

The Chief

Dick Culbert

Its official name is Stawamus Chief, a ridge of modest elevation (652 m) squatting in a valley amid 1800 m and higher summits, directly above the port of Squamish. The Chief, however, is not so much a mountain as a wall. Solid granite, roughly a mile long, and up to 460 m in relief—together an impressive looking cliff to have in the back yard of a town. Firm rock, serious dimensions, and above all the Chief's easy access have made it the focal point of rock climbing on the W coast of Canada. A major highway skirts the base of the main walls, now an hour's drive from the city of Vancouver and 4 hours from the larger American metropolis of Seattle.

Since the beginning of serious climbing at Squamish, it has been part of the 'Yosemite School'. Even at a time when Yosemite was a place known only from journals and rumours, Chief-enthusiasts attempted to apply what was known of the Californian techniques and the decimal system of grading. Almost without exception, those who have been most successful on the Chief, have gone on to become part of the Yosemite scene, bypassing the other American rock climbing centres in the traditional 1500 mile journey to that shrine.

To be sure, there are some rough similarities between the 2 climbing areas. Both are granite and both are children of the Ice Age—the last glacier having pulled back from the Squamish Valley a mere 10,000 years ago. Beyond these factors there are some very important differences, however, which run almost entirely in favour of Yosemite. To begin with the Chief is an uncompromisingly massive structure on which jam cracks are very rare and even piton cracks are sparse over large areas. Most of the walls are aid-climbing territory; and although one apron of slabs presents some fine free routes, there is not much for the beginner. Pretty well everything runs 5.7 or better. Then there is the unfortunate matter of bush. Jungles in coastal British Columbia can be as impenetrable as those anywhere in the world, and even granite walls tend to be lush wherever cracks or ledges permit. This cuts into the aesthetics and further restricts rock climbing to areas so steep or smooth that vegetation cannot get started. The Chief's third major problem is weather, which is generally foul. Rain and cloud are common in all seasons and dominate the wintry half of the year. As free climbing is largely on slabs or slabby dihedrals, these routes are impassable when wet. In cold spells, meltwater freezes on the rim of the wall so that ice-falls are not infrequent winter hazards. Other unfortunate Chief characteristics include mosquitoes, moss, periodic high winds and pollution from nearby pulp and lumber mills.

Despite all its drawbacks, however, the Chief is big, granite and accessible; which is enough to ensure it a continuing clientele. Furthermore, objective

THE CHIEF

dangers are few in summer—there has never been a fatal accident (yet). And across the years some fine routes have been worked out.

Although a mere 35 miles from metropolitan Vancouver, Squamish was not served by road until 1958. Thereupon the Chief became by far the most impressive rock wall adjacent to a highway in SW British Columbia, but it was studiously ignored by Vancouver climbers. Ignored is perhaps the wrong word—climbers joined the tourists in considering it an inspiring piece of scenery—but the notion of trying to climb the thing was not seriously entertained. The Vancouver climbing circle was then small, largely European, and oriented to exploratory mountaineering. Unclimbed peaks were still available at weekends, and exploration of the Chief was relegated largely to binocular work as climbing parties drove beneath it en route to new ranges opened by the Squamish Highway. When the gloom of winter closed the higher regions, a few of us wandered along the base of the main walls, observing that they were indeed inhospitable and that the trees grew out of any crack large enough for a finger jam. Fine scenery, but look for yourself—there aren't any holds!

The body of the Chief is split by four immense chasms. Dank, loose and claustrophobic, these granite slots were at least amenable to mountaineering techniques and there was even something intriguingly evil about them. It was to these guts that climbers first turned their attention, the most prominent one (S gully—a particularly loathsome orifice) was ascended by Hank Mather and Jim Archer in 1957 to become the first rock route recorded on the Chief. Ascents of the other gullies followed, all proving thoroughly unaesthetic by rock climbing standards, but off-season novelties in the view of mountaineers.

