

SENDING IT

Climbing El Dorado

November 16, 2023 - January 28, 2024

“Climbing has been called ‘moving over stone.’ The feeling of that movement is joyful. Like a dance.

It is addictive. In my life as a climber I have experienced fear, real and imagined. We say the fear helps keep you alive.”

-Ron Vardanega



BEGINNER'S MIND

The genesis of this exhibition lies with Charlie Downs, a long-time rock climber and the architect of many of our community's cherished public buildings. Charlie moved to this area precisely for its proximity to quality climbing areas and superb ski slopes. Throughout the course of his career, he designed many of the schools where our children spend their days, shared spaces where we spend our leisure time, and community facilities that play host to some of our region's most valuable public services. In a way, we can thank the granite cliffs, peaks, crags, and spires that feature in this exhibition for shaping much of our built environment.

To plant the seed of *Sending It* in fertile soil, Charlie pulled together a group of some of the most experienced climbers, many of whom made First Ascents of well-known routes. My introduction to rock climbing – its history, culture, and community – was in the cozy attic room of Squirrel's store in Strawberry, tucked in the shadow of Lover's Leap, a renowned climbing area right off Highway 50. Old guidebooks with hand-drawn maps and dog-eared pages were passed around like yearbooks at a school reunion. The enthusiasm and the common bond among these folks were apparent, and I was drawn in by their description of what binds them together. One phrase stuck with me from that first meeting, spoken by local legend Aidan Maguire: "We've all been humbled, and we've all been scared," feelings that are, evidently, tempered by trial and triumph.

At some point in the month following, Charlie decided that I needed to experience a climb for myself in order to have the right frame of mind to curate this show. I agreed, eager to push my own boundaries and always hungry for the new experience. I talked a good friend of mine, who is herself a climber, into coming along, knowing that her presence would put me at ease and give me confidence.

Petch, of Lover's Leap Guides, generously agreed to lead me up a beginner's route on Lover's Leap. From below, I looked straight up the rock face, searching out obvious hand and foot holds, slowly realizing that I'd be expected

to use only a running crack as my means of ascent. I watched Petch shimmy up the route like it was nothing, while I puzzled over where I should even begin. Charlie stepped in and patiently, calmly talked me through how to jam my feet and hands, how to use physics to my advantage (even it seems to defy all animal instinct), and how to keep pushing through. With quite an effort, I made it up to a natural ledge, sitting near (clinging to) a massive Sierra juniper that jutted dramatically from the rock face. I decided I had reached my top – not the top, but my top, and higher than I expected to make it in any case.

What Charlie had suspected was true; attempting a climb myself was the only way to experience the chemical cocktail that soaked my brain over the course of that day. Facing down my own instinctive fear of heights and then the dopamine rush that came with having done so: scared, humbled, relieved, stoked.

Sending It: Climbing El Dorado is an ode to the granitic landscape whose beauty draws so many of us here, and to those who see only possibility in its vertical expanses. To my mind, rock climbing is where human smallness, vulnerability, and impermanence meet the measure of time that stones and mountains keep. Climbing is a sport that invites human innovation and ingenuity; early climbers like Yvon Chouinard learned blacksmithing so they could design and fabricate the gear they needed to climb better and higher, while preserving the quality of the route for future generations. New gear and new designs continue to expand the sport's accessibility and ease. Finally, climbing is about stories, human relationships, and community. I've been engrossed in the many stories that El Dorado County's climbing community has generously shared with me over the past few months. Their stories and passion have opened my eyes to new ways of seeing the land around me, and the way my community relates to it.

Marya Osucha, Exhibition Curator

GLOSSARY

Aid Climbing: A type of climbing that makes use of rope, rather than the rock itself, to ascend the face. Relying on the rope for upward progress.

Anchor: A point of attachment for a climbing rope.

Approach: The walk to the base of a climb.

Arête: A part of the wall where the wall itself juts out to a sharp vertical ridge or point.

Belay: To keep a climber from falling too far by using friction on the rope. The system that stops a climber's fall.

Belayer: The person who manages the rope so as to catch the climber on the other end in case of a fall or slip.

Big wall: Extended, multi-pitch rock climber that often takes several days to complete

Bolted route: A route protected with pre-placed bolt anchors, used to secure the rope to rock, rather than removable protection pieces.

Bolts: Metal expansion bolts drilled into the rock for use as protection, to secure the climbing rope, on sport or aid climbs.

Camming device: A carefully designed piece of protection that is often spring-loaded and wedges into a crack or pocket by rotating, to be removed as the second climber ascends.

Chimney: Wide, vertical crack large enough for a climber to fit inside and climb.

Chock: Term applied to any passive (not spring-loaded) protection tool wedged into cracks and used as a rope anchor during a climb.

Clean: A route that is free of vegetation and loose rock. Also, to remove protection as you follow a lead climber.

Crag: A small cliff, or the term for a climbing area.

Crux: The toughest move or sequence of moves on a climb

Free Climb: To climb using only hands and feet on the rock. Rope is used only for safety and is not relied upon for upward progress.

Free Solo: Climbing without a belay, or without a system to stop your fall. Very high risk.

Hex: Six-sided passive protection that either wedges or rotates into place in a crack.

Jam: To wedge a body part into a crack on a rock climb in order to put weight on it and move upward.

Lead: To be the first person on a climb, either clipping the rope into bolts or placing protection as you go.

Nut: Passive protection piece consisting of a wedge-shaped piece of metal affixed to a wire.

