by the French couple Stevie Haston and Laurence Gouault. In 1997, the pair free climbed a route on Echo Tower at 5.12, and then in 2002, the team managed to free climb Harvey Carter's Sundevil Chimney. Haston's bold approach to free climbing cost him at least two fifty-foot falls on the climb, but he did manage to complete the ascent as a free climb at 5.13. Soon after, the team of Ben Bransby and Pete Robins free climbed the original Finger of Fate route at 5.12.

Free climbing standards have jumped dramatically in the last twenty years, but that does not mean the art of aid climbing is lost. Difficult aid climbs have continued to be established in the Fisher Towers, with Coloradan Jim Beyer being the standout first ascensionist. Beyer's routes, Deadman's Party on Echo Tower, Intifada on Cottontail Tower, and World's End on the Titan, would all be on the short list of the hardest and most dangerous aid climbs in the world. To most climbers today, aid climbing is considered the older style, much less common and casual than free climbing, but it remains a necessary means to reach many of the summits of the desert.

In every epoch of time, history is unfolding, and in the desert the difficulty of the climbs is far beyond where Ingalls, Kor, and Bjornstad would have ever dreamed. Climbers now have access to climbing gyms across the country so they don't have to chase the sun all winter to stay in shape. Climbing gyms have improved the skills of climbers so that many claim to be in better shape after a long winter in the gym

to the desert ecology, local legends, and the history of the of the climbs it recorded. The Desert Rats were suddenly in print for their exploits, but a few resented the book. A guide book meant the coveted information about the climbs, information only a previous ascensionist had, was now available to all. With the increase in the total number of people climbing across the U.S., it was just a matter of time before larger numbers of climbers were journeying to the sandstone walls of the desert. Indeed, the number of climbers to visit the desert did increase after the release of the book.

Climbing as a world-wide sport saw significant changes in the late 1980s. Bolts, commonly placed into European limestone, came into use as a



Ryan Nelson places a tiny camming device in an Indian Creek crack climb called From Switzerland with Love. Rated 5.13, this climb is considered one of the hardest crack climbs in the world. *Photo Courtesy Michael D'Anna Photography*

than after a long summer on the rock. The equipment continues to get safer and lighter. Bjornstad has written four more books on desert climbing, and a guide book specifically about the hundreds of climbs in the Indian Creek area is in its second edition. In 1995, visiting Swiss climber Didier Berthoud successfully climbed a route at Indian Creek graded 5.13+. The single pitch routes graded 5.11 and 5.12 in Indian Creek are now climbed daily, and rarely does a weekend pass without a climber ticking off one of the 5.13s. Bold, powerful climbers continue to visit the desert and push the range of what is possible.

The desert towers are still the region's most unique draw, and thousands of climbers a year come to Moab just to stand on one of the tiny islands in the sky. Stewart Green, Billy Westbay, and Jimmy Dunn's bold ascent of the West Face of Castleton in 1971 was the sixth overall of the tower. In 2009, on an

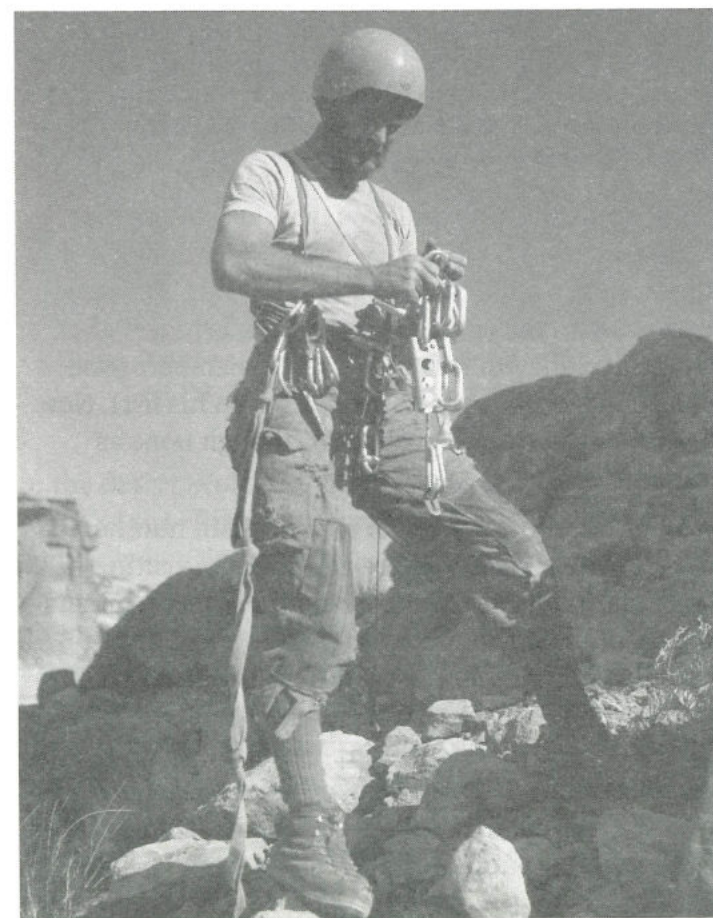
average Saturday in April, you are likely to see that many ascents of Castleton before noon. Many tower climbers keep a list of how many summits they have reached, with the coveted 100 Towers being an elite, unofficial club with less than twenty members (one Moab climber has over 260 summits on his list). New towers are discovered every year, though none as dramatic as Castleton or Moses.