36 Aerial view of the Chief. This and next photo: D. Culbert

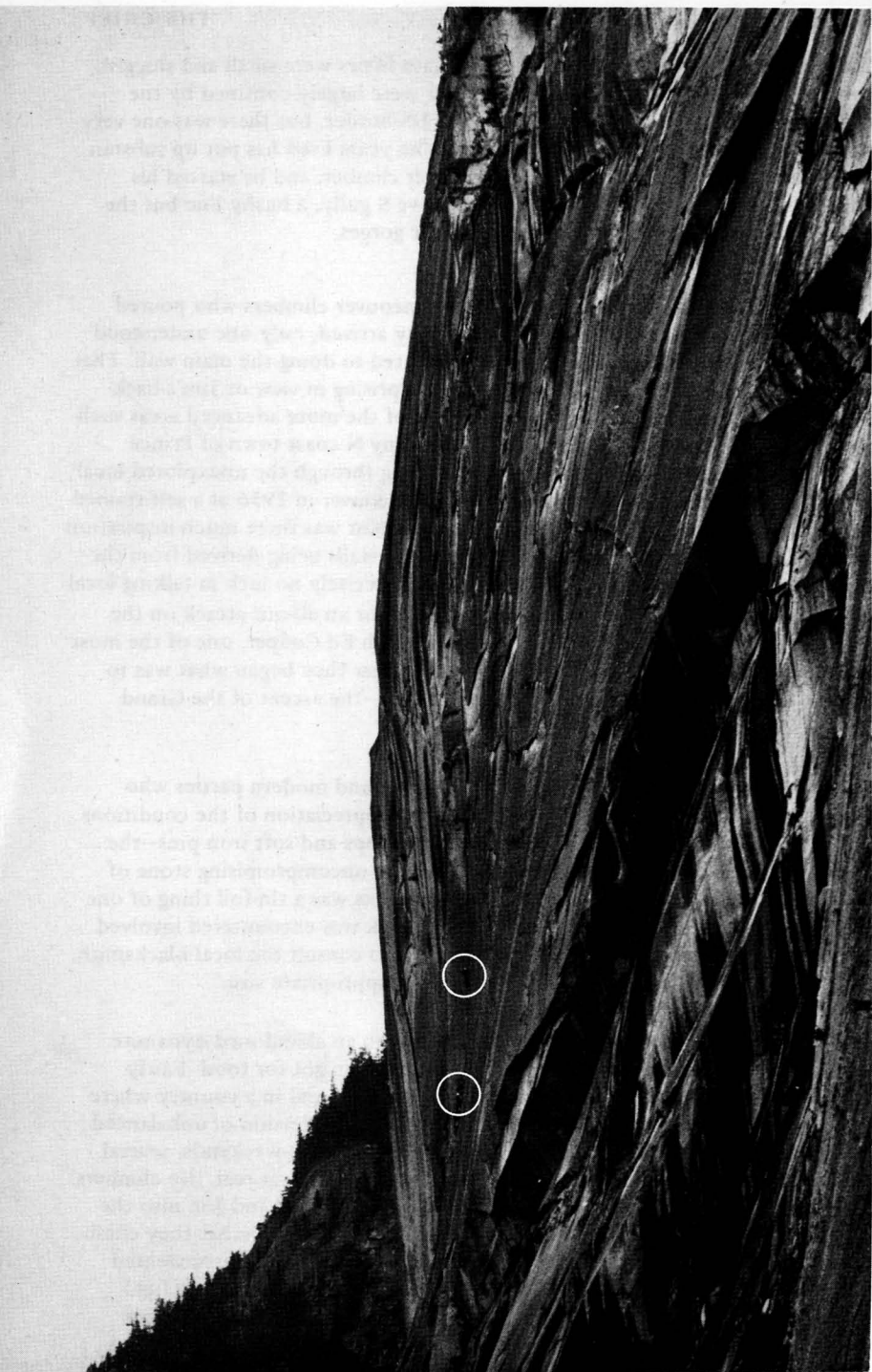


While climbing circles in Vancouver in the late fifties were small and sluggish, those of Seattle were not. Happily the latter were largely confined by the common belief that the world ended at the US border, but there was one very important exception—Fred Beckey. Across the years Fred has put up substantially more routes at Squamish than any other climber, and he started his collection in 1959 with a line up the rim above S gully, a bushy line but the first venture outside the shattered rock of the gorges.

I think it may be fairly said that of all the Vancouver climbers who poured through the Squamish Valley after the highway arrived, only one understood the Chief's potential and became fully committed to doing the main wall. That was Jim Baldwin. This vision is particularly surprising in view of Jim's background. Far from being an apostle from some of the more advanced areas such as California or Europe, he was raised in the rainy N coast town of Prince Rupert, where his only companion in scrambling through the unexplored local ranges was his malamute pup. He arrived in Vancouver in 1956 as a self-trained mountaineer with no rock climbing experience. Nor was there much inspiration available in Vancouver, most of his thirst for big walls being derived from the sparse references in climbing journals. Jim had precisely no luck in talking local climbers into the kind of commitment required for an all-out attack on the Chief's major wall, but in 1961 he teamed up with Ed Cooper, one of the most active climbers in Seattle. In the spring of that year they began what was to be one of the epic sieges in N American climbing—the ascent of the Grand Wall.

Grand Wall was a good 4 years ahead of its time, and modern parties who wander up the resulting bolt ladders have scant appreciation of the conditions of the first ascent. This was the time of prusik loops and soft iron pins—the latter coming off poorly in engagements with the uncompromising stone of Squamish. The largest piton available in these parts was a tin-foil thing of one inch size. The usual technique when a larger crack was encountered involved sizing it up at close range and then going down to consult the local blacksmith, who would pound out some sheet-iron folds of appropriate size.

The siege began with the two participants living in an abandoned dynamite shed at the base and raiding gardens in Squamish at night for food. Fairly soon, however, they were observed by the town folk, and in a country where the population still considered rock climbing a rare perversion of unbalanced individuals in Switzerland, this made front-page news. On weekends, several thousand tourists jammed the highway for their first look at real, live climbers. Squamish merchants were quick on the uptake, moving Ed and Jim into the luxury of free board and meals with the additional suggestion that they climb only at weekends. The good life and necessity of placing an unprecedented 136 bolts assured that the siege would break no speed records. Their final week-long push coincided with the hottest spell of the year, a race against thirst which was amplified by the suspicion that overhangs would not allow rappelling out. (Today there is a bivouac hut on this $1\frac{1}{2}$ day route, and a class IV escape is known for those who do not feel committed to the second day.)



