

WHEN THE LEADER FOLLOWS

By Andy Selters

Photograph of Allen Steck by Andy Selters

Groggy, I open my eyes to a huge dropoff. Yosemite walls fall away into great depths, and far below me the pines and meandering Merced lay quiet. Argh, hard granite presses a deep impression into old joints. Oh yeah, last night. When it was time to bed down I just adjusted my tie-in, flaked down a few coils of rope for padding and curled onto this sloping ramp — no clothes except the T-shirt and pants I climbed in, no water, no food. At least it's not too cold; I've actually slept. And to look over The Valley when no one else is awake and the ditch is a silvery corridor of moonlit stone ...

Yosemite can still feel like a special place.

Wait, what about Steck? He's a pitch below me, at the base of The Narrows, no food or water either! I may be 42 but he's 76! What if he croaks? I'd have to ... that's too intense.

"Allen!"

"Yeah," a creaky response echoes up the chimney.

"How are you doing?"

"Oh, okay."

"It's 1:30."

"Oh, thank God."

Thank God you're an optimist, Allen, and a tough one at that. But why are you up here again, and why do I think it's so cool?

The routes that Allen Steck pioneered from 1949 into the 1970s make him one of the greatest American climbers of all time. Any self-respecting ascensionist with any sense of history would jump at the chance to rope up with him. Yosemite climbers who may have no clue speak his name when they talk about scaling Sentinel Rock. The Steck-Salathé is one of North America's classic routes, rich in chimneys, one of the first big granite walls ever done, in 1950. I first met Allen a few years ago, at a Bishop celebration of his 70th birthday. He still climbs often, and now when he comes over to the Eastside he usually

gives me a call. A few years ago, he had a heart arrhythmia incident, so he climbs with a monitor around his chest. When it tachs at over 100 for very long he has to hang out for a bit, but he does amazingly well, up to some 5.10. After one good day, he baited a hook.

"You know, it's coming up to the 50th anniversary of the S-S."

"Are you thinking about doing it?" I nibbled.

"Would you be interested?" he set the hook.

I looked at the guidebook and swallowed the sinker: The schema showed nothing harder than 5.9. It's been years since I'd

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done serious chimneys, but I couldn't remember the last time I had trouble on 5.9. A 15-pitch wall would be a substantial challenge for him, but if Allen says he's ready, I'm ready. Most important is that he knows his limits, and he has a good time. I jumped up proud to lead all the pitches, and haul a little sack with a lunch, a gallon of water and two sweaters.

Now we're stuck for the night, 600 feet from the top, and I'm thinking that climbing the chimneys on this route are like bench-pressing a Land Cruiser. Five-nine my ass. People had warned me. Doug Robinson said, "I wouldn't go up there again unless I was in really good shape."

Then Peter Croft: "It's not as technical as Astroman [the ultra-

hard, modern Yosemite classic], but it's probably just as strenuous. At least."

My struggles started just twenty feet up the first pitch, at a bulge that took me several tries and a desperate clutch. With four previous ascents of the route, Steck came up easily, taking an unobvious, easier variation that would have been scary to lead. The next pitches were easier. There a guy caught up and passed us, climbing alone and without a rope, saying it was his first time to solo the route. Said his name was Cedar, and that he'd met Allen in Joshua Tree a couple of years before. He sailed past us, making me feel like Allen deserved a better partner.

Our updated schema said that

pitch four, the Wilson Overhang, now is 5.10b, due to broken holds. I found that section easy, and Allen also pulled through with only one pause. At that point I figured the rest of the climb would go smoothly.

The very next pitch, however, put me back in school. It looked like a wide, difficult crack, but I reminded myself of the thousand 5.9's I'd done and knew that things would appear. I wedged into the slot, put in a piece, and nothing appeared. I reached and pressed and gripped and gained an inch. Why didn't Allen tell me about this? I pumped and thrutched some more and fell back that inch. It was like wrestling a whale. Just then another guy came up. Watching him move toward us with no rope and so much air below was like watching a technician working on a live bomb. But he looked equally amazed to see a man up here with a mane of white hair and liver spots. I asked him what he knew about the "5.8 no pro" lieback variation to the right. He said he'd give it a try. He pulled up it, admitted it was scary but not too hard, and scampered on. I immediately went that way.