All facets of the history of climbing can now be found in one area. There are aid climbers visiting Moab to establish challenging aid lines, free climbers coming purely to get no more than 100 feet off the ground, and many climbers who just want to be a part of "the scene" of Moab climbing. However, it is still possible to find a tower, rising above an ancient streambed passed Anasazi ruins, amid songs of canyon wrens, and have it all to yourself, somewhere in the desert around Moab.

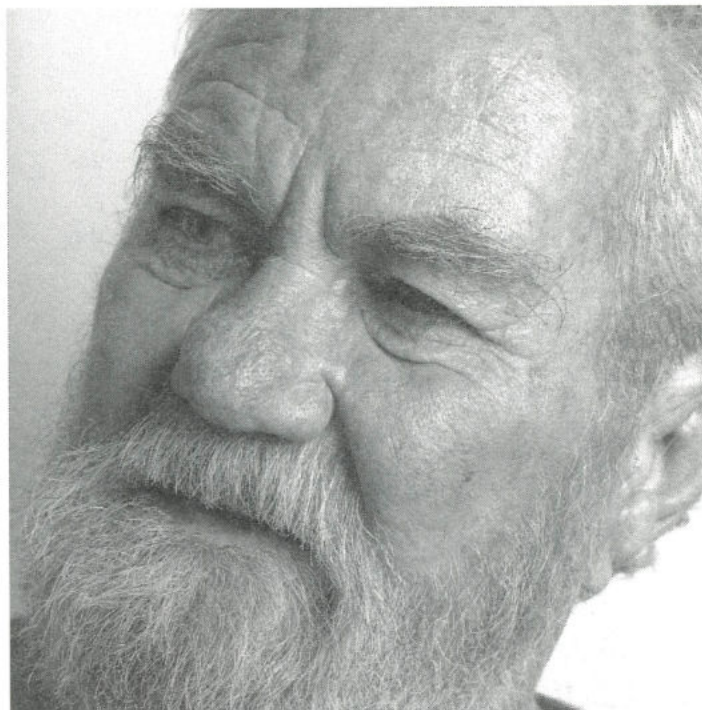


An Interview with Eric Bjornstad

Eric Bjornstad is the iconic desert climber. Eric was born October 23, 1934, in Phoenix, Arizona, but has lived much of his life in Moab. He has worked for Harvard University, written for dozens of periodicals in all genres of writing, and helped rig and even got a cameo appearance in Clint Eastwood's movie "The Eiger Sanction." However, it is his life as a climber, specifically a desert-tower climber, for which he is most widely recognized.



At right: A young Eric Bjornstad just before starting up Zeus in September, 1971. Photo Courtesy the Barnes Collection, Museum of Moab



Eric Bjornstad. Photo Courtesy Guilio Malfer

Early in his climbing career, Eric did the second ascent of the Moose's Tooth, a 9,780 foot high mountain of ice and snow in Alaska that retains a fearsome reputation to this day. He also did numerous ascents of big peaks in Washington state and Canada, including the North Face of North Howser in British Columbia and the first winter ascent of Sahale Peak in the North Cascades.

Rock climbers around the world know Eric through his five climbing guidebooks to the desert Southwest. The first, *Desert Rock*, was published in 1988 and is now such a collectors item that it sells on eBay for \$250 or more. Eric's books not only tell climbers the "how and where," but are also filled with anecdotal stories about the Moab area that will enrich anyone's time in the region.