Passive protection: Any piece of climbing protection, securing the rope to rock, that does not have moving parts (chocks, nuts, etc).

Pitch: The length of a climb that can be protected by 1 rope length.

Piton: A thin, wedge-like piece of metal that is pounded into a rock face and then clipped to a climbing rope for protection. The original means of protecting climbs, now out of favor due to the damage it does to the rock.

Placement: An opening in the rock in which a piece of protection fits. Also, the act of inserting a piece of protection.

Protection: Any device used to secure a climbing rope to rock.

Rack: The selection of gear used for a climb.

Rappel: To descend a cliff by lowering oneself on a fixed rope, with feet against a wall.

Route: The path up a specific climb.

Runner: Loop of nylon webbing used to attach the climbing rope to protection.

Second: To follow, or be the second climber, on a rope team.

Sending it: Successfully reaching the top and finishing a climb.

Sport Climbing: Rock climbing using pre-placed protection such as bolts or a top rope.

Topo: The graphical representation (sketch drawing or a photograph with routes depicted) of a climbing route.

Topping out: To climb up and over a wall or boulder so you end up on top of it, essentially completing the climb.

Top Rope: A rope that is passed through a fixed anchor at the top of a climbing wall, with each end tied to the climber and the belayer at the bottom. Ensures the climber is always protected from falling very far and is thus a good way to learn to climb.

Traditional or “Trad”: Rock climbing using protection placed by lead climber and removed by second.

Webbing: Woven nylon tape used for making slings and runners for climbing.



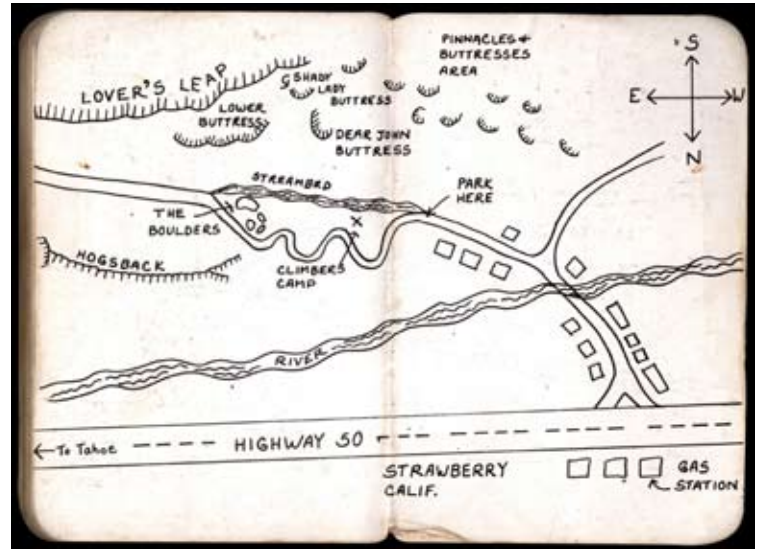
*8th Grader Bliss Stargaard on her first multi-pitch, Corrugation Corner, Lover's Leap, 2017
Photo by Thomas Stargaard*

LOVER'S LEAP



Paul Burich climbing The Farce, Lover's Leap, 1974
Photo by Bart O'Brien

Long before any of Lover's Leap granodiorite was exposed to the earth's surface, the rock was intensely fractured along horizontal planes. Flows of molten mass from below were squeezed into these fractures, later to solidify into these veins geologists call "dikes." These veins are rich in quartz and feldspar and virtually devoid of dark minerals. Dark minerals, which are the first to weather, are abundant in the surrounding granodiorite; hence the dikes erode much more slowly. Dikes themselves are not that rare, but in the overwhelming abundance that they occur here they are unique.



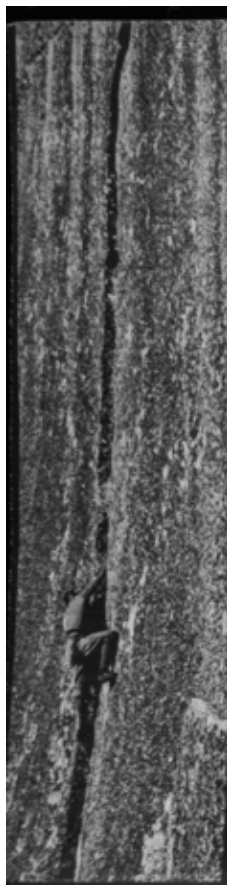
Hand Drawn Map of Lover's Leap from *A Climber's Guide to TAHOE ROCK*, by Rick Summer, 1980

A lot of vertical walls that would otherwise be impossible to freeclimb are rendered easy by the dikes. This in large part explains the tremendous popularity The Leap holds for those climbing in the beginning to moderately difficult range.

From *A Climber's Guide to TAHOE ROCK* by Rick Summer, 1980



View of Lover's Leap, 2021
Photo by Marc "Petch" Pietrolungo



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Rockcraft: The Royal Robbins School of Rock Climbing, c. 1969



*Royal Robbins on
Lover's Leap
c. 1970*
Courtesy of Robbins
Family Archive

ROYAL ROBBINS 1935-2017: Big-Wall Pioneer

Royal Robbins is one of the best-known names in climbing. He is perhaps best remembered for his broad influence on climbing which impacted nearly every aspect of the pursuit - from pioneering the country's first Grade VI big wall ascent on Half Dome's Northwest Face in 1957, to starting the famous clothing company that bears his name.

