

Slowly we insinuated ourselves into the elegant 'Hotel Roses de Dades' so from camping outside it in the blowing dirt we dined and slept within. Never did skis look so out of place as ours stacked by the tent against the hotel with nothing but desert all round. Only in the north lay the hint of snowy peaks. The next morning they were white-washed with new snow, but that salvo was too late. We were out.

We phoned and arranged for the mini-bus to pick us up at the hotel. Another driver, a surly maniac, took us over the dramatic Tizi n' Tichka pass (nearly 2400m) back to Marrakech, and because the journey was based on mileage we were actually charged *less* than expected. The patisserie and later a gourmet meal in the 'Bagatelle' with lots of *Chaud Soleil* really ended the tour. If it gave little ski-ing for our Eagle selves, the Alpine halves of our beings were fully satisfied. It was the sort of expedition John Ball had made at the start of the game, a hundred years ago; very traditional.

## Sandstone towers of the American south-west desert

Eric Bjørnstad

The American SW desert is a loosely delineated area of the Colorado Plateau. Geographically, it is referred to as a table-land or high desert country and encompasses portions of Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and Utah. The territory is the product of relatively recent geologic activity. Only 50 million years ago the entire region was convulsed by violent movement of the earth's crust, and 12 million years ago, the area uplifted 1200 to 1800m. As a result of this cataclysm, water run-off was extensively accelerated. As the watershed of this ancient bottom evolved, spectacular erosion formed the canyons, cliffs, mesas, buttes and spires, now identified synonymously with the Indians who predominantly inhabit the land. With the exception of scattered small towns settled by the Mormons, the SW desert is an area insulated not only physically but culturally from the general public; few roads are paved, maps are vague, not always reliable, and available literature is often of interest only to the botanist, geologist or Indian historian.

Climbing in the desert has never been popular. The common sentiments have been briefly stated by Yosemite pioneer and desert veteran Chuck Pratt: 'Desert climbs are generally short, often requiring less time than the approaches. The rock at its best is brittle and rotten, and at its worst is the consistency of wet sugar'.

Yet, the desert compels with a type of magical attraction. It is unique, decreeing its particular demands, offering its fulfilling rewards. It is at once alluring and repelling, a harmony of extremes, addicting its trespassers to its treasures.

Temperatures are seldom right; often it is unbearably hot, or unpredictably cold: frequently running the gamut within the few hours before and after dusk and before and after dawn. Only brief days of Spring and Fall offer passable climbing conditions, and then, one's eyes are subject to pain from the sand-filled air. Food is unavoidably gritty. High winds can whip the climbing rope to threads in hours and bring communication to a frustrating halt. Climbers usually know on their first visit whether or not they are likely to return. A successful ascent can require the logistics of an expedition with many of the trials of grand alpinism.



5 Pinnacles of the SW desert (This and next photo: E. Bjørnstad/R. Smutek)

These are the rigours, but there is something else there; the tranquil stillness, the majestic sky and encompassing grandeur, more noble than generally experienced in the mountains. The space is overwhelming, scents and hues a rare delight. Strategy on the friable sandstone is a test of the climber's ability to adjust and readjust to the everchanging elements as he is seldom called upon to do in the high country. Every day holds a distillation of all that is met on a big wall climb.

The inception of mountaineering in this isolated sector of the country was not until the mid-thirties. It was a point in history during which North American climbing was still in its infancy. Although notable ascents had been made throughout the continent, they were accomplished largely without technical knowhow. It was a time when safe rope management, piton protection and multiple day ascents over technical terrain were far behind the evolution of their European counterparts.