When Allen followed, he said he'd never gone that way before. "Well how did you guys do that wide thing?"

"We used aid. I've never been able to free that pitch."

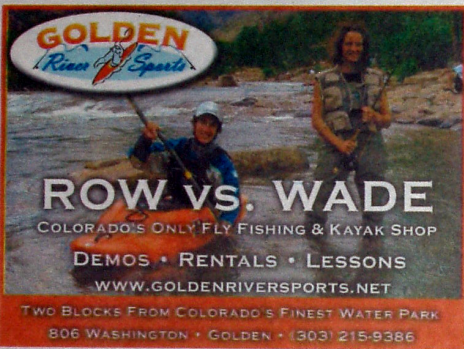
When Allen and John Salathé first did this route, there was no such thing as five-anything. You

climbed features, not numbers. Free or aid, you did what the rock called for. Allen was a primary force in America's second generation of technical climbers. He and people like Fred Beckey and Warren Harding were just taking new heart with innovations like Vibram-soled rock shoes and nylon ropes — still braided like twine and attached with a simple bowline around the waist. They also had bolts and Salathé's pitons made from Ford axles, but nothing wider than a 3/4-inch angle. The year before Sentinel, Allen had gone to Europe and given the war-weary Austrians one of their first views of a nylon rope. He and an Austrian partner used it to climb the multiple overhangs on the north face of the Cima Grande. That was the first time an American had climbed a major Alpine face. Back home, Sentinel Rock was the biggest technical climb on anyone's agenda. A bunch of teams, some including Allen, had started up it and even spent a night, but all of them turned back exhausted, never reaching higher than the top of the Flying Buttress.

Now, after a couple of pitches more, he and I were on top of that Buttress, halfway up the wall and ready for lunch. We tucked into cool shade to suck down some tinned oysters. I looked up and saw a trail of bolt hangers swinging in the breeze.

"That's not the way we go, is it?"

"No, those are John's bolts. He



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aided up that headwall, and then we worked left."

I looked down to an obvious cleft, vertical and wide, that started below us and continued up past the junction with Salathe's original lead. "And now we go down to there?"

"Yes," he said, between some of his deep, deliberate gasps, which sound like an old locomotive winding up. That's how he recovers after hard sections, and the noise was kind of alarming until I got used to it. Sometimes too, when he clears his throat, he grinds out a loud, disturbing roar.

Back on the move, in that cleft I had to reach deep in for rattly fist jams, wedge my feet and tensely reach up again. The slot just kept on going, for two pitches. On both of them I was pleased to place our 5-inch-wide camming unit, but after a while I had to quit thinking about how far I would fall before it caught me. When Allen finished the second pitch I asked him, "How for Chrissakes did you guys back then protect that pitch?"

"I don't know how we protected that," he said, without much interest in my question. I may be fascinated with a tour through history, but Allen is just focused on here and now. After a few locomotive breaths, though, he adds, "We couldn't have protected that, it must have been terrifying."

I think it was that section that put them past the temptation of retreat and into the lofty air of commitment, because from there the upper chimneys look like a pretty accessible avenue to the top. But there was still the face pitch. Although I found this not well protected, with sticky shoes it felt quite reasonable, tippy-toeing on small edges and nubbins. Fifty years before, Allen had unearthed the way up in his glorified hiking shoes, finding a slit for just one pylon on the way, where now there's a bolt.

He told me, "They think that that pitch is where [the famous soloist Derek] Hersey came off."

"Because of ...?"

"Where they found the body."

Then we started the real chimney pitches. The first one was insecure, no real hope for protection, but not as strenuous as I feared. The subconscious mystery of flaring chimney technique began to find its way into me. Allen came up smoothly, albeit with three rest hangs. Above loomed The Notorious Narrows. I figured I was ready. What a joke.

You walk a ledge into the wall's deepest, darkest bowel. The only way up then is a vertical chute that starts as a perfect foot-to-butt span, but a roof quickly cuts it off to the width of an adult human head. I chimneyed up and poked my skull up into the slot, facing left, and realized that I would be looking that way for some time to come. I inched higher, bringing up my neck, shoulders and then an

arm into the casing. When my upper body was wedged up as far as possible, I guessed I was supposed to just cut my feet loose and somehow monkey myself upward. I cut loose, pushed and grunted and whimpered with my feet cycling in mid-air, got nowhere and gave up, and desperately pawed my way back down.