In addition, Robbins was an author with two instruction manuals and three autobiographies to his credit as well as numerous articles. *Basic Rockcraft* and *Advanced Rockcraft*, first published in 1971 and 1973, helped introduce and educate a new generation of climbers.

Robbins even included a "Sermon" in *Advanced Rockcraft* in which he laid out the "rules" of climbing, which essentially boiled down to stay safe, be honest, and leave the stone unchanged.

Royal Robbins hosted a school of rock climbing, also called Rockcraft, at Lover's Leap beginning in the late 1960s. About Lover's Leap Robbins said, "[...] no one cliff even in Yosemite has Lover's Leap's concentration of routes with such quality and variety." In 1973, Robbins listed The Line, a popular route on Lover's Leap, as one of his top five favorite routes.

WRIGHT'S LAKE REBOLT

by Aidan Maguire

Wrights Lake is home to an amazing and beautiful climbing area, where many of the climbs are hard and often follow crack systems where protection in the form of nuts and camming devices are placed to protect the lead climber and removed after the climb has been done that day. Other climbs do not provide any opportunities to place protection and are instead protected by bolts that are placed by the first ascensionist, providing a permanent way to protect the lead climber. At the top of all the climbs is an anchor of 2 bolts and chains to lower the lead climber back to the ground or bring up the second.

The area saw development in the late 80's and mid 90's with new routes still occasionally being done today. Many of the routes (in particular those done by myself in the 90's) were bolted with stainless steel expansion bolts which is the standard today. However, routes that are older are often anchored and bolted with different types of rustable bolts, sometimes as small as 1/4 inch by 1 1/4 inch long.

These have sat through 30-plus years of Sierra winters, and have eroded and rusted to the point of becoming weak and dangerous. One of the inherent problems is that the bolt embedded into the granite, so that it's impossible to know how badly eroded it truly is. Many climbers over the years have been injured or killed when a bolt or anchor point failed, resulting in a ground fall.

I set out with a keen desire to improve the Wright's Lake climbing area, contacting The American Safe Climbing Association (ASCA). With their support, I decided that I would embark with the help of friends on a refurbishing and rebolting of the crag. Old "manky" bolts have to be pulled or chopped with a great deal of pounding, twisting, hammering (and cursing). Once out, the previous small hole is drilled to accommodate a new stainless steel bolt. This is all done with the utmost care not to alter, damage or deface the rock and to be the best stewards of these areas. The end result is old climbs equipped anew, with bolts that generations will safely use decade after decade.



Joel and Terry Levinson on the Prow 10a WL, 2023

Photo by Aidan Maguire

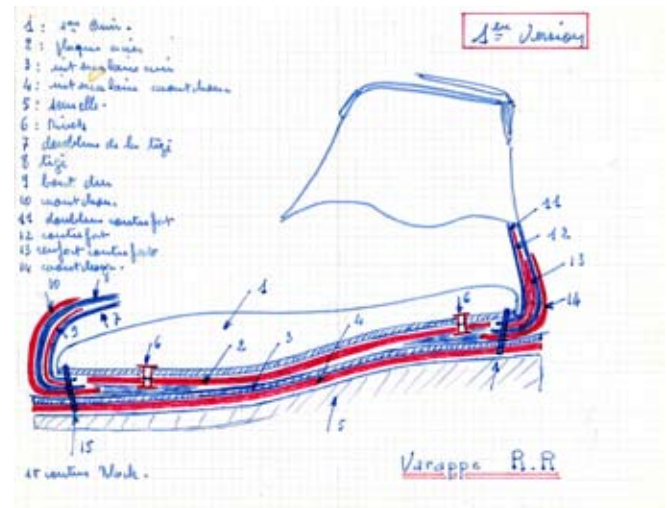
GEAR EVOLUTION

Adapted from *Climbing No. 372*, by Jim Erickson, 2022

Many of the towering heights rock climbers are able to reach today would not be possible without years of gear development, testing, and innovation by the climbers themselves. From hemp rope, to hand-forging tools in their own garages, rock climbers have sought to make their gear safer and lighter.

Ropes: Ropes started out as Manila hemp, and by the '50s were made of nylon.

Harnesses: In the beginning climbers tied themselves directly into the rope using a bowline. By the '80s almost all climbers had switched to the sit-in harness that is used today.



Royal Robbin's design for Varappe Shoe, c. mid-1960s



Examples of original vs modern bolts and climbing rope.

first, but became so popular he had to hire employees. These pitons enabled the big-wall climbers of the 1960s to do long El Capitan routes having 400 or more piton placements, yet only carrying a rack of perhaps 50 pitons. However these had an unforeseen environmental side-effect in that they caused cumulative damage to the rock. Today climbers don't typically use pitons for cragging, only for big-wall climbing.



Shoes: Shoes have improved dramatically. In the 1970s most American climbers were using tight-fitting, lug-soled hiking shoes, or Royal Robbin's specially designed rock climbing shoes - these were great for edging, big walls and approaches but had terrible friction grip. In the '80s new "sticky-rubber" shoes became popular, and since then shoes have continued to improve.