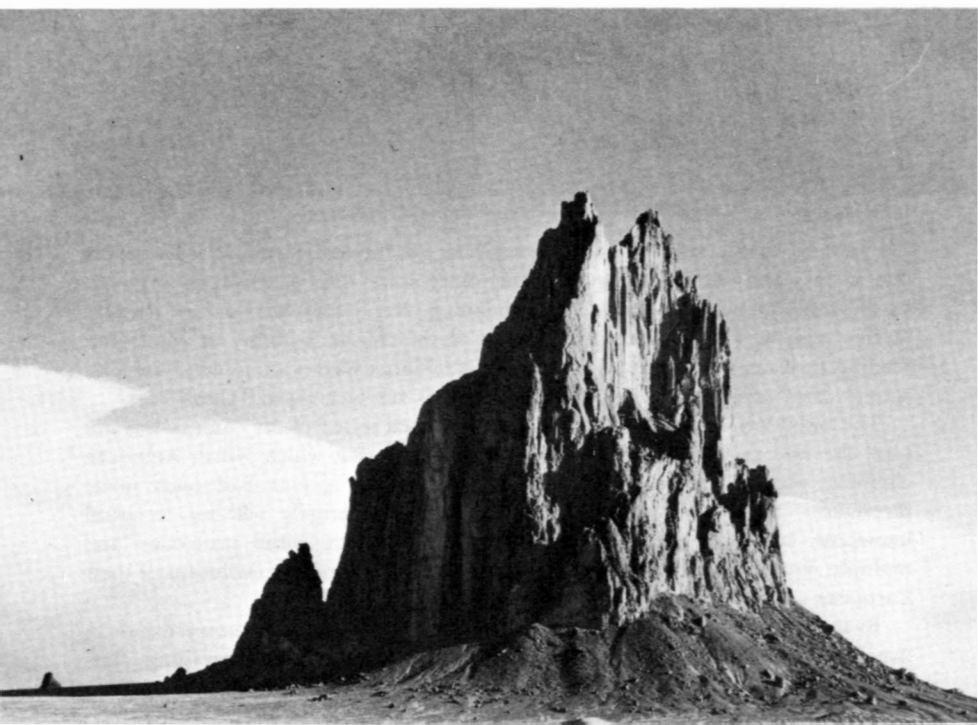
By the first few decades of the 20th Century only a dozen or so mountaineers in America were concerned with technical advancements. The prevailing consciousness of the climbing fraternity was still the Smythe philosophy of purity:

climbing wholly without the decadence of modern technology. Then, as now, reputations were often the fulcrum from which the evolution of climbing either accelerates or stagnates. For the avant-garde, inaccessible summits, the 'unclimbables', were the frontiers from which reputations germinated.

In the thirties, Colorado climbers Robert Ormes, Bill House, Mel Griffiths and Gordon Williams were repeatedly turned back by an 'unclimbable' basalt rib high on Shiprock. This volcanic plug, located near the point where the 4 desert states share a common boundary, was the first attempt to scale a desert monolith. The Colorado climbers' efforts and a dramatic fall taken by Ormes were summarized in the article, 'A piece of bent iron', which appeared in 1937 in the national *Saturday Evening Post* magazine.

By 1939, Shiprock, rising 550m above a flat sea of desert, had accrued 12 failures and was well established as 'America's toughest climbing problem'. Lured by this imposing reputation, California Sierra climbers Raffi Bedayn, Dave Brower, John Dyer and Bestor Robinson journeyed the 1000 and some miles over rough roads into the unknown of the SW desert. They were among the forerunners in rope management and aid climbing on the glacier chiselled walls of Yosemite. To the desert, and N American climbing, they brought the innovation of the expansion bolt. Four days, 4 bolts and a lassoed horn of rock brought the team to the elusive summit of Shiprock, and the threshold of desert mountaineering. Robinson spoke in defence of their modern technology (the bolt), writing: '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.'

#### 6 Shiprock



Agathlan, a Navajo word meaning 'piles of wool', is a volcanic plug like Shiprock and although considerably smaller, it is steep and composed of dangerously loose rock. The first ascent was in 1949 by Kay Garner, Herb Conn and Lee Pedrick (2 years before Shiprock was to be repeated). With the ascent of Agathlan, the 2 major volcanic plugs on the desert had been climbed. They were massive monoliths and not at all spirelike. The known sandstone towers up to this time had been considered despairingly soft and unclimbable.

In 1955, Southern California climbers Don Wilson and Jerry Gallwas made a reconnaissance of Spider Rock in Canyon de Chelly (in the NE corner of Arizona). The following year they returned with Mark Powell and became the first to climb a major sandstone tower in the desert. Spider Rock, rising 240m from its canyon base, is generally accepted as the highest free standing pinnacle on the N American continent. The first ascent involved 5 days of climbing with a minimum of bolts being placed. Prophetically, the party experienced the terror of pitons that could be removed from the soft rock with the fingers and bolt holes that could be drilled in half the time they took to drill on their home walls of Yosemite. It was a grim foreboding of the drama that was to be re-enacted on nearly every sandstone ascent of the future.

The same year, the California team searched out the thin 75m Cleopatra's Needle which lay just over the border of Arizona into New Mexico. It had initially been discovered, together with Spider Rock, from examination of a magazine photo. On the ascent of Cleo the party placed a ladder of aid pitons to within 12m of the top. As they backed down for the evening's bivouac several of the anchors shifted under their weight. The following morning nearly all the pitons required redriving into the soft sandstone. On their final descent many of the pins were removed without the aid of a hammer.