"How on earth do you do this?" I wanted to not do it. I walked back out to the open wall and saw a bolt hanger. "Can you go out there?"

"Those are John's bolts. He drilled and aided out on the face."

"So you guys didn't climb up through The Narrows here?"

"No, we couldn't conceive of it."

"Who was the first to do it?"

"Who knows? Maybe Robbins."


Allen was not inclined to humor my desire for another way. "Probably no one has been out to those bolts since John and I. I doubt you could trust them any more."

I sighed and started back up. With the pressure of evening approaching, I inched back up into the black shaft, fighting off fatigue and my instincts to avoid entrapments. I thrutched THRASHED and wrenched and strained and almost puked before I finally figured out to somehow throw my left leg up into the slot, and get enough added push until my hips were in. That move was far harder than any 5.10 I've ever done. Finally I was wedged like a moth in a doorjamb, and the thrutching action eased from absolutely absurd to utterly unreasonable. I wriggled and pressed and squirmed, praying for any undulation and thinking of all the legendary climbers who had slithered in sweat between these same walls. When I emerged into the open sky, it felt like a rite of passage.

But that's where Allen ran out of gas. He tried to prusik up the rope while I tried pulling; he tried struggling while I tried pulling with prusiks. He was just too tired. Meanwhile I hauled the sack, and of course it got stuck. After several tries and rest breaks, the sun went down, so here we are, 120 feet apart and with our water, snacks and my sweater wedged between us, innacessible.

Wear-hour cold is coming on now, and so I jump around for a bit before slumping back down onto my nest of rope. I imagine how bold Allen and John were to be up here in 1950: peering from their lug-soled shoes up into hope but unable to know what was next, tied in with a simple loop around the waist and armed with just a rack of improvised iron. It's easy to add up what they lacked: topo descriptions, cams, sticky shoes, chalk, quickdraw runners, alloy carabiners and comfy harnesses. It's much harder to measure the things that they had

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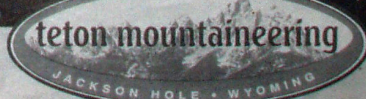
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instead: tenacity, optimism, ingenuity, determination and a desire to test the unknown, all at a level that's probably just as rare today.

Now, 50 years later, we're again not so sure what will happen. If Allen can't get up The Narrows, I guess we'll have to rappel — a long way down, no fun, or worse. It starts to dawn on me that Allen is not a piece of history, he's my climbing partner. This 21st century enterprise demands pushing our potential here and now. He doesn't want to make any statements, he doesn't care if it's unusual or not for a 76-year old to climb this route, he just wants to do it.

When dawn finally comes, I call down again.

"Hey Allen!"

"Yeah?"

"Ready to get going?"

"Wait a little longer."

Measured expenditures of energy, that's what growing older requires. When I watch Allen climb, I see someone moving not very fast, but never with any doubt. Pausing does not mean losing concentration. He's got a very keen sense of what he's capable of and at what pace. I wonder what the AARP would think of him. They'd probably deny that he exists. They wouldn't want to threaten their members with apoplexy or with the thought that old age might not be an excuse.

When he's ready, I apply some extra winching from above, and with that help Allen is able to worm through The Narrows. He arrives.

Between gasps, he says, "I had no idea how we were going to get me out of there. Last night I was thinking, 'maybe I'll just croak, and then Andy will have to figure it out on his own.'"

We tear into the sack, and assess our water supply; almost a quart left, out of four at the start. "How much water did you and Salathé bring?" I ask:

"Two quarts each."

Multiplying that by the days on the route, I offer, "So, like 4 or 5 gallons total?"

"No, two quarts each, total. We started with a gallon, same as



Andy Sellers Photo of Sentinel Rock

here."

"And you spent five days up here?"

"Yes, and it was over 100 on the Valley floor."

They had a tenacity that make my struggles look like a tanning session. "And Salathé was how old?"

"He was 51."

"Good thing this route stays in the shade."