Dave Hampton wearing climbing gear, c. 1975
Photo by Charlie Downs

EEYORE'S ENIGMA

by George Connor

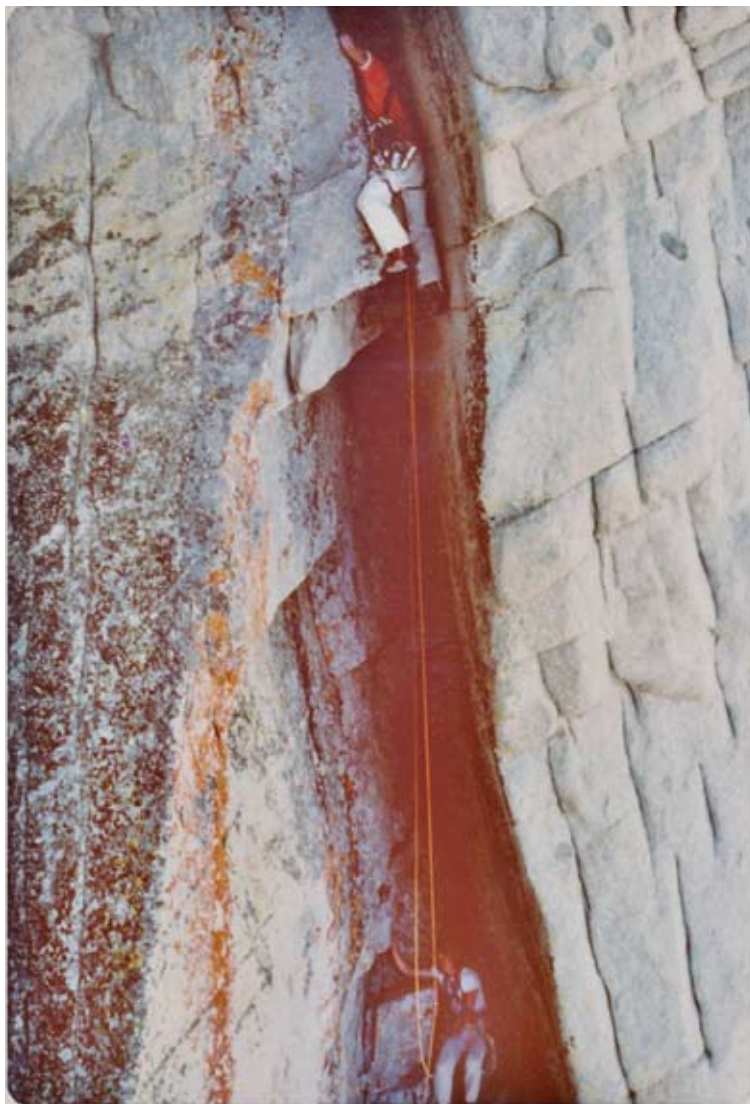
In 1976, Rob Oravetz and I were starting our third year of climbing. Completely smitten by the sport, we spent most of our available time off driving up to the Cosumnes River Gorge to practice on the short cliffs, occasionally making forays up to Sugarloaf, Phantom Spires, and Lover's Leap. Since we had no older mentors, we taught ourselves by reading Royal Robbins' Rockcraft books. There were no climbing gyms back then and the nearest mountaineering school was down in Yosemite.

We studied the diagrams in the Rockcraft books, bought a rope and some equipment, learned how to do the hip belay, and off we went. We improved rapidly, climbing 5.8 classics like Haystack and Corrugation Corner in our first season and breaking into the 5.9 realm early in our second season. By the end of our second full season of climbing, we felt pretty solid on 5.9 and considered ourselves advanced climbers. Still – there were other more advanced climbers out there who actually climbed 5.10, and even the “mythical” 5.11 climbs. We did not know any of these people, but we revered them. They were like gods to us.

Back to 1976: all that we had available to us in terms of guidebooks were photocopied route descriptions taken from a climbing magazine article. The descriptions were vague, saying things like, “Little is known about this route – it follows a series of shallow corners to the left of Haystack.” As far as equipment, the recommendations might be: “A selection of 10-12 chocks up 3” is adequate.”

Looking through the stapled pages of this makeshift guide, we saw Eeyore's Enigma was described as “The Horror Climb at Lover's Leap – many bongs [a big piton] are needed for the overhanging section.” We stared up at the awesome flared bomb bay chimney where a single 4” bong had been left fixed.

A “bomb bay” chimney is a horizontal slot with no bottom – so if a climber fell, they would drop directly down into space (like a bomb). A blue sling was attached



George Connor getting situated in the off width – Robert Oravetz bracing himself for a probable fall. Photo by Dan Chan

to this bong, swaying gently in the breeze while dangling straight down – a frightening omen to anyone looking up from below. The first ascent of this intimidating route had been done years earlier by Warren Harding, TM Herbert, and Galen Rowell – all seasoned Yosemite hard men. We did not even consider going near it.

So, imagine our surprise when rumors started to spread that a climber named Jim Orey had free climbed Eeyore's Enigma and had given it a 5.9 rating! How could this

possibly be?? To show our naiveté (stupidity?) we assumed the rumor was true, even though we didn't know Jim Orey, or anyone else who did. I suggested to Rob that we should try it; after all – he had led the 5.9 off width on Traveler's Buttress, and I had led the hard off width on the East Face Route on Upper Spire at Phantom Spires.

Rob was skeptical, but reluctantly agreed with my promise to lead the scary overhanging section. We pooled our gear and off we went. I enlisted my buddy Dan Chan to photograph the climb using my Pentax



George entering the claustrophobic squeeze chimney
Photo by Dan Chan

35mm camera.