In 1957, Don Wilson, Jerry Gallwas and Mark Powell returned with Bill 'Dolt' Feuerer to attempt the most awe inspiring tower on the desert, the 110m Totem Pole in Monument Valley. The Pole, in the Navajo Tribal Park near the Arizona-Utah border, is considered the most difficult and exposed climb on the desert. By 1957, it had already turned back 2 previous attempts. The Californians spent 4 days fixing ropes up the soft aid cracks, negotiating the final lead via a bolt ladder. The keys to the lower leads were special aluminium channel pitons Bill Feuerer had made for the often-flaring wide crack system. These pitons were the precursor of Yvon Chouinard's wide angle 'bong-bong'. On their descent, high winds blew the climbers halfway around the 9 to 12m thick tower, turning the summit rappel into a nightmare. The Pole was repeated in 1959 by Dave Rearick, TM Herbert and Tom Condon. Spider was ascended in 1960 by Chuck Pratt and Bob Kamps, and Cleo, in 1962 by Steve Roper and Sharon Linder. By 1959, 45 ascents of Shiprock had been made and that year TM Herbert, Dave Rearick, Yvon Chouinard and Bob Kamps made the first free ascent.

Layton Kor, by 1960, had made the third ascent of Spider Rock, Cleopatra's Needle and the Totem Pole. With these difficult and exacting ascents behind him. Kor parted from the tradition of repeating existing climbs and pioneered routes up 5 virgin towers within the following 2 years.

The first pinnacle was 120m Castleton Tower with Huntley Ingalls, 30km E of Moab, Utah. This rather stout shaft was the first desert climb on the relatively harder Wingate formation of sandstone and was done with little direct aid. The following year a Chevrolet automobile and a pretty starlet made the ascent via



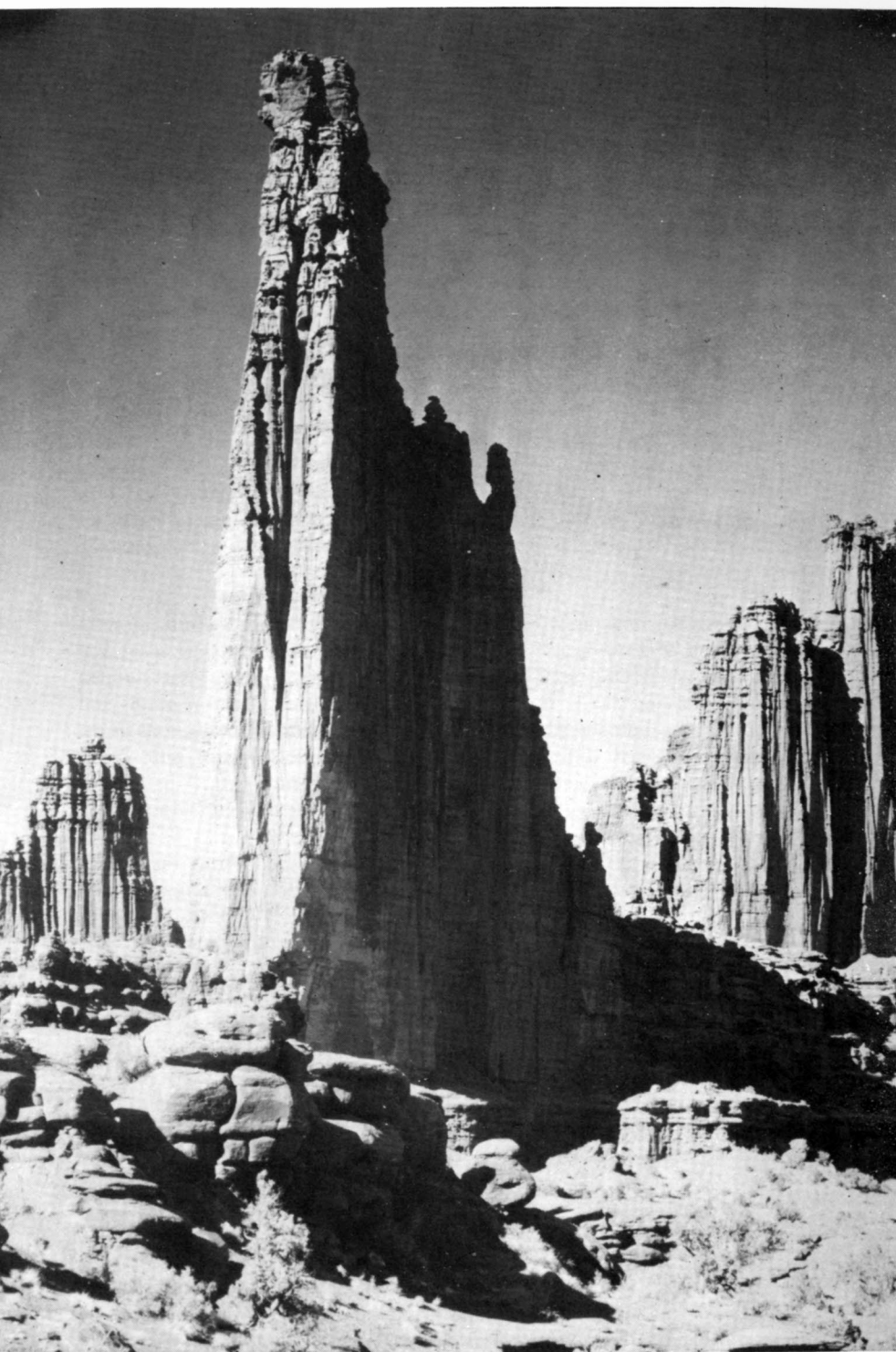
7 Priest and Nuns (This and next photo: E. Cooper)