I sat down briefly with Eric in his Moab home to discuss climbing. What follows are a few excerpts from that interview. Though times have changed, I found that the thoughts and feelings of climbers are very similar to what they were fifty years ago.

Canyon Legacy (C.L.): When did you first begin climbing?

Eric Bjornstad (E.B.): I climbed everything in sight when I was a kid—trees, boulders, whatever. When I was a teenager, we lived in Bishop, California, and that gave me access to the Sierras. However, none of that climbing was technical. I lived in Berkeley, California, in the 1950s and my roommate was a caver. We had to do a lot of technical climbing while in the caves, and that's where I got my first education in the use of ropes and gear. When I moved to Seattle in 1959, I found there were no caves, but there was plenty of climbing to do above ground. I did my first rock climb, The Tooth, in the northern Cascades that year.

C.L.: When did you first come to the desert to climb?

E.B.: Fred Beckey was my climbing partner for 98% of the climbing I did. (Authors note: Fred Beckey is well known to climbers as the MOST prolific climber. At the age of 86, he still has an inexhaustible drive to do first ascents of all kinds of mountains.) In 1961, Layton Kor came to Seattle to climb with us and he raved about the first ascent possibilities of the desert. Fred and I came down to the Navajo Reservation to explore the unclimbed towers in the following season. The biggest and most proud towers of the Reservation had just been climbed, but we managed to get our share of first ascents.

C.L.: With plenty of climbing objectives, not to mention a business (Eric ran a number of coffee shops) in Seattle, what drew you to return to the desert Southwest?

E.B.: I never did like climbing around lots of other people. I like to be able to get away from everything. It was easy to find your own space with no other climbers around you in the Southwest. Also, I soon found I really liked climbing on the softer stone of this area. It's more challenging than granite. The fact that everything, from your handholds to your anchors, is less secure, means you have to be more focused. It heightens the experience.

C.L.: When you got started, what were the biggest challenges you had to face that climbers don't have to worry about today?

E.B.: The approaches! (The climber-term "approach" refers to the distance traveled to get to the base of the climb and usually implies hiking.) We didn't have all the roads we have now, and our vehicles couldn't do what a modern jeep can do.

Also, one can't underestimate how the knowledge of the region helps you to climb. We had to actually find the towers. There were no books or recreation-maps to show us where they were, and there certainly wasn't a guidebook telling us how to ascend the spire once we found our way to it. That information makes climbing much less complex today.

C.L.: How did you find what are now the most popular climbs?

E.B.: Lin Ottinger and I became friends and he was a big help in finding towers. Lin knew his way around in the desert and showed us a number of spires from his Volkswagen. He also accompanied us to the base of a number of towers, but generally did not climb.