Robert led the first pitch off Main Ledge without any problem. He set up the belay on an exposed chockstone ledge at the base of the flared bomb bay chimney. Even on this warm summer day, we were cooled by an icy draft that seeped out of the chimney from the depths of Traveler's Buttress. At the appointed hour, Dan appeared off to the side to take photos. No turning back now... the camera was rolling.

As I mentioned before, we were naïve back then and I simply assumed the fixed bong halfway up the bomb bay chimney was bomber. I took a deep breath and cast off, aiming for the fixed bong. Surprisingly, the downward flaring bomb bay chimney felt relatively secure. I quickly reached the fixed bong and clipped the blue sling. No time to dawdle; my thighs were starting to burn. Continuing the diagonal chimneying, I reached the outer edge where the crack turned vertical as an off width jam. Here I placed a decent #10 hex in sideways. I quickly realized making the transition from the chimney to get established in the off width crack would be tricky and frightening. This was a fantastically exposed position and I was all too aware that if I popped, I would drop straight down into space.

Hoping the #10 hex was good, I slithered like a snake up into the off width. As it turns out, this sequence of moves is the technical (and psychological) crux of the climb, and it took all of my strength and experience to pull it off without falling.

I remember screaming to Robert that I was “about to peel off.” His silence down at the ledge was not reassuring. Somehow, I managed to claw my way up and got situated in the off width. I quickly fumbled in a #11 hex and clipped in. A few inches higher, a “thank God” jug and a bolt signaled the end of the desperate sequence. I exhaled and spent a few moments collecting myself.

Even though my body was pasted halfway into an off width crack in one of the most exposed sections of rock at Lover's Leap, I experienced a sense of relief. Solid 9

protection was at hand, and the route ahead appeared manageable.

The next few feet of climbing led to a huge roof split by an ominous squeeze chimney. The roof extended to the left and it seemed logical to squirm up into the squeeze chimney to attempt to get past.

Once inside the squeeze chimney, I saw that it constricted above. This damned chimney was so tight, I needed to have my head turned to the left so I could see where I was going. I couldn't even turn my head around inside that thing! I couldn't find any hex placements inside the chimney, so by the time I reached the outer edge I was quite a ways above my last protection. Thankfully, good footholds appeared out on the face, making the exit from the squeeze chimney manageable.

From here, the terrain got easier. A long section of runout face climbing on decent dikes led to a comfortable alcove with a convenient horn to use as a solid belay anchor. I set up the belay and called to Robert to come up. It was with great satisfaction that I listened to Robert's grunts, heavy breathing, and muffled curses which indicated that he was not having an easy time.

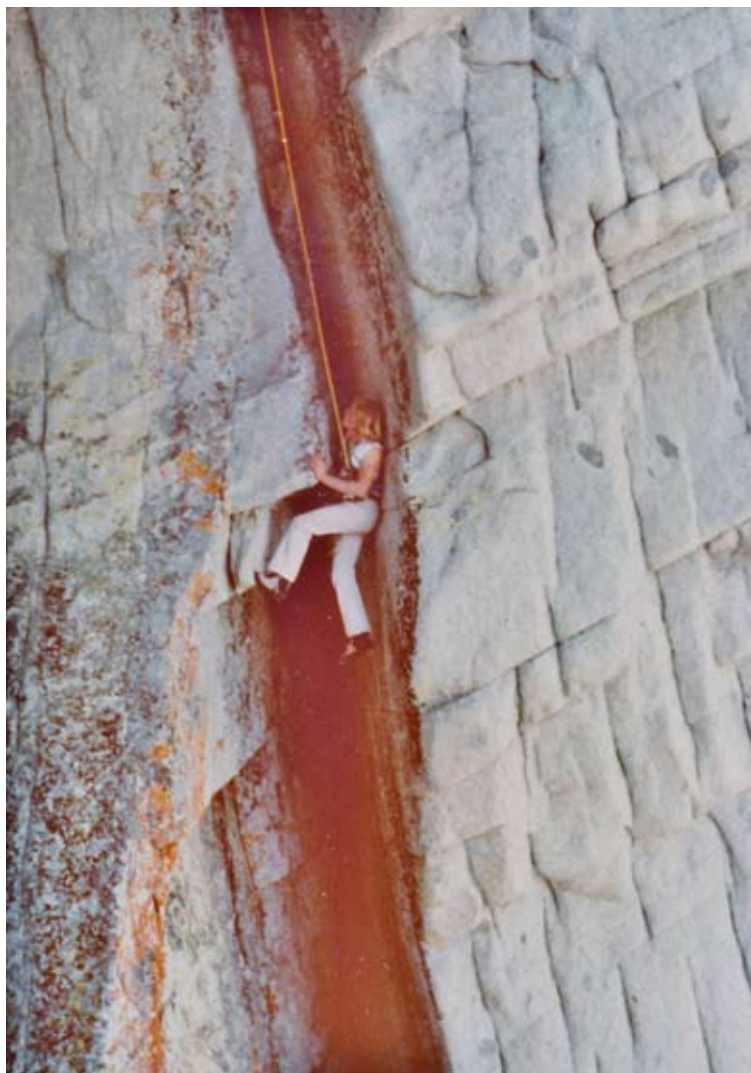
When Robert arrived at the belay, he reached out to shake my hand and congratulated me on a "superb lead". Rob was not one to give compliments freely back then, and so I was elated to get such high praise from my typically stoic and austere partner.

Rob led a short pitch with a tricky roof exit onto the dike-covered wall. I then led another short pitch up huge dikes to the top. We coiled the rope, and indulged in the time-honored routine of recounting our experience in minute detail. We couldn't have been more stoked as we laughed and conversed all the way down to our packs at the bottom.