helicopter for a television advertisement. The second ascent, the sporting way, required no aid, making Castleton Tower the only major tower to date, climbed entirely free. It is the most frequently climbed pinnacle on the desert with 4 routes, of varying difficulty, up its vertical walls, and is the only major tower in the SW that has been free soloed. Castleton is easily reached over paved roads from Moab, Utah.

Next, Kor was joined by Fred Beckey and Harvey T. Carter for the ascent of the Priest, a pinnacle located just N of Castleton. Because the summit block was too decomposed to accept rappel bolts or pitons, the party had to wrap countless yards of nylon webbing around a summit block to establish a safe descent anchor.

In 1962, Kor, Huntley Ingalls and George Hurley climbed the 275m fin-like Titan in the Fisher Towers group a few miles E of Moab. Ingalls described the character of the soft Cutler sandstone formation of the Fisher Towers in a *National Geographic Magazine* article: 'A coating of baked mud covered the buttress. In some places it hung in curtains. Sometimes Kor had to probe the caked mud with a long piton or excavate with his hammer to find a crack, showering dust and small rocks down on me. At times he had to drive a long piton directly into the mud and gingerly trust his weight to it.' The 4 day ascent required 48 bolts.

The same year Kor, Ingalls and Steve Komito made the ascent of 90m Standing Rock in Monument Basin, now part of the Canyonlands National Park in Utah. This tower is referred to as the Totem Pole by the local tour guides. Its composition is the Organ formation of sandstone, extremely loose and brittle. The formation is characterized by a bubbly mud appearance that consists of boulders of varying size overhung by one another, all cemented together with a crusty dried mud.



8 Titan, Fisher Towers

The fifth tower pioneered in the 1960–62 siege by Layton Kor was 75m Venus' Needle, located near Cleopatra's Needle, in New Mexico. It was climbed with Frank Magary in one day.

Other significant ascents in 1962 were 90m North Six-Shooter near Canyonlands National Park by Huntley Ingalls, Steve Komito and Rick Horn; Rick Horn and party also climbed the ungainly looking Washerwoman and Monster Towers in the Canyonlands area.

Dark Angel Spire in the Entrada sandstone, in what is now Arches National Park just N of Moab, Utah, was climbed by Dave Rearick and Bob Kamps. Mexican Hat, near the town of the same name in S Utah, was climbed by Royal Robbins and Jack Turner. Its broad summit block, stranded atop a thin base pillar, required nailing across a 40ft ceiling. Harvey T. Carter and Dick Bird climbed Dragon Tower, and Carter and Steve Miller climbed Hindu Spire, 2 short but demanding pinnacles near the Fisher Group.

The second major ascent on the soft Cutler and Moenkopi walls of the Fisher Towers was accomplished by Harvey T. Carter and Cleve McCarty when they climbed the 215m fin-like King Fisher. The upper layer of rock in the Fisher group (above the Cutler formation) is the loose Moenkopi sandstone. A hundred and nine bolts were placed setting an ignoble record in resolution.