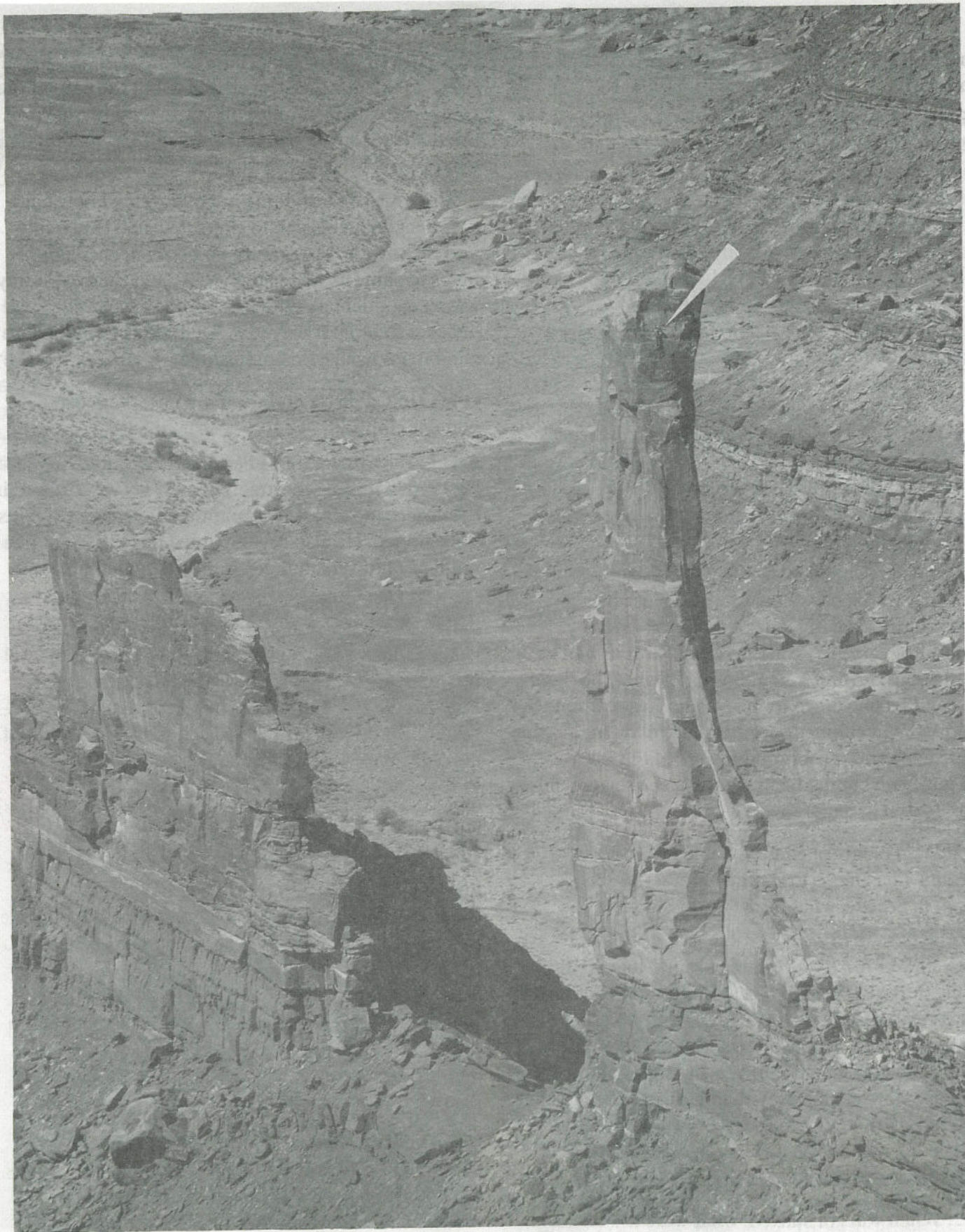
Lin really made my life in the desert possible in those days. He let me stay with him when I was visiting and he drove us around. Lin also encouraged me to write *Desert Rock*. I really felt at the time that Fred should write the book, but he didn't feel he had the time or energy for the project. Also, I kept a lot of notes from our climbs and they proved useful in that first book.

C.L.: What are your most memorable ascents?

E.B.: For starters, I'd have to say the Moose's Tooth in Alaska. We drove the Al-Can Highway, flew into the Ruth Glacier on one of the first ski planes, and we had the whole mountain range to ourselves. It was so remote.

But I did get a sense of that isolation here in the southwest. When Fred and I first attempted Shiprock I felt we were alone in the desert. We spent twenty days on that climb and didn't even reach the summit, but the sense of isolation was unforgettable.

Both Moses and Zeus [in Taylor Canyon in Canyonlands National Park] were memorable climbs. Lin had taken Fred and me out there after we had scouted the tower from the air. Fred and I realized we didn't have time to climb Moses as we both had commitments back in Washington, so we climbed Zeus, the smaller tower next to Moses, on that trip.



Eric Bjornstad nearing the summit of Zeus in Taylor Canyon. This was the first ascent of the tower. With thunderstorms in the distance, the team named the tower for the King of the Gods. The gods kept the lightning at bay that day. *Photo Courtesy The Barnes Collection, Museum of Moab*

The ascent of Zeus was memorable because of the thunderstorms. There were huge electrical storms dancing around us and we got lucky to not have them pass right over Taylor Canyon. I came up with the name "Zeus" for the tower as he was the king of the Greek gods and controlled thunder and lightning.

Echo Tower, in the Fishers, had an interesting story that had nothing to do with climbing. My girlfriend was with us and staying in our camp while we climbed. We could see her sitting down there all day. She was reading a book with her back to the fire when a spark lit her coat aflame. We watched her jumping around with smoke and flames coming off her back. We screamed for her to roll, which she eventually did. The fire went out and she was fine, but it scared the heck out of all of us.