This ascent turned out to be on my birthday, so for a few years I kept up a tradition of doing Eeyore's Enigma on my birthday. Gradually, I ran out of partners who were willing (stupid enough?) to accept my invitation to

climb it. I think it's probably safe to say that I'm one of the few people on the planet who has climbed Eeyore's Enigma multiple times.

There were very few records kept back then, and information was typically passed word of mouth. But I suspect our ascent of Eeyore's Enigma was probably in the first five free ascents, and certainly in the first ten total ascents. To this day, I consider that ascent the proudest achievement of my climbing career.



Robert following the crux pitch. Photo by Dan Chan

GEOLOGY

The Sierra Nevada is well-known for its towering granite peaks, which formed 85 to 120 million years ago as magma from an arc of erupting volcanoes solidified deep within the Earth's crust. As tectonic plates shifted, the range began to uplift, reaching its current elevation roughly 5 million years ago. Granite is most often formed where oceanic plates dive beneath continental plates in tectonic environments called subduction zones.

Millions of years after the Sierra began to rise, glaciers formed and retreated in a series of ice ages, helping to carve out the current landscape seen today. Erosion from precipitation and rivers left – and continues to leave – its marks on the range.



Sarah Shaw climbing Pyramid Creek Canyon, Horsetail Falls, 2022
Photo by Marc "Petch" Pietrolungo

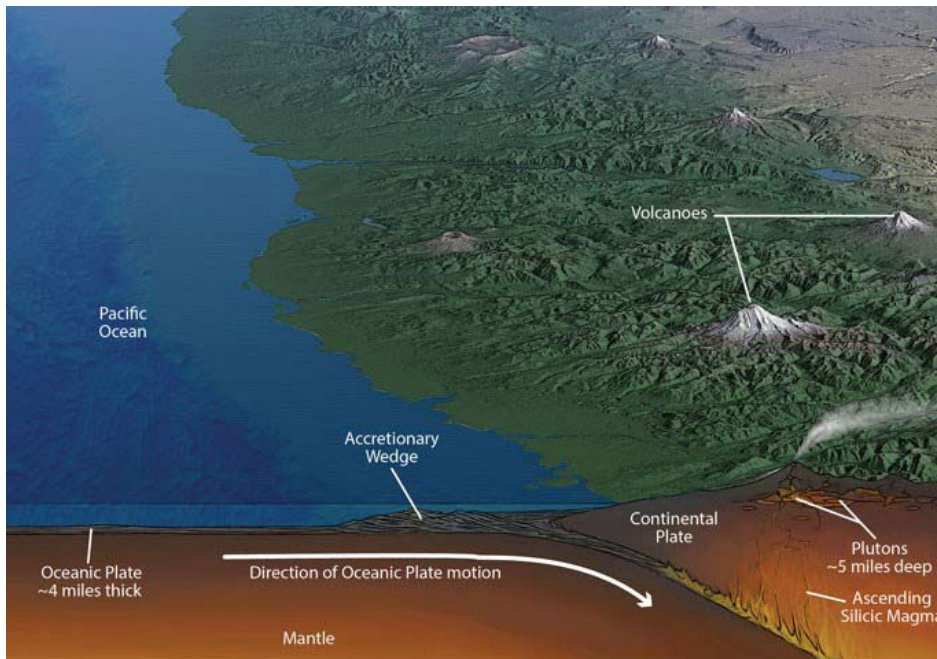


Diagram of subduction (oceanic plate pushing beneath continental plate) beneath the ancestral Sierra Nevada about 100 million years ago.
Illustration by Eric Knight



- Sedimentary rock
- Granite rock
- Volcanic rock
- Metamorphic rock

The Lake Tahoe basin formed by encroachment of normal faults into the Sierra Nevada region, causing several west flowing canyons. From *Pyroclastic Surges & Tertiary River Gravel Deposits in the Sierra Nevada*, 2013 by George Wheeldon.

SUGARLOAF

From *A Climber's Guide to TAHOE ROCK* by Rick Summer, 1980

Traveling on Highway 50 from Placerville one comes to the small town of Kyburz, 30 miles west of Tahoe. Here on the north side of the American River canyon is a crag: Sugarloaf. [...] Approach the rock under the south face passing large boulders which offer top-roping and some excellent short leads. The climbs on the main rock are clean and smooth, the cracks nicely spaced around the rock, and there is much enjoyable face climbing on secure knobs. The granite at Sugarloaf is different from that found in the Tahoe Basin, and different from Lover's Leap. The lower Sierra setting (4900 feet) and subalpine conditions of Sugarloaf, and the sleepiness of Kyburz, create a calm, relaxed atmosphere for rock climbing. The weather is generally good and the climbing excellent year-round. The approach takes about 30-40 minutes.

After climbing any of the routes ending on the summit, a quick descent is accomplished by walking north along the eastern side to a tree on the left that enables one to descent a short wall. A gully then leads north to the ground. The descent is easy class 3.



Sugarloaf East Face, 2022
Photo by Marc "Petch" Pietrolungo



Climber on Farley, Sugarloaf, 2022
Photo by Marc "Petch" Pietrolungo

PHANTOM SPIRES

by George Connor, Eric Barrett, and David Babich,
in *A Climber's Guide to TAHOE ROCK* by Rick Summer, 1980

This group of spires is hidden by trees, and consequently goes largely unnoticed by most climbers. The approach is best made from a wide turnout on the north side of Highway 50, 3.4 miles east of the Union 76 station at Kyburz. A small stream passes under the highway at this turnout. The strenuous 25-minute approach to the lower spire is made on undeveloped trails up the left side of the ravine formed by the stream.