By 1965, perlon ropes, prusik handles, nylon aid slings and runners, hard steel pitons, the Kletterschuhe, the dynamic belay and numerous other sophistications in mountaineering equipment and technique had been added to the sport and were widely accepted. Only brief years before, climbers were wearing boots studded with nails and using Manila ropes, metal runged stirrups, soft iron pitons and double rope aid techniques. The acceptance of these and other innovations in the field opened the way to difficult ascents on the desert as elsewhere. Still, desert climbing remained an esoteric endeavour. The momentum gained in new or repeated desert ascents has to be attributed largely to the enormous increase in general membership to the mountaineering involvement.

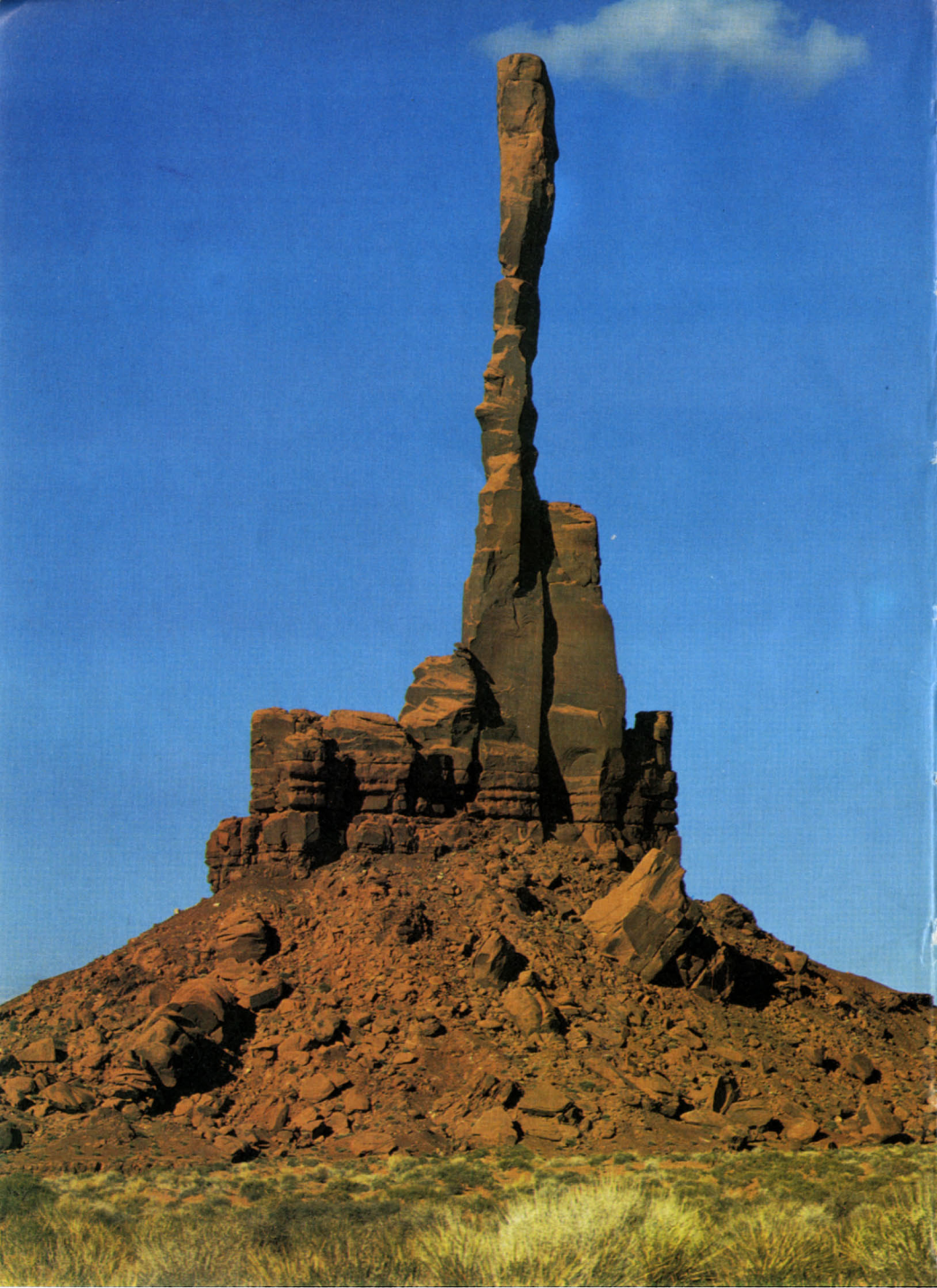
In 1965, Fred Beckey and Eric Bjørnstad, travelling 30 hours from their home town of Seattle, Washington, set up camp beneath the bulwarks of Shiprock's SW buttress. The great monolith had been climbed a hundred times by the 1939 original ascent line, yet no one had ventured on to the miles of walls, columns and chimneys that defended Shiprock's huge bulk from the S, E and N. The possibilities were endless, although none was particularly inviting as easy or safe.

