

Anti-Climbing At Pinnacles

ANTI-CLIMBING AT PINNACLES

Shake and Bake

In the long, low shafts of late afternoon light, a ridge of gnarled rock stumps appears below me. This is the Pinnacles, a place where lava squirted up and punished the ground, where the mangling motion of earth plates scraped along a fault.

Our single-engine airplane hums deeply as we circle, like explorers looking for prehistoric creatures in a strange land. During our slow circling, I understand why the complex jumble of canyons and protuberances were once a sanctuary for bandits. I imagine them crashing their whiskey bottles down over hot sagebrush fires, while lizards dart back. Perched on the shattered rock knobs, a turkey vulture flaps once, caws until the walls caw, then glides off on its homeward mile.

"Captain George Vancouver, do you read me? This is Tom Higgins. We are flying in a minuscule contrivance over territory now known as Pinnacles National Monument, California. You were the first to explore the area, as you were mapping the west coast of North America in 1792. What did you think of the volcanic rock? The surrounding peaks rising to nearly 3000 feet? The views of arid hills and long valleys? Imagine these valleys teeming with vineyards, roads, towns, and industry. Captain? Come in, sir ... your Grace?"

I want to talk with Vancouver on the plane's radio, leap across the requisite time span and find out what he thought as he kicked his mule toward, in his words, "the most extraordinary mountain I have ever beheld." I imagine bumping into him in his explorer's garb, reincarnated with his mule. Would he understand the climbing motive or care about our progress? Would I exchange my days for his, for his perspectives on the fresh, untrammelled land? Perhaps we would begin talking about food, as I offered him something from my pack. Then we might go on to farming, technology, autos, flight, moon travel, power, electricity, energy, government, nations, states, democracy, war, bombs, atoms, science, geology, and Pinnacles. Would he believe that a mountain 8000 feet high once stood here, then exploded in outpourings of lava and rubble heaved into the air? All this sixty million years ago?

A crackle of static fills the airwaves. "This is Captain Vancouver. If you would care to read my diary, you will find I traveled by horse, not by mule, and the purpose of my journey to your "Pinnacles" was in part exploratory, but equally a brief diversion from the endless task of mapping the west coast of the continent, assessing the nature and extent of Spanish settlements, and negotiating certain matters with the Spaniards. Our ships, Discovery and Chatham, were in need of caulking and sail repair in November, 1792. We anchored at the Port of Monterey for this work and, after visiting the Mission of San Carlos, I joined a party traveling to the valley through which the Monterey River flows. I was there gratified, as my diary records, by the sight of the most extraordinary mountain I had ever beheld:

On one side it presented the appearance of a sumptuous edifice fallen into decay; the columns which looked as if they had been raised with much labor and industry, were of great magnitude, seemed to be of an elegant form, and to be composed of the same cream-colored stone, of which I have before made mention. Between these magnificent columns were deep excavations, resembling different passages into the interior parts of the supposed building, whose roof being the summit of the mountain appeared to be wholly supported by these columns rising perpendicularly with the most minute mathematical exactness. The whole had a most beautiful appearance of human ingenuity and labor; but since it is not possible, from the rude and very humble race of beings that are found to be the native inhabitants of this country, to suppose they could have been capable of raising such a structure, its being the production of nature, cannot be questioned...."

My arms are glistening with sweat in the ninety-degree air. Directly overhead, one blistered hand is turning a rubber-handled drill. The other is swinging a hammer into the mushroomed end of the holder. Fine dust puffs from around the drill tip. My chalky hand pinches an egg-shaped knob. I move one foot from its hold, shake it, and make the return. Suddenly my eye is pulled beyond the knobs to the sweeping gulf below. I feel an upwelling wave and reeling sensation at the prospect of toppling over backwards. Overhead, the black indentation we are climbing curves up and outward. From a distance, this shallow, water-worn groove, darkened by eons of slow seepage from the grassy terraces above, gives the appearance of a deep excavation between columns—perhaps this cliff, now called the Balconies, is the "sumptuous edifice" described by Vancouver. Below, the indentation sticks straight down like a black tongue. A few of the twelve protection bolts below sparkle against the black. Several of these bolts had to be started without looking at the drill overhead for fear that any backward leaning might instigate a somersaulting cascade down the knobby tongue.