LOWER SPIRE

Lying at the southern end of a compact cluster is this small but classic spire. The rock is solid and several fine routes have been done.

MIDDLE SPIRE

This Spire is a ten-minute walk uphill, and a bit northwest of the Lower Spire. Its north and west faces are clean and steep, and the east side is bisected by a large walk on and off ledge or terrace.



Phantom Spires, 2020
Photo by Loren Christofferson



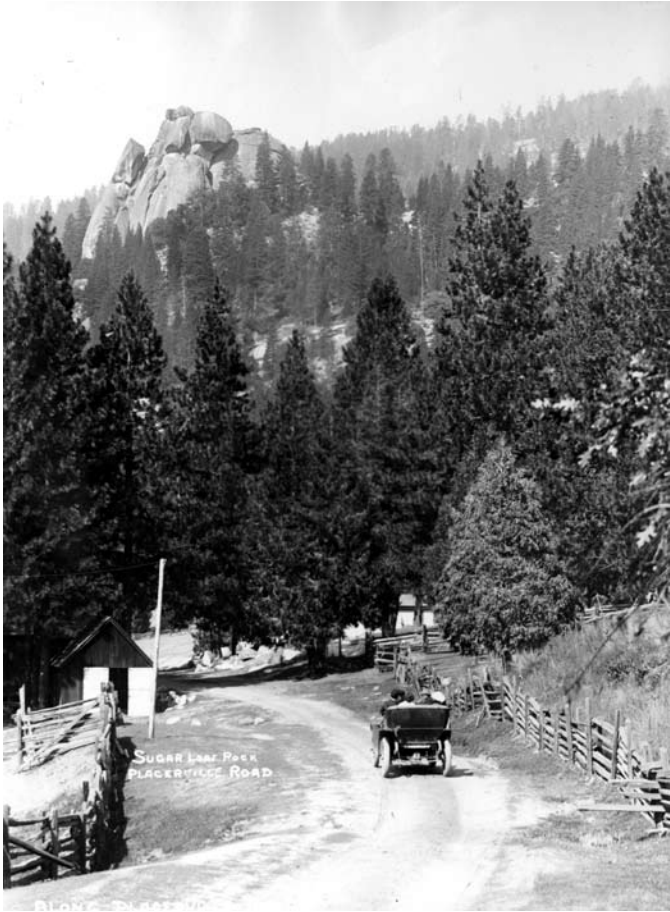
UPPER SPIRE

This is the grand pappy of the spires. It rises 300 feet on its east side and half that on the west. The final summit spire is flanked on the north and south by buttresses, the tops of which form the Lower Platform (south) and Upper Platform (north).

*Michel Fourcroy on Thanksgiving,
Upper Spire, Phantom Spires, 2018*
Photo by Thomas Stargaard

ARCHIVE

Sugarloaf Rock Along Placerville Road, c. 1910
Photo courtesy of El Dorado County Historical Museum



Sierra Bluffs from Slippery Ford House, c. 1900
Photo courtesy of El Dorado County Historical Museum



Strawberry Store, c. 1940
Photo courtesy of El Dorado County
Historical Museum



Arts and Culture El Dorado's mission to promote, connect, and empower arts and culture throughout the county is achieved by targeted programs and services, a vibrant gallery exhibition series, and a focus on initiatives which support and sustain the cultural life of the region.

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Arts and Culture El Dorado acknowledges that the sites included in this exhibition are on unceded Nisenan, Miwok, and Washoe lands.

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United Climb.