After 20 days, and perhaps two-thirds of the difficulties behind, Bjørnstad was unavoidably called back to his business in Seattle. The gamut of the rigours found on a desert climb had been experienced by the team. One day's upward progress consisted of nailing a bulging chimney too rotten to stem and too soft to bolt; height gained was 12 to 15m after a harrowing 14-hour day. That night the ubiquitous Spring winds gathered velocity, ripping at the Base Camp tent and breaking its central pole. The following day necessitated a journey to the nearest town to find a piece of lumber suitable for an improvised tent pole. The next day, endless hours were absorbed replacing badly frayed ropes and redriving loosened anchors. Again, little additional height was gained. That night the desert froze, bursting water bottles; another sojourn into town. The next morning a 1000lb chock-stone broke loose as Bjørnstad was prusiking over it. Only minor abrasions and a few missed heart beats were experienced in the close call.

On the twenty-first day, the ever resolute Fred Beckey persuaded Seattle



*Spider Rock, Canyon de Chelly (Photo: E. Cooper)*



*Totem Pole, Monument Valley (Photo: E. Cooper)*

architect Alex Bertulis to fly to New Mexico. Beckey advantageously implied to Bertulis that Shiprock's prize summit might be won with a couple of days good effort. The goal was not achieved and Bertulis returned to his forsaken business after a week of frustrated climbing. Desert veteran Harvey T. Carter, from nearby Aspen, Colorado, was then solicited and joined forces with Fred Beckey on the labours on the SW buttress. A couple of days later they gained the hard earned summit. The marathon ascent had absorbed 30 days of struggle on the part of Beckey. With this breakthrough numerous new lines appeared within the following few years.

Harvey T. Carter was the mainstay on desert ascents and notably in the exploration and development of routes on Shiprock. Donald Liska and Eric Bjørnstad, together with Carter, climbed the major satellite towers around Shiprock. The first was the 180m Sextant, the second was the crumbly Sea Anchor Tower. Liska and Bjørnstad also worked with Carter on the first ascent of the W ridge route on Shiprock, but were not able to be present on the final summit push.

In 1965, Harvey Carter, Dave Hiser and Dave Bentley climbed Sister Superior, and Carter with Steve Miller climbed the Convent; both towers are about 75m tall and are located at the N end of the Castleton ridge. Long approaches to these crumbling towers have discouraged most climbers from repeating the ascents.

In the Fall of 1965, Fred Beckey, Eric Bjørnstad and Harvey T. Carter rendezvoused in the Fisher Towers. After 7 days of effort (2 bivouacs), the team reached the summit of 170m Echo Tower, the third summit gained on the soft Cutler and Moenkopi walls of the Fisher group. History repeated itself when Bjørnstad nailed up a badly exfoliated expanding flake on the sixth day of the ascent. He marginally escaped from one piton to the next as 3 pins in succession spun down the belay rope moments after weight had been transferred, each time to the anchor above. Much of the climb involved bolting over flaking bulges that resembled the underneath side of a staircase tilted to the vertical.

Two years after the ascent of Echo Tower, Harvey Carter recruited a battalion of climbers and overcame Cottontail, the last of the giants in the Fisher Towers east of Moab, Utah.

Scattered ascents were made throughout the SW desert in the late sixties as climbers ventured from their homelands seeking to expand their mountaineering experience. Few returned for a second exposure. A dozen or so different pinnacles were climbed by as many different parties. Harvey Carter remained the leading protagonist eliminating the smaller, although exacting, pinnacles in the area of the Fisher group. Carter's biggest climb was the S face ascent of the Titan accomplished with a host of volunteer muscle.

Scattered climbs were made in what is now Arches National Park and Canyonlands National Park near Moab, Utah. Fred Beckey continued to pioneer routes up sandstone towers each Spring and Fall. His best ascents were Owl Rock and King on a Throne in the Monument Valley area of S Utah-N Arizona.

In the early sixties, word was brought back by climbing parties heralding the closure of Navajo lands to climbing. The specific pinnacles mentioned were the Totem Pole and Spider Rock. In the years that followed, ascents on the reservation were made in secret. The threat of penalty was not imminent. On some climbs the natives would gather and watch the ascent with much curiosity. On an early climb of Spider Rock, an Indian even asked the climbers if they would leave a rope behind so that he could repeat the climb.