We came back a couple years after the ascent of Zeus to climb Moses. At the time, Lin was referring to it as Monkey Rock because it looked a bit like a hunched over monkey. That name had also been used in the past for the Monkey Rock Mine, which is up the canyon from there. However, the name Moses has stuck. I had my thirty-sixth birthday on the summit of Moses.

C.L.: How has Moab changed since that time?

E.B.: Well, for one thing, people taking part in recreation were so rare, they weren't even noticeable, not even the Jeeps. You had people coming from time to time to go jeeping, but they were few and far between. As far as I know, no one was running the rivers regularly, and the mountain bike hadn't even been invented yet.

Like I said, the roads weren't as extensive as they are now or as well maintained. River Road, for instance, wasn't paved yet. There were no bridges over the stream crossings so any storm would cut the road off. It could be a real mess getting back from Castle Valley.

C.L.: What have been the biggest changes to climbing around Moab?

E.B.: Cams! The spring-loaded camming device has made the sport safer, cleaner (no damage to the rock), and easier for everyone. When Ray Jardine invented the "Friend," he revolutionized climbing.

With the added safety and the ease of use that came with cams, the sport was less likely to kill you and thus more people were willing to do it. The jump in the number of climbers visiting the area from 1975 to 1985 was huge.

When I first came here, the sole reason for climbing in the desert was to reach the summits of towers. We only climbed on smaller cliffs to train for the towers. Today, climbing is more about the grade of difficulty you achieve and that's almost always found on the smaller cliffs. How hard you climb is more important than what you climb, I guess.

It's also a social sport nowadays. A weekend of climbing on Potash Road or at Indian Creek, where summits are rarely reached, is as much a social gathering as it is a form of exercise. We were trying to get away from other climbers, where as today climbers seem to enjoy each other's company. It's a mainstream sport now.

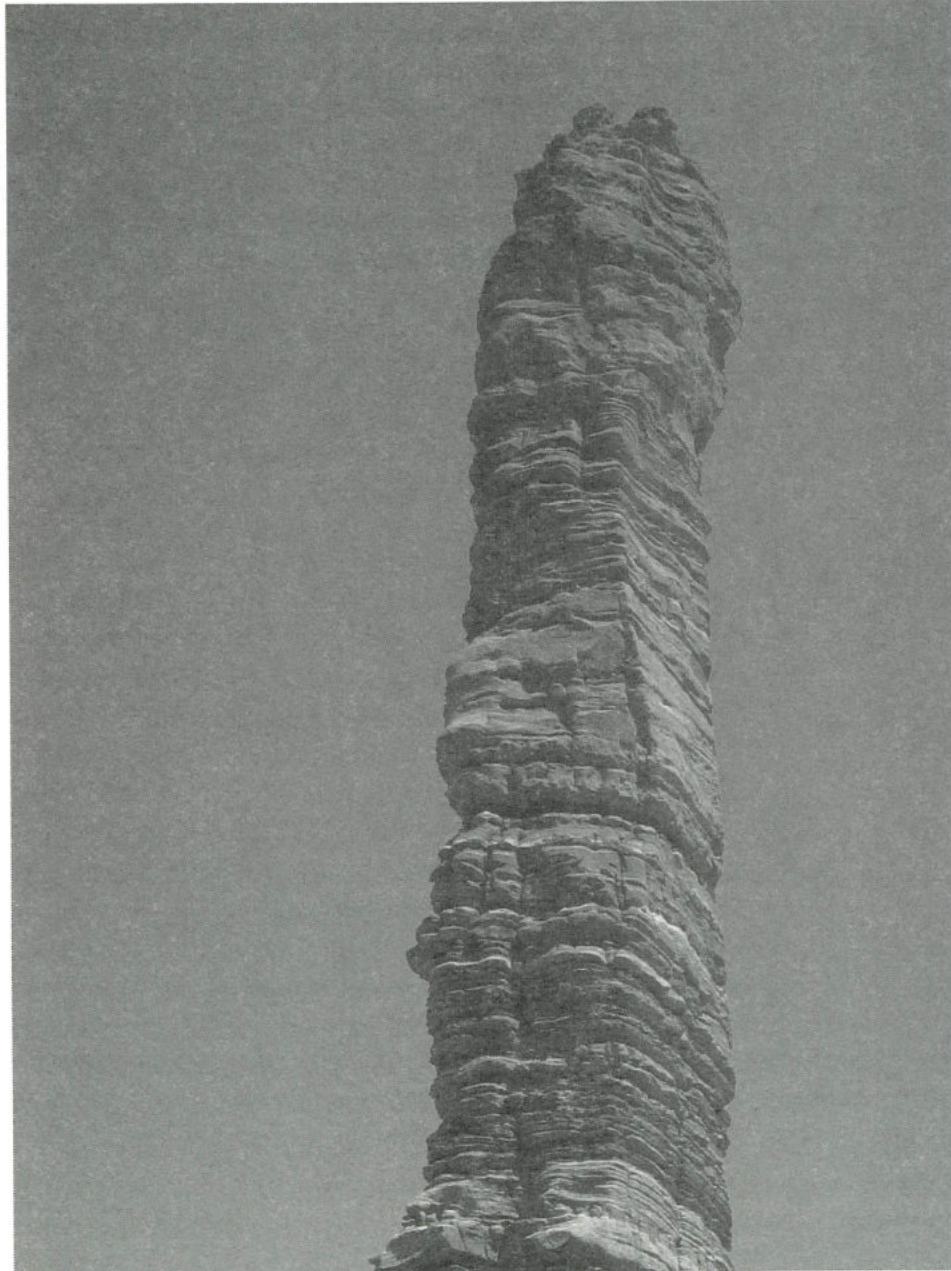
C.L.: Did you foresee forty years ago that rock climbing in the desert would be what it is today?

