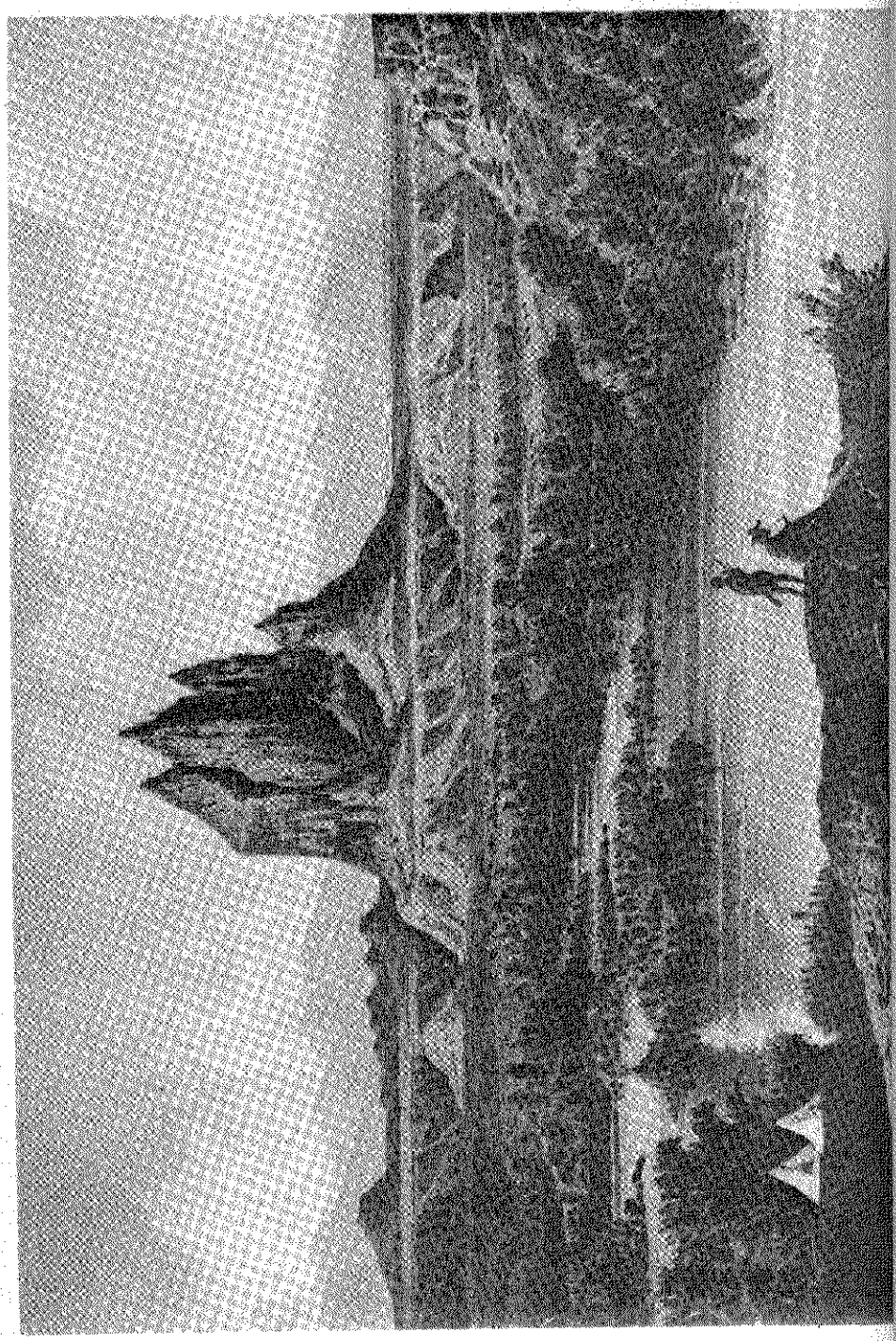

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The First Ascent of Shiprock

By BESTOR ROBINSON

WE were encamped at the eastern base of Shiprock. Dinner was over. The embers of our sagebrush campfire sporadically came to life as gusts of desert wind fanned them into flame. We were all looking at the silhouette of Shiprock outlined against the evening sky. The wind-driven clouds gave the mountain the appearance of motion — it was no longer a mere rock in the desert but a full-rigged barkentine carrying triangular skysails atop its three masts. It must have been under conditions such as these that the early wanderers named the peak. Under the full glare of the desert sun it is not a ship, but just another fantastically shaped rock in a land filled with weird erosion forms.