The prospect of climbing the bulge above makes my moves tight and flat to the rock, like those of a beginning climber. No bolts will be possible on the overhang, and a fall will mean I could smash into my partner, Chris Vandiver. Chris says he hates this climb, for there is too much tension, too much reiterating calculus. The rock at Pinnacles is noted for its undependability, and we must test each hold and gingerly distribute weight over them on the assumption each might pop off. To Chris, it seems perverse to endure such mental strain. But we do continue the strain, we do finish the route we name Shake and Bake. We do look back on the dark 350-foot rock curtain called the Balconies and feel a foolish pride at

having been up there with birds shooting by like meteors, with patient vultures circling, with the bursts of hot, high breezes, with every pore electrified by the job at hand. And we do, if only to ourselves, blur the climb and the wall and come to think that the path of holds is ours, first touched, first assembled into a sequence of thinking and reaching by our brains and hands, and punctuated with just the right number of bolts to hold the thought and action together. Shake and Bake

"My efforts," says Captain Vancouver, "were always directed toward more practical affairs than climbing, as you describe it. My concerns were with commerce, conflict, and compromise. My main purpose in the journey was to settle a dispute with Spain regarding fur trade and territory on the coast. Of course, I also mapped and recorded the bays, harbors, and useful resources of other places on the same expedition, including Australia, Tahiti, and Hawaii. My explorations were purposeful, but what propels you toward such great effort, if not for profit or Country?"

"I know the climb I just did seems ludicrous, Captain, but not all climbing is like this. Some of it is pure gymnastic delight in pristine places, such as certain routes over knobby granite in the high mountains of California. However, there is other climbing which, as with any strenuous adventure, makes you buzz with why, what, and where you are. You mapped the coast of California. The climber of a new route weaves like a vessel, watching, heading, hoping for better rock sometimes keyed by color, white and pink being the most dangerous. As explorer, the climber is astonished and fascinated by a big mossy patch, a pocket of clicking, whirring bats, or a strong scent of foreign urines. And as climber, there is some kind of sensational ricochet in feeling fearful and stupid, then elated and accomplished at having navigated through yet another vertical assemblage of strange and untouched stones."

"Perhaps," I continue, "such climbing is a pleasure reserved for those a little jaded by the deluxe routes of great centers for the sport. Is it possible that the very grandeur of the best walls and consequent chain of ascents can cause one to turn away? Imagine, Vancouver, a long and lovely flake of rock shaped like your boot there, seemingly glued high on a shimmering, 3000-foot granite cliff. And great roofs and towers, all eventually connected by a marvelous climbing route. Do you see how even this might become dull from the doing? Where the elation, once so private, becomes so common, so implanted in a growing collective that the heart becomes a little tired and sad from it all? It is then that we turn to darker jewels—elusive, out of fashion, even fragile—as if in search of anti-climbs."

Resurrection Wall was Ruprecht's dark jewel. Ruprecht Von Kammerlander schemed and teamed with several different partners, until in 1978 he completed a route on this magnificent wall. Mossy on its lower reaches, then building to a dangerous pink higher and finally streaked in black over several intervals, the entire vertical mass suggests an ominous megalith. Ruprecht's friends will peer into this shadowy face, celebrate his climbing courage, remember his fatal motorcycle accident, and perhaps feel something like a haunting about the great wall. Resurrection Wall Munge Pitch

I fall again into the void, dangling below the bulge on Resurrection's second pitch. My partner, Frank Sarnquist, looks on impatiently. Above, I can see Ruprecht's fifteen aid bolts dotting the bulging wall. These are the only aid points on the three-pitch climb, and we are trying to pass them free. Surprisingly, the rock here turns solid after the fantastic mounds of fuzzy moss and fragile holds on the first pitch. I try again to surmount the bulge, this time finding a sequence of holds leading right of the bolt ladder to a small pocket. Here I can rest without using my arms. Ten more bolts remain on a slightly overhanging wall. As I begin this section, I find that the moves are consistently 5.9 and 5.10. Clipping into the bolts is a desperate struggle. Five bolts up, I lose all strength and float once again into space. Frank lowers me to the pocket, and I begin again, now more efficiently. At the last bolt I face the final move to the belay ledge, and I see exactly what to do. I know such a move by heart. It is 5.8, but it might as well be 5.30. My arms are spent. I rush the move, make it, then fling a hand onto the belay ledge, a melon-sized stone embedded in the wall. A hold breaks under my foot. I can't keep a grip on the massive stone and am off again into space! Frank lowers me to a poor resting point. One arm can dangle, then the other, but not both at once. I repeat all the sequences as fast as possible up to the last bolt. A little less tired this try than last, I grab the belay stone. I don't trust any of the knobs this time and instead friction my feet flat on the face as I mantle. I'm up!

The next pitch is a surprisingly moderate piece, something of an optical illusion. From below it appears awful, but once on it, large holds lead the way. The bolts turn out to be more illusory than the climbing. Frank leads way out, looks and looks, then spies a couple. Near the top, the wall scoops in below us, making the exposure incredible for a mere three-pitch climb.

On the summit we see a family of foxes shoot through a brushy gully. The sun is low and drenches us in amber light. In the canyon below, lost in deep purples, a host of frogs starts up. The misty air envelops us. I feel utterly remote and safe among the oaks and wispy, gray-green pines. Lower on our walk down, I see Resurrection shooting upward steeply, hazy, as if rubbed in charcoal, and now echoing onto us all the evening sounds.