In 1967, Fred Beckey, Harvey T. Carter, Eric Bjørnstad and Pat Callis climbed the thin Middle Sister of the Three Sister group in the Tribal Park of Monument Valley. Kor had previously ascended the 2 stouter outside Sisters. The descent from the summit of the Middle Sister, reached on the third day, was greeted adversely by the Tribal Park police. A Navajo officer announced that the 'natives were restless'. Anxious moments passed before the team was released and directed to let the climbing world know that future violations of the climbing ban on the reservation would automatically result in a fine and/or jail sentence. Needless to say, after the ascent of the Middle Sister the ban gained a dimension of reality previously not recognized. The reason for the ban was explained by the director of Navajo Parks and Recreation Dept., Mr Sam Day, III: 'Because of the Navajo's traditional fear of death and its aftermath, accidents, especially fatalities, often render the area where they occur as taboo and the location is sometimes henceforth regarded as contaminated by evil spirits and is considered a place to be avoided.'

Eagle Rock Spire is an aesthetic looking leaning tower detached from the Great Eagle Mesa that lies on the Utah-Arizona border. The tower's name is descriptive of the pinnacle's summit icing of eagle guano. In 1970, Fred Beckey and Eric Bjørnstad met in the tiny Navajo hamlet of Kayenta, a few miles S of Monument Valley. With Spring struggling to establish itself, Beckey and Bjørnstad worked for 16 days fixing ropes up the 135m leaning spire. One day ropes were glazed with ice and water bottles froze, the next day wind lashed the ropes and sand blasted bare skin and stung eyes. Four days later the early summer sun shone with ninety-degree intensity reflecting off the red-white walls of the tower. Eagle Rock Spire was the last tower to be climbed that is located beside a major roadway. From its summit Beckey and Bjørnstad could see a thin, lone shaft far to the distant west. After the descent from Eagle Rock a futile effort was made to reach the mystery tower. It was not destined to happen for another 3 years. With the help of Canyonlands guide, Lin Ottinger, and his dune buggy, Eric Bjørnstad was able to put together the combination of sandy trails required to reach the slender 90m Jacob's Ladder. The first ascent was made by Bjørnstad with Fred Beckey and Bob Deglas.

The most unexpected discovery of a sandstone tower was made in 1970 through Canyonlands guide, Lin Ottinger, by Fred Beckey and Eric Bjørnstad. Only 4 air miles from the town of Moab, across the rim-rock in a tiny box canyon stands the 90m Bride. Her ascent, by Beckey, Bjørnstad and Jim Hudock was accomplished the following year. The rock is Kayenta, capped by the unstable Navajo formation.

Perhaps the closest profile to the slender Totem Pole in Monument Valley, is Chinle Spire, named for the sandstone formation of which it is composed. The tower is sequestered in a far corner of the Navajo reservation near Round Rock in N Arizona. Like the Pole, Chinle's central girth is thinner than its summit block, giving both pinnacles the appearance that their downfall might be imminent. These slender shafts of sandstone are unique. They are only 9 to 12m thick yet tower to the incredulous height of a 40-storey skyscraper. They are awesome monuments of nature, carved from soft rock by the slow action of wind, water and frost.

In 1972, Fred Beckey and Eric Bjørnstad made the first ascent of Chinle Spire, the Totem Pole's look-alike. The same year Bjørnstad and Stan Hollister climbed Vanishing Angel in the Moab valley. This pinnacle is formed from the Wingate and topped with soft Chinle sandstone. Hollister zippered 5 of 6 pitons from the unstable rock as he took a 6m fall during the first ascent. He landed beneath an overhang and was not hurt.



9 Moses and Zeus (Photo: E. Bjørnstad/R. Smutek)

In the early seventies the 3 so-called mystery towers, Doric Column, the Citadel and Gothic Nightmare were climbed in a hidden valley beyond the Fisher Tower group. The ascents were done by Bill Forrest, George Hurley and Don Briggs. Ninety metre Pointed Rock was climbed by Steve Chaney, Art Howells and Don Ducette. It is located in an area E of Venus' Needle.

One of the most aesthetic towers on the desert was not discovered by climbers until 1970. That Spring, Fred Beckey, Eric Bjørnstad and Canyonland's guide, Lin Ottinger, flew up the Taylor Valley (65km W of Moab) in a small aircraft over what is now within the E boundaries of Canyonlands National Park. After the air reconnaissance the 180m Moses, like many of the isolated towers on the desert, was reached with a 4-wheel-drive vehicle. The pinnacle was first climbed in 1972 by Fred Beckey, Eric Bjørnstad, Jim Galvin, Thom Nephew and Greg Markov, in 5 days, after an earlier abortive effort by Beckey and Bjørnstad. Two years before, at the time of discovery, Beckey and Bjørnstad made the first ascent of the slender 60m Zeus that accompanies Moses in the secluded Taylor Valley of Canyonlands.