I was jarred out of my nautical musings by Dave Brower's strictly military remark, "Seven o'clock tomorrow morning is our zero hour."

Looking backward it seemed that the military analogy was appropriate. Like an army staff we had developed our plans of attack deliberately and in detail. A mountain which had repulsed a dozen attempts could obviously not be conquered in any other way, if it could be conquered at all.

Dick Leonard had served as intelligence officer. He had corresponded with most of the earlier parties as to their routes, difficulties and suggestions. He had collected photographs from both climbers and non-climbers. These had been examined under the microscope

for routes and under a protractor for angles. A folder jammed with photos, notes, letters and maps was the result. Unfortunately, the necessity of attending an important National Park conference prevented his joining the climb.

Since climbers, more literally than armies, move on their stomachs, it was necessary that a small, but efficient, quartermaster corps be organized. Raffi Bedayan pulled the most tasty and nourishing foods off the shelves of his grocery. Florence Robinson enlisted as commissary sergeant.

A list of equipment finally emerged from a plethora of arguments and experiments. It included over one thousand feet of rope, dozens of pitons of varying shapes, thicknesses and lengths, and carabiners of three sizes, including the screw-jawed type for excessive strain. Lastly, and with some concern over the mountaineering ethics of our decision, we included several expansion bolts and stellite-tipped rock drills. We agreed with mountaineering moralists that climbing by the use of expansion bolts was taboo. We did believe, however, that safety knew no restrictive rules and that even expansion bolts were justified in order to secure the firm anchorage that would prevent a serious fall from imperiling the lives of the entire party.

Stories from previous climbing groups indicated that climate had much to do with hanging on to the precipitous faces of Shiprock. A Colorado team making a summer attempt had been tortured by baking temperatures and rock too hot to handle. The climbing capacity of our friends from the Southern California Chapter of the Sierra Club had been impaired by numbing winter cold. Since optimum climate seemed to arrive in October, so would we.

The climbing party had been organized on the theory that men who varied greatly in their special climbing abilities would make a stronger team than a group of good all-around climbers without such special abilities. Although three men would ordinarily have been considered ideal, the plans finally called for four men in order to be able to handle complicated anchorages and involved rope techniques. And so the party consisted of Dave Brower, John Dyer, Raffi Bedayan, and me.

Dave was the friction climber, the advocate of dynamic balance who seemed somehow to be able to move on slight discolorations of the rock. His long orangutan arms added to his normal height of six feet two made him valuable where holds were far apart.

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Dyer was our lightweight lead man. Chipmunk-like, he could scramble up cracks; his lack of weight enabled him to make use of rotten rock and insecure pitons which could not be relied upon with safety by a heavier climber; and, if he should be unfortunate enough to fall, he would strain neither the rope nor the belayer holding it.

Bedayan, like Brower and Dyer, was an all-around climber. His particular ability, however, lay in the establishment of bombproof anchorages. With his two feet firmly planted, he was as immovable as a stubborn burro, and as reassuring for lead men.

Why I was included in the party still remains a mystery, unless it is explained by my love of ropes, pitons and other technical gear in their manifold combinations, which had earned me the doubtful appellation of "Rock Engineer."

Finally perfecting our military preparations, we had decided that the attack would have to be along the lines of methodical siege tactics, instead of the now famous blitzkrieg. In one important particular the military analogy was totally abandoned. There was no general, no captain — not even a lance corporal. The party was deliberately leaderless. The assumption of responsibility for decisions by the entire team does of course take time, but it brings into play the conflict of opinions without the presence of a dominating voice. In the long run, with an experienced party the judgment of such a "composite mind" is more likely to be right than the quick decisions of even a brilliant leader.