"Sport never interested me much," Vancouver observes, "but in the realm of sports, this is indeed an odd one."

"Why do you think so?"

"There is so much useless searching, it seems to me. First you exploit the most exquisite walls in well-known places, then grow tired of it all and turn to inferior, obscure rock for your pleasure. Where does the anti-climber go next—underwater? Is this what modern civilization brings, so much useless leisure?"

"It is not so much that Pinnacles climbers scorn all else," I reply. "Rather, this place provides welcome relief from the climbing bustle elsewhere. And it is uniquely beautiful. I am not alone in liking the Pinnacles—just in a comfortable minority. Since the 1930s, small, select groups of climbers have practiced their sport here, particularly in the winter months, when the high mountains are covered with snow. The result has been a set of pleasing miniatures such as the Hand, the Monolith, Freedom Dome, Tuff Dome, the Machete Ridge, and Mechanic's Delight. Yes, these climbs are totally useless except to our 'leisure,' yet they stand in one's mind like gallery prints or Chinese vases on a display shelf. As for the inferior rock, it's strange how quickly one forgets about it when relishing the colors and forms."

"Perhaps the explorer and climber," Vancouver speculates, "share a similar propensity for discounting the past. The horrors of the last adventure dim as the open seas or far-flung peaks call on familiar yearnings. The beauty of the world is indeed to be appreciated, but the climber seems far too preoccupied with internal reactions and sentiments. Are these not the province of poets, not of explorers and adventurous men?" Mechanic's Delight

The miniature is Mechanic's Delight. Barry Bates said only four words to me about his first free ascent—"a very hard mantle." With Jim Crooks one late afternoon, I search out the overhanging start and find the embedded rock on which Barry must have done his mantle. It is a downsloping snout the size of my palm, with no decent footing below and no decent holds above. After attempting it once, I immediately give up. I mutter something about Barry being too strong, and how I'll have to find a trick. The plan unravels itself slowly. I pull up on the snout, make a flurry of foot changes, one extremely hard right-hand pull, then fall off. The rock is so much more complex than granite, first requiring extensive searching for a hold, then testing it, then comparing options. Jim and I stand at the bottom talking over the foot-and-hand options and risks, like stockbrokers comparing companies. "If you do this, you'll have no margin for error; if you do that, you'll have no reserves left by the time...."

A few minutes later I'm trying the identical foot maneuver and right-hand pull, our labored calculus having arrived at the same place as my initial intuition. This time I make the move correctly, reach far left to clip into an ancient bolt, then pull left, stepping on a tiny knob which shakes as I test it with a foot tap. More calculus—how much weight do I dare put there? Get the hands doing the main job ... gently now ... gently. Soon I'm back on the main line of bolts and discover sharp flakes, excellent if I pull and step straight down on them.

On top, I wave to our friend Tom Gerughty, on the nearby trail. He takes our picture. I like the clean, quick snap of his Hasselblad. Now Jim and I are forever interlocked with this lovely miniature. Later, Tom snaps another of us on Freedom Dome. I am content to be positioned in time on the perfection of these bumpy rocks, thrust up like whales' snouts to heaven, bursting from ancient and mysterious origins.

Repulsion is again welling up in Chris Vandiver. He squints through cigarette smoke, peers upward at a dripping, leaning dihedral and says what he always says at Pinnacles: "I hate it." We are standing at the base of another route on the Balconies, this one created by Frank Sacherer and Steve Roper in 1961. It is a horror of horrors. The dihedral is seeping black ooze. Whines, buzzes, bleats, and chirps emanate from it, sounds we cannot associate with any familiar life form.

"Bats and birds," Chris mumbles to assure himself we are still on planet Earth. He reluctantly begins to free climb the initial bolt ladder. The route has about thirty aid bolts, perhaps half of them placed on this first pitch, and wisely placed on the wall slightly left of the terrifying dihedral. Thank God we won't have to insert any limb into its dark, humming recesses. We hope to free climb past each and every old aid bolt, some of which poke out far from the rock, droop, or wiggle. To our knowledge, no one previously has mustered the slightest ambition to free climb this wizened classic; this surprises us very little.

After free climbing past the first few bolts, Chris glides back to the ground. He is not certain the bolts are good. I take over, following the ladder, finding sustained 5.9 and 5.10 climbing and occasionally a good bolt, even a new one. The rock is amazingly sound. But gradually the bolts lead closer and closer to the dihedral. Finally, I'm obliged to stick a hand into the crack, lie back a bit, and otherwise become far too intimate with damp, dark places.