Harvey Carter returned to his favoured Fisher Towers in 1973, bringing recruits from his home town of Aspen, Colorado and established a direttissima up the steep W face of the Titan. The summit was reached by Carter and Lou Dawson. The rest of the party was not able to be present for the final ascent. The 6-day climb required about 40 bolts. The same year Ken Wyrick and Cardo Merrill climbed River Tower a few km NE of the Fishers. South Six-Shooter in the southern Canyonlands area was climbed by 3 different routes. The teams were made up of Mike Gardner and Harvey Miller, Kurt Rasmussen and Harvey Miller, and Muff Chaney, Kurt Rasmussen and John Pease. An ascent had also been pioneered by Frank Trummel, Mike Graber and Hooman Aprin.

The Window Route on Echo Pinnacle, located near the Moab airport, is surely one of the most extraordinary routes on the desert. Established in 1974 by Ken

Wyrick, Terry McKenna and Eric Bjørnstad, the route begins on badly decomposing Organ rock on the tower's E face. Half-way up the monolith an unlikely opening in the rock is found and one is able to walk upright through a roomy wind, rain and frost hewn tunnel to the far W side of the pinnacle. Here the ascent continues up a spectacular split column through which a view to the E of Echo is seen. The upper portion of the climb is over a relatively dense Chinle formation.

The Window Route on Echo Pinnacle (not to be confused with Echo Tower in the Fisher group) has been repeated a number of times and is one of the more popular routes on the desert to date. The pinnacle is located on Bureau of Land Management property and is therefore public domain and not under the restrictions governing the Navajo lands in the S portion of the state.

Other major ascents of 1974 were 110m Candlestick Tower in Canyonlands by Larry Hamilton, James Dunn and Doug Snively, and Bootleg Tower in Day Canyon near Moab by Terry McKenna and Eric Bjørnstad. The northernmost pinnacle in the Valley of the Gods of S Utah was climbed by Bjørnstad and Ron Wiggle. In Utah's southern Canyonlands, N of the expansive man-made Lake Powell, a thin pinnacle is balanced between 2 mesas. This slender obelisk, the Sewing Machine Needle was pioneered on a 2-day siege by Fred Beckey, Eric Bjørnstad, Reid Cundiff and Lou Dawson. The approach to the tower is over a seemingly endless 40km of jarring jeep trail beginning between the Colorado and Dirty Devil Rivers. The summit was reached during an early May snow-storm which reduced visibility to a few feet, stiffened the ropes and very nearly froze the climbers who were clothed for the warmth of the desert's expected temperate Spring. The Sewing Machine Needle is formed of the Rico sandstone.

In 1975, Ken Wyrick and Eric Bjørnstad made the fifth ascent of the Totem Pole in Monument Valley while working on Clint Eastwood's spy thriller movie, *The Eiger Sanction*. The Navajo Tribal Council had given permission to use the Pole in exchange for cleaning the tower of the many shiny anchors left from previous ascents.

It is necessary to respect the climbing ban on Shiprock, Spider, the Totem Pole and the Three Sisters, although the restrictions are more political than religious. However, other pinnacles, outside the Tribal Park, within the reservation continue to be climbed with little threat of discovery. They are generally far isolated from the native's hogan or the highway. Climbing in Canyonlands and Arches National Parks is not regulated except for a few towers that are located near high traffic tourist paths. The Fisher Towers, Castleton and all pinnacles on Bureau of Land Management property are open. This includes the majority of desert towers.

By 1975, virtually every corner of the high desert had been explored by climbers either by foot, with 4-wheel drive, or small aircraft. Dozens of towers remain unclimbed, but they are, with rare exception, pinnacles that are without a useable fracture line and would require the taboo of a bolt ladder the tower's entire length. Others are either fin-like and aesthetically less appealing, or impossibly unstable.

It has been 4 decades since Shiprock's historic ascent introduced mountaineering to the American SW desert. Still, desert climbers number only a couple of dozen. The ascent of a sandstone tower remains a unique climbing experience. It is often a high risk adventure that taxes to the limit one's skill and judgement. It is an endeavour through which the climber realizes an ultimate in communication with the stark beauty of a pristine wilderness.