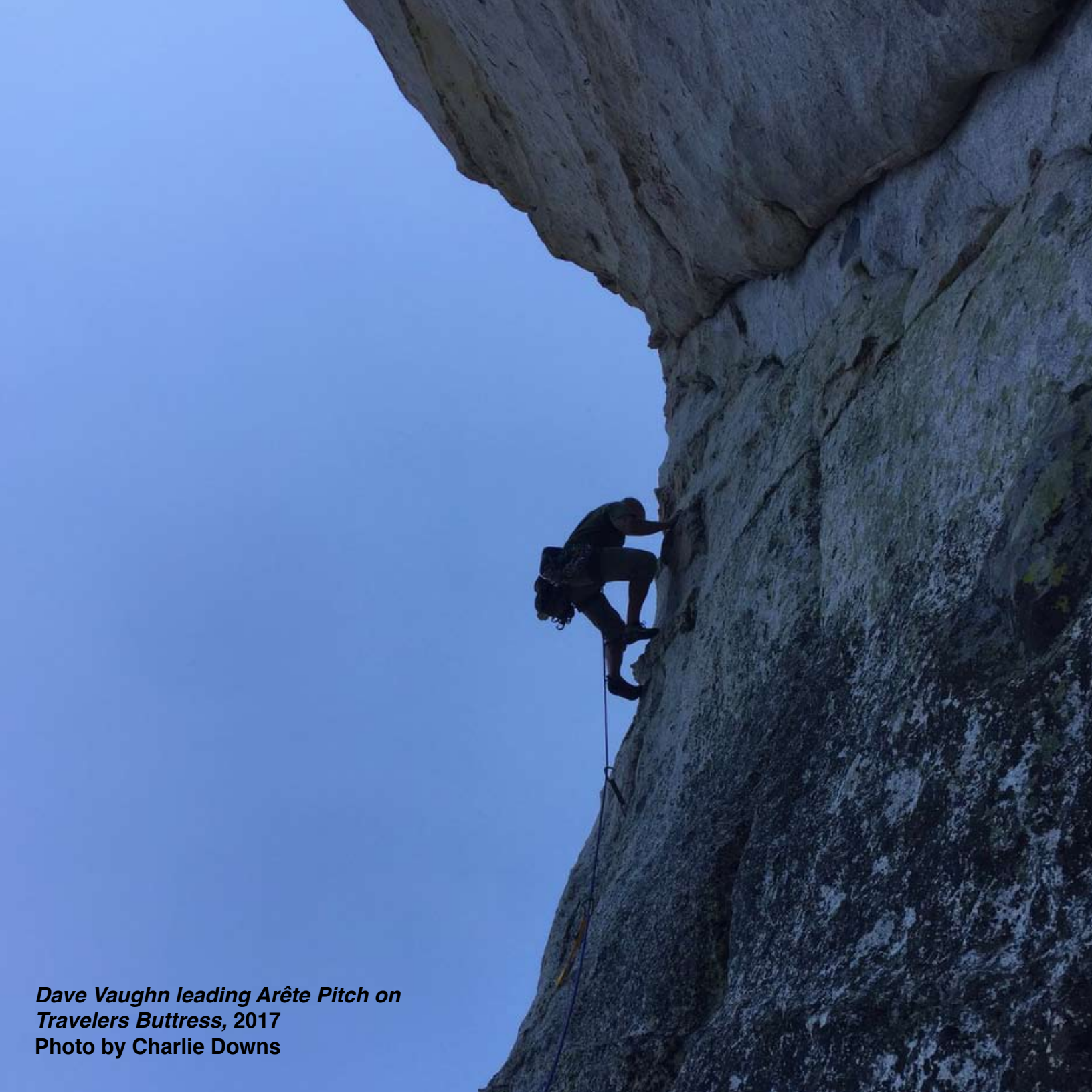
At the AAC—the largest community of climbers in the country—our members connect around a shared passion for the vertical realm, and they take pride in protecting public lands and educating fellow climbers.

Join us in this mission and you'll also receive the *American Alpine Journal*, *Accidents in North American Climbing*, and the emergency rescue and medical expense coverage you need to dream big.

Learn more at americanalpineclub.org.



📷 Nik Berry working *El Corazon* (5.13b) with Madeleine Sorkin, Yosemite, CA. Land of the Northern Paiute and Miwok peoples. AAC member Jeremiah Watt



***Dave Vaughn leading Arête Pitch on
Travelers Buttress, 2017
Photo by Charlie Downs***

WRIGHTS LAKE

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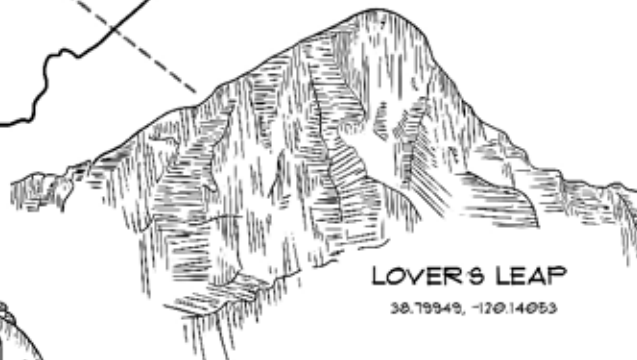
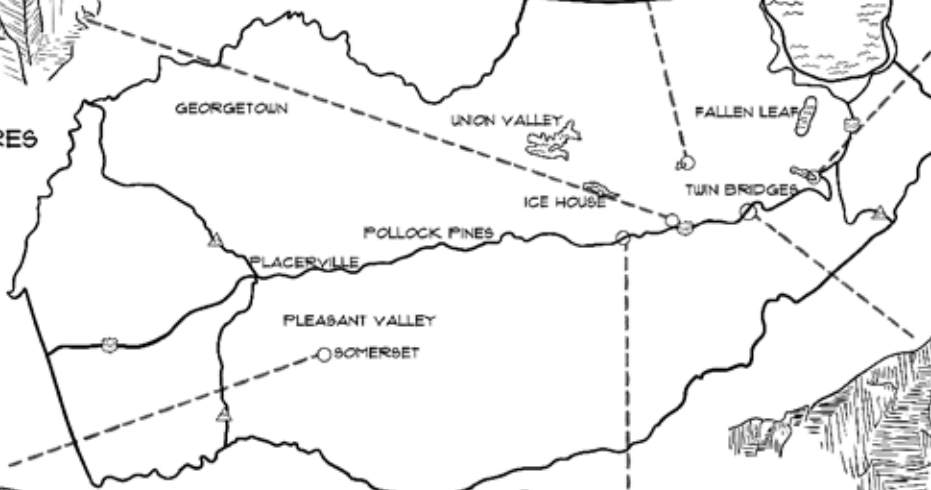
ECHO LAKE

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PHANTOM SPIRES

38.78989, -120.24171



LOVER'S LEAP

38.79949, -120.14053



BUCKS BAR

38.64907, -120.70669



SUGAR LOAF

38.7137, -120.3074

Map of climbing locations, 2023
Illustration by Caitlin Thompson



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