Whirr ... bip ... bip ... bip ... eeeooo ... all the fearful sounds begin, and as I peer into the crack I see tucked-up limbs and fuzzy ears. God, I've got to get out of here! The dihedral bends left at this point, forcing me onto the face. A very hard stem to the left brings me to easier ground and eventually to the belay spot. Here I clip into two anchor bolts, three higher aid bolts, and a nut, but I still feel insecure. Chris climbs smoothly and quickly up to the stem, then falls off trying to move across. There's no way to traverse back to try it again, so he just continues.

"5.11," Chris says tersely.

"Can't be," I say. I always say that, thinking 5.11 must be equivalent to the worst boulder moves I've ever done. The mood turns more and more glum as we hop on little holds, trying to find a comfortable stance, suspecting that the whole patch of rock and bolts might burst off with a pop, like a faulty door of an airplane at high altitude.

The next pitch takes off on a steep wall above and beyond the dihedral. Black, brown, pocketed, and knobby, the rock sweeps upward. The aid bolts stop and an aid crack begins, meaning that the bolts we are accustomed to for protection become farther and farther apart. Chris refuses to lead the second pitch, again concerned about the doubtful bolts. I start out, reach the crack and find it takes nuts only grudgingly. No move is over 5.9, and most are 5.8, but I'm exerting

tremendous energy, moving as if each hold might snap off. My moves become more and more rigid. I start to think like Chris, unable to blank out the vision of the line of bolts plucked out of their roost, clinking and tingling down the rope to meet me as I ram to a halt.

At the end of this pitch I hang out on a sling belay from two fairly good-looking bolts. Above, the wall bends outward, showing another bolt ladder. As Chris comes up, unclipping from bolt after bolt and about to leave us both on just my two, I panic at the thought of popping the anchor bolts. I ask him to stop, then clip us both through the next higher bolt. I inform Chris I'm just too rattled to take the next lead.

He glowers upward, calculates, broods, then attacks the headwall. He's careful and more fluid than I've been, testing holds, obviously desperate but still in control. He's hating it again, but smells the relief of the summit and pushes on. Soon he disappears around a corner and gains a belay tree. Another short pitch ending on clunking hunks of rock, and we're on top.

We are in a hilarious mood, stomping up and down in the dry weeds, enormously relieved, proud and mystified at how and why we free climbed through this minefield of wobbly rock and shaky bolts. Our socks are full of stickers. Chris gurgles a little, squeezes up a laugh, then bursts forth with whooping hollers. Laughs echo off the grotesque boulders which surround us like monsters, then vanish into the darkening air. We feel like children who have just touched a tarantula and gotten away without a bite—that slow, devilish black rambler, so beautiful and frightening all at once.

"Your thoughts and actions," Vancouver remarks, "are much akin to those of the childlike Indians I observed. As I wrote in my diary, most had not bettered themselves, had not made habitations more comfortable than those of their predecessors. I would wager this is still true."

"Must we judge a people by their shelter? Did you not ever discover something of yourself on those long journeys? Yes, we gratefully lost all care for anything beyond the crackling weeds underfoot, the purple and brown of evening, and the straggling path down. What occupied us was a little howl of glee as we nipped prudence on its back. We were emptied of care and filled with nothing more than ... a rolling giggle. So whole did we feel that no man, woman, vocation, promise, or problem could hold a moment's thought. And when we looked back to our horrible shroud of rock, still oozing, it was no longer with the wicked terror we had first known. Our wonder had transformed it into a magnificent, hulking friend, and in that moment, somehow always with us, all else in nature became comprehensible, including our brief lives so tiny on the spinning globe.

"Can we go on to something else?" asks Vancouver.

"Such as?"

"Well, anything but climbing. Tell me more about electricity, as you call it, or the flying contraptions."

Our small plane straightens out from its circling over Pinnacles, and we head north. After a minute or two, the view back reveals little of consequence in the smooth, rolling ranchlands and cultivated valleys. Above, caught deep in cobalt blue, are the first stars. I doze to the drone of the engine and remember the echo of frogs below Resurrection, the smooth, slender foxes, and the view to the dusky Balconies. I realize that I love most of all the moments at the ends of climbs, when the earth smokes in its beauty and innocence. Vancouver, do you read me? You, the mapmaker, negotiator, loyal subject of the Crown, are the outward explorer; I am the inner. I would not trade my days or perspectives for yours, and I know again that all of consequence for me lies in fleeting wonder near the towers and foxes, thoughts emptied of human exploits, technologies, and history. Monolith

Picture Information:

(1) Chris Vandiver and Tom Fukuya begin Shake and Bake, by Tom Higgins; (2) Bruce Cooke on final pitch of Shake and Bake, by Tom Higgins; (3) Tom Higgins on Resurrection, by Frank Sarnquist; (4) Tom Higgins completes the crux moves on Mechanic's Delight, by Tom Gerughty; (5) Tom Higgins and Frank Sarnquist on Monolith, by Tom Gerughty.

Ascent, Sierra Club, 1980