We had planned to devote our entire first day to scouting a route from the ground. It was an undeserved help and pleasure to be met by three Colorado climbers led by the redoubtable Mel Griffith, who had driven over several hundred miles of rough roads for the sole purpose of giving us firsthand the benefit of their experience with the rock. All day had been spent with them circling the peak, scanning its sculptured cliffs with glasses and telescopes and discussing the possibilities of each suggested route. The character of the problem was clear. We could ascend to the crest only by using the route which our Colorado friends had developed to the base of the north tower. This tower, unfortunately, lay astride the crest like a huge transverse fin. A broken basalt dike led to its north side. The main peak lay to the south. The all important question was how to get over, around or through this fin and into a large bowl facing east and formed by the three towers of Shiprock. The Col-

oradans had tried to go over it using precarious holds formed by a two-foot lava dike. They had got only a third of the way up and that appeared, through the telescopes, to be the easiest third. The west edge of the tower did not have a crack or a hold for hundreds of feet. One might as well try to traverse the sheer face of Half Dome in Yosemite. A steep chimney leading easterly down from the crest to the top of the thousand-foot cliffs offered a bare hope that at closer range a traverse might be found where the north tower joined these cliffs. Through our glasses we were unable to pick a route, but we could not say that a route, consisting of tiny cracks and holds, could not be found on closer inspection. Unanimously we agreed that this was the only section offering a possibility. We decided to rub our noses into it the next day and see whether it would begrudgingly yield a way into the great bowl. Our preparations had thus been completed.

"Yes," Dave repeated, looking at Shiprock's silhouette against the sky, "Seven o'clock tomorrow morning is our zero hour. I wonder if we'll get over the top?" Being a navy man, I could not, from pride, restrain the contentious rejoinder, "This is a ship we are boarding — it's not an army maneuver. The job is to get around the fire control tower and climb the mainmast."

Came sleep — then breakfast, followed by the lugging of much gear around the stern of the ship to the western side — to the basalt dike which yielded a satisfactory, but at times airy, route to the bottom of the north tower. Halting only long enough to admire the work of our predecessors, as well as their ambition in attempting a frontal assault on its perpendicular wall, we went over the ridge to the east side and looked down toward camp. Three hundred feet below lay a sloping ledge which could be reached only by roping down a steep chimney. There was, however, no possibility of climbing back on the smooth-polished, holdless rock.

An improvised block and tackle appeared the appropriate technique. A loop of rope was securely anchored to two pitons, a large carabiner tied into the rope and the loop adjusted so that the carabiner would hang just beyond the lip of our ledge. Dave roped down, grumbling a bit when the large carabiner passed over his shoulder. John and I followed, but Raffi remained behind using up valuable calories maintaining body warmth against the snow-chilled winds which blew from the San Joaquin mountains. We were

not convinced that we could trust our hoist for the return journey and wanted a human donkey engine at the upper end of the rope.

We were now on a ledge as large as a city lot, sloping outward at an angle of thirty degrees to the brink of the eastern cliffs. This ledge continues, like the roof of a lean-to, almost the entire length of Shiprock. It forms the bottom of the great bowl and also the top of the south shoulder. The only difficulty is that this roof is cut into three sections without apparent provision for a connecting trail.

Reconnaissance indicated two possibilities, a high route which would land us in the bowl, and a low one which ended thirty feet under its lower lip. Although both contained extensive gaps of nothing, the lower route looked preferable except for its termination. Lack of piton cracks and adequate anchorage made it necessary to bring down Raffi, who by this time had made it clear that as a hoisting engine he was completely useless because of the cold. We did not feel concerned, however, so long as he could complain so loud and lustily.

Using all of our available rope, and even tying Raffi into the bottom of our hoist for better anchorage, we tackled the traverse. It was a friction problem, so Dave took the lead and demonstrated the effectiveness of his theory of dynamic balance by arriving at a secure ledge almost halfway around the tower. I came up and took over a fair sitting anchorage, aided by an insecure piton. Even such a piton is helpful when one is dangling his feet over a desert more than a thousand feet below. I knew I could not fall for I was tied to Raffi by a new rope, the breaking strain of which was over three thousand pounds; and Raffi was tied into the double hoisting rope. My mind told me that all was secure and that the worst that could happen would be a pendulum swing around the nose of the tower and onto the sloping ledge. This conclusion was irrefutable. I looked down on the desert, drove in a second, equally useless, piton and then, and not until then, felt secure.