37 *Climbing on the Chief*

In the years following the Grand Wall, Baldwin and Cooper went on to Yosemite, putting up the Dihedral Wall on El Cap in another lengthy siege. Jim Baldwin was killed there somewhat later. The tales brought back from these first real contacts with Yosemite had a profound effect on Chief climbers, who were by then a small but identifiable group. These returning stories cast Californian walls, climbers and standards in Olympian proportions. It was on these rumours and a full-blown inferiority complex that we started grading the routes which proliferated at Squamish in the early and mid-sixties. This mystique was not lifted until the latter part of the decade when Yosemite became a standard pilgrimage for Vancouver climbers, and the Chief was found to have a grading system two decimal points under-rated. This has certainly not helped the Chief's popularity with out-of-town climbers, but the system was so thoroughly entrenched that it is only now that new guide-books with adjusted ratings are being published.

Until the mid-sixties, routes put up at Squamish were largely on the Chief's relatively small apron of slabs or on its satellite bluffs. The main walls were left in peace, in fact Grand Wall was not repeated until 1964. The second part of the decade, however, saw a rapid accumulation of big-wall routes, along with the influx of new techniques and equipment. At Squamish these were put up with siege tactics, not so much due to a lack of commitment as to the convenience of being able to work on a weekend basis. The first guide-book was put out by Glenn Woodsworth in 1967 and by 1970 there were well over 100 routes established in the area.

Squamish had also changed radically by this time. In early bivouacs, climbers looked out over a sprinkling of street lights with dogs barking in the evening and roosters announcing the dawn. Through the mid-sixties it was dogs, drunken loggers and car horns, with a sea of lights which had flowed almost to the foot of the walls. By 1970 the night shifts at the lumber-mills and chemical plants had drowned out all else, and their lights illuminate the S walls with an eerie blue glare.

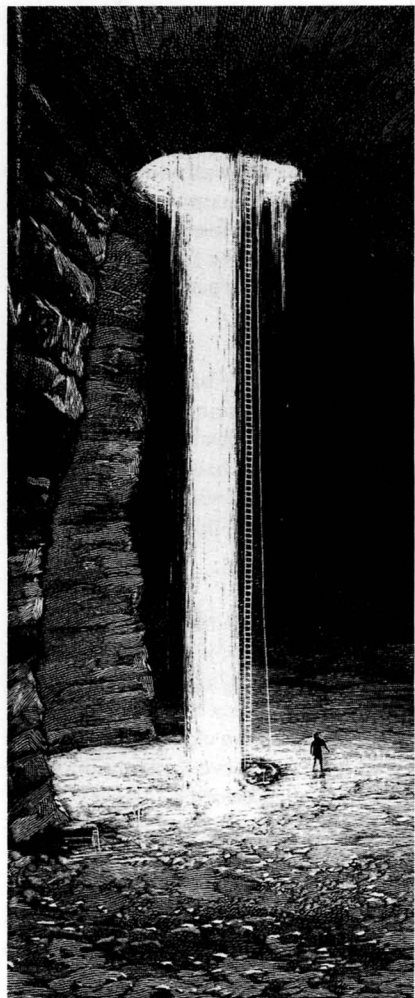
1970 or 71 seems to have been some sort of a climax for Chief activity. By that time the sleeping caves under the boulders at the base were ringed with beer bottles, and it was no longer safe to leave hardware lying about. Many of the cars scattered along the base bore foreign licence plates. Squamish-trained teams had done well on the hardest walls of Yosemite, the exploits of Tim Auger, Gordon Smaill, Neil Bennett, Hugh Burton and Steve Sutton (among others) having gone a long way toward inverting the inferiority complex. But in 1970 the wildest route of all was put up at Squamish, and not by local climbers.

The Black Dyke is a vertical artery of basalt which runs up the entire frontal wall of the Chief. Its passage involves 3 very large roofs and the cracks accompanying this system are erratic and poor. This line was forced by Al Givler and Mead Hargis in a three-weekend winter siege. It is still the most demanding (and dangerous) route at Squamish.

THE CHIEF

Since 1971 there has been a change. Perhaps it is because improving techniques have lessened the commitment necessary to do big walls, that the commitment of climbers to this aspect of the Chief has reduced. The old Squamish clique has largely scattered (some to the higher ranges) and the area is being viewed more as a spring climbing and practice ground than a complete climbing environment. Short, high-standard free routes have become the focus of innovation here as elsewhere, but it remains to be seen to what extent this will maintain the old Chief in the centre of the spotlight.

38 *Gaping Ghyll Main Chamber*



39 *Martell descending Gaping Ghyll*



Both reproduced from 'Irelande et Cavernes Anglaises' by E. A. Martel, 1897