"Yes. We were so dry. The only food he brought was this big can of dates. He was a complete vegetarian. He was always telling me, 'Allen, it's because you shouldn't eat meat!' Allen chuckles in a mimic of Salathé's Swiss

give out. I stuff in a couple of cams on the way, and then grab a thank-god hold that gets me up into some manzanita.

I watch Allen follow and he doesn't struggle or go fast, he doesn't have that option. He just keeps his erect poise, moving as if on a ladder, puffing like a train before taking a short rest on the rope. He reaches the manzanita and recalls, "John and I had to aid that."

There's still more up to go. It looks easy, but after so many schoolings, I'm mistrustful, and there's a couple of options. Allen doesn't offer direction, he just sets up his belay. The whole route he's not offered much advice, as if he doesn't want to interfere with my first experience with this climb.

I think Allen has been like that all his career, letting things speak for themselves. His journal accounts are great trip narratives, but he's never published any Word According To Steck, never strayed into pontification, probably never thought about what space he occupies in the pantheon. Others with his list of achievements would have succumbed. Castle Rock Spire, Waddington new route and first winter ascent, the first Grand (Teton) Traverse, new routes on Angel Wings, El Capitan, Clyde Minaret and a bunch of other Sierra classics, not to mention big things in Asia like Pajju and Celestial Peak. But biggest of all, and, arguably the grandest route in the hemisphere, was Mt. Logan's Hummingbird Ridge, 1965. A six-week epic of high-wire comices and crumbly headwalls, infinitely intimidating and collected into one of the biggest sweeps of mountain architecture in the world. Talk to him awhile, and you'll hear anecdotes from many other adventures: the first attempt on Makalu's southwest ridge, climbs in Turkey and Greece, and the most obscure one near the top of his personal list, 80 days of hiking and climbing on a traverse of the whole Grand Canyon, with his brother George. Off-mountain, he started *Ascent* magazine and America's first international guide-

accent.

There's two more chimney pitches waiting, and for two old men suffering from rigor bivouacs we get up them okay. The second one ends at a mossy alcove, it looks off-route. When Allen arrives, he affirms the way though, saying, "This is where John and I spent our last night."

"Doesn't look too comfortable. You guys must have been desperate. Where do we go now?"

"Up those cracks."

To my dismay, beyond that waits yet another vertical head-wall. At least it's got a hand crack, not a chimney. I start up it trying to climb fast before my tired arms



ing company, Mountain Travel. All in all, without banging a drum, he's opened a vast network of avenues for Americans to go higher.

At a campfire circle just last year, a campmat suggested that he write a memoir. Allen shrugged off the idea with mild disinterest. But moments later someone mentioned Africa, and he lit up. "Morocco, yes! I'd love to climb in Morocco!" Right there, that's the Word From Steck: get Out There; this world has endless wonders. Look at the earth and you'll always see a possibility for doing a bit more than what you're supposed to be able to do, and so go do your damndest to pull it off. It starts with inspiration, follows it, and ends when you're back down. Simple as that. The core is too important to be distracted, and the afterward of good rest, good food and wine, good company and good stories feels like meaning.

As I watch him complete the last slabs on Sentinel, far beyond all notions of what senior citizenship is all about, Allen is still not distracted by any grand anything, he's just got a few more moves before we can start down. When he arrives I shake his hand, and start coiling the rope. My body aches, like a Land Cruiser has run over me; he must be wasted. But he takes the lead for the start down, through bushes and

around some little towers.

"When John and I got here, we were absolutely insane for water. John was sure he'd find some closer springs by traversing." Pointing upward toward Glacier Point, Allen says, "He just started wandering up, and around those slopes and buttresses, and I finally met him at the stream way down there."

"Hey, wasn't it just a few days later that you headed up to Waddington?"

"Yes, maybe not quite a week later."

I follow him into the descent gully, and a funny notion comes up. I think I understand now what's so cool about what Allen's done, and the way he's done it. I may have struggled, but his determination to face his greater challenge gave me extra push. Though I led all the pitches, and though he didn't point me anywhere unless I asked, it was he who's been in the lead the whole way, and in a way that neither one of us could even notice. That's the singing fact of climbing with someone who put up the route 50 years before.

Andy Selters is the author of "Ways to the Sky: A Historical Guide to Mountaineering in North America." This is his first story for the Gazette. He lives in Bishop, California.

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