Dave tried the high route but found it impossible. There was not even a prayerhold. (Next day he tried again but got no farther.) Dropping onto the lower route he found it better than expected, leading by way of a small, but secure, shelf to an eight-foot wall, which was climbed by use of a single piton.

Dave reported that if he could get over a thirty-foot cliff he would be in the giant bowl, but that he was figuratively at the end

of his rope. Looking at the single coil of the one hundred twenty foot climbing rope remaining in my hand, I called from my well-ventilated anchorage that he was literally at the end of his rope and almost at the end of the day.

Johnny would have to lead over such a wall, so Raffi and I shuttled him over to Dave to have a look. Half of our composite mind was now in operation at the actual battle front. However, gnawing feelings in our midriffs and the lengthening shadow of Shiprock warned that it was time to return to camp. An hour later we were stowing away the excellent grub Florence had prepared.

The second day of climbing found all four of us at the base of the thirty-foot wall well before noon. We were on a broad but sloping shelf. Not a single secure piton crack could be found. Holding a fall from above would not be easy — so in went an expansion bolt.

Dave unsuccessfully attempted to detour the wall by way of a large crow's-nest. There was only one alternative left; a job of pure rock-engineering with two-man stands, pitons, foot slings and tension ropes. I had such an enjoyable time pounding pitons into the overhanging, outward sloping crack, that I hated to turn the job of going over to Johnny. However, prudence dictated that a two hundred pound man should not fall on questionable pitons, so Johnny took over. A delicate traverse on rotten rock, a second expansion bolt for safety, and Johnny reached the base of the second crack on our resisting wall. Then, back to camp. We had climbed only twelve feet that day. Too much time was being spent going to and from camp. The lure of good food and air mattresses was wrecking our mountaineering technique; at least so we concluded.

Next day, the third on the mountain, witnessed our carrying, over our well worn route, a light tent, extra grub, and six pints of water. Johnny finished his overhang, well enmeshed in ropes, pitons and slings. A few minutes later the entire party was in the great bowl scrambling over easy slopes to the south side of the thin transverse fin. There, alongside the same lava dike which witnessed Ormes' fall a year before, nature had fashioned an excellent bivouac cave. Surely it was not more than forty feet from the back of this cave to the opposite side where we had arrived more than three days before. Forty feet in three days. Raffi thought that next time we had best tunnel through.

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Caching our equipment in the cave we hurried to scale the mainmast itself — the scantiness of our water supply or a cold night might disable the party for difficult climbing on the morrow.

After preliminary surveying of routes, the composite mind came to a two to two impasse. Dave and Johnny voted for the north side, the rest of us for the south arête with its overhanging horn. Dave, belayed by Raffi, performed in topnotch style. The north face begrudgingly yielded a perpendicular route to within seventy feet of the summit and then flatly refused to permit further progress. An overhang without a piton crack or a place for a two-man stand ended a valiant attempt.

Darkness had fallen before we arrived at our bivouac cave. Starvation rations were prescribed for dinner because digestion would waste much-needed water. Crawling into our light tent to conserve body heat, we spent a reasonably comfortable night on the hard rock, turning over, however, only by unanimous consent. The night was chilly, but we did not especially miss our sleeping bags.

The next morning the remainder of our water was partitioned under watchful eyes intent on democratic equality. After much scientific argument a little food to allay stomach emptiness was distributed and we were ready to tackle the mainmast. With husbandly solicitude I called down to Florence to inquire how she had survived the night. "Splendid," she replied, "only I had to kill two rattlers that insisted the camp was theirs."

Again we climbed to the upper edge of the great bowl at the base of the south arête of the main tower. Here I put a long line of pitons into the overhanging crack that wormed its way upward toward the horn. Johnny took over, threw his auxiliary rope over the horn and, after making sure he was anchored both above and below, climbed out over eighteen hundred feet of sheer western cliff and up the holdless side of the horn.

On the broad ridge atop the nose safe anchorage could be secured only by another expansion bolt. Up came the rest of the party. Dave took over the lead on the friction slopes ahead and soon we were all sitting on the summit of Shiprock. A rock cairn was built; a Sierra Club register with room for a thousand names was safely tucked away in its center.

"We've gone over the top," said Dave.

"No," I insisted, "we've climbed the mainmast."