E.B.: Climbing is such an esoteric exercise, it never occurred to me that many other people would want to do it. But the sport does inspire passion, as does the desert, so I guess it makes sense that others would find that passion where I did. I'm grateful for all the climbs I've done and love the fact that other people are able to feel as alive through climbing.



The Big Question

Why? Everyone wants to know “why” we climb. Why do we put ourselves through pain in our hands, feet, and all joints between, risking severe injury or death, just to get to the top of a barren rock, all the while being filthy and thirsty and usually a bit scared? It’s a question that has never been successfully answered.



Hans Johnstone and Sam Lightner Jr. approaching the 330-foot Standing Rock in Monument Basin, Canyonlands National Park. When Layton Kor was asked why he felt the need to climb the teetery-looking tower in 1962, he paraphrased George Mallory with “Not ‘because it’s there,’ but because it might not be there much longer.” *Photo Courtesy Helen Motter*

It’s not for the money. We don’t really get paid, at least not often, and we actually have to spend a fair amount on equipment to partake of the sport. For that matter, rescue from an accident can be very expensive, with the ensuing medical costs perhaps destroying an entire family fortune.

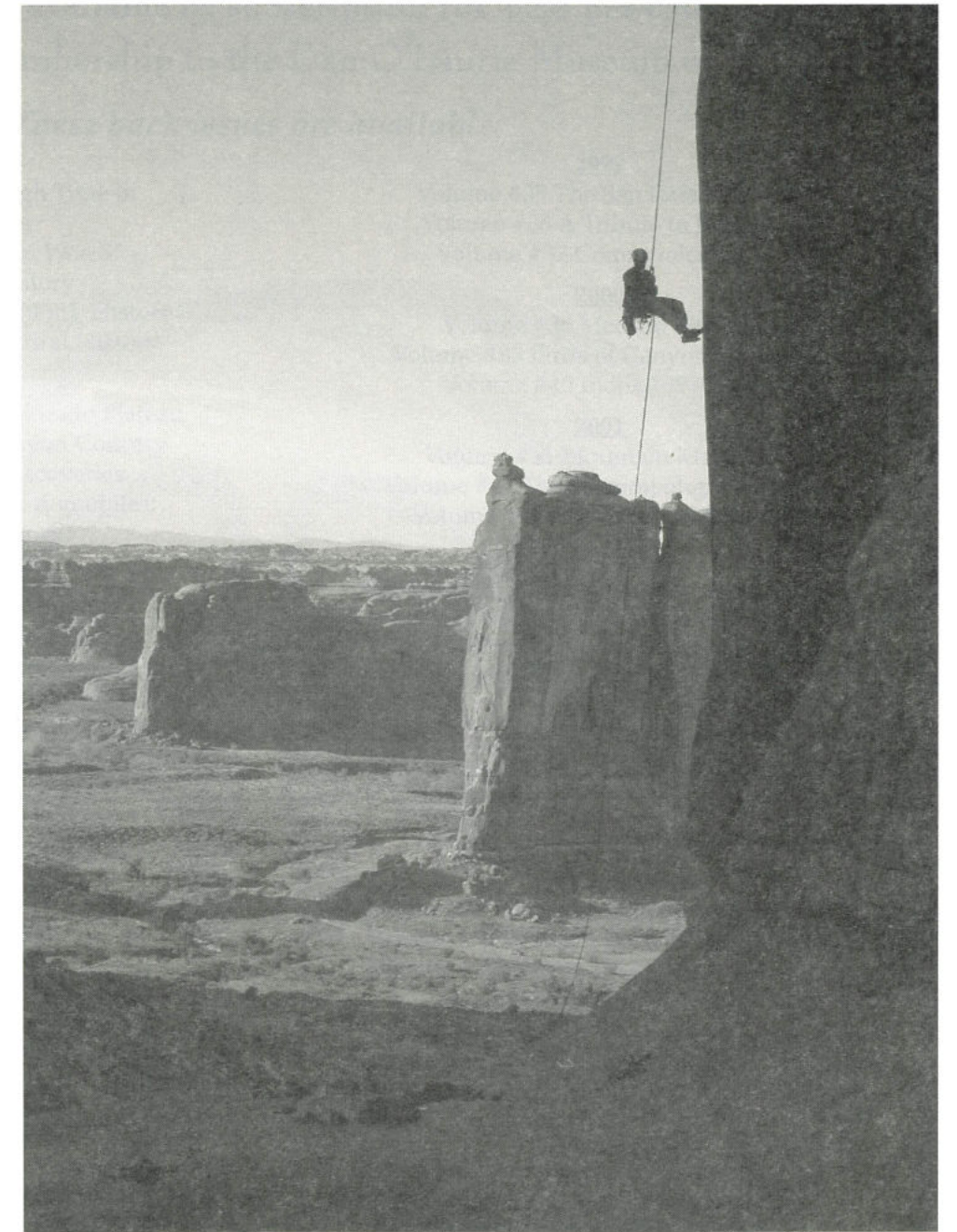
It’s also not for the view from the summit. Yes, from the top of any peak you get a unique perspective on the world. However, most climbers I’ve met would rather look at the object they climb than look down into the valley from its summit. Essentially, of all the vistas possible, the one taken from the mountain’s base is usually the best.

And it’s not “because it’s there,” as George Mallory is so commonly quoted when the question comes up. Mallory, who’d probably had a couple drinks, was being pestered by a New York reporter for the reason he wanted to climb Mount Everest. Rather than try to answer the question, he just gave it a bit of spin. Personally, I can see a sagebrush in my yard. It is “there,” but I don’t feel the need to go jump over it. A proper twist of Mallory’s

wisecrack answer came from desert climber Layton Kor just before he, Huntley Ingalls, and Steve Komito did the first ascent of the teetery Standing Rock in Canyonlands National Park. “We need to climb this thing not so much because it’s there, but because it might not be there much longer.” With an answer like that, it’s pretty clear that even climbers don’t know “why.”

There are hundreds, if not thousands, of people who build their entire lives around the art and sport of climbing. Jobs are chosen, vacations are planned, mates are picked, and kids are raised, all with the sport of climbing as a centerpiece to the lives involved. More than perhaps any other sport, climbing has become a lifestyle, yet we are not able to put a firm answer on why that lifestyle is chosen.

Climbing is a combination of many things. It is the exploration of what is just around the corner, as well as what is just over the top. Climbing is the adventure of exploring the world in a manner that, if not done correctly, has a significant danger. As a sport, it is a healthy form of exercise, using almost all of the body to be done correctly. And finally, climbing is a way to get away from society (when climbing in remote areas like much of our desert) and a way to enjoy good company at a crowded venue like the Supercrack Buttress at Indian Creek or Wall Street on Potash Road.



Forest Dramis rappelling off Argon Tower in Arches National Park.
Photo Courtesy Sam Lightner Jr.

I once asked “Why” to Winn Blevins, the author and long-time desert climber now living in Blanding. His response was, “Rather than try to answer ‘why’ you climb, why not ask yourself why you need an answer.” I guess I don’t. And with that, I think I’ll go climbing.





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