

Ice Climbing in Clear Creek Canyon

A climbing trip report by Glenn Murray

SUMMARY: I climb ice with Sean in Clear Creek Canyon, Sunday, Jan.23, 1995. We encounter difficulties and women.

I originally worried that moving to Golden from Fort Collins would be akin to climbing banishment—nothing but sport climbs or commuting to Boulder. Soon after moving here, though, a new climbing shop opened up, and I went in to ask about local climbing. The guys there told me there was ice nearby, in Clear Creek Canyon. I was dubious. This is, after all, a dry state. One day I took my girlfriend Michelle on a Sunday drive up the canyon, and, lo, there it was, ten minutes from Golden, a frozen white cascade pouring down the mountain. Four pitches? Five? It was time to find a partner. The only ice climber I knew in Denver was a friend of Michelle's whom I had never climbed with. Sean had a new job and a new baby, and hadn't been climbing in years. I began working on him over Christmas, calling on sunny days, when ice climbing would seem like a distant dream.

'There's a lot of ice.'

'Really.'

'Yes. Ten minutes drive, five minute approach.'

'Really?'

Over the sound of a baby crying in the background I began to detect a wistful note in his voice. One day I went up and soloed a nearby bulge, practiced traversing, played with my new Spectre, cut a bollard and rapped down.

'The ice is thick.'

'It's been too warm.'

Last week it cooled off, and I called Sunday morning at about ten. Sun, weakened by Denver pollution, poured through the miniblinds. Michelle had told me that Sean's wife Cindy was ready for Sean to get out a bit. It was time to close this deal.

'Say, Sean, you want to go climbing?'

'I don't know, I've made plans already.'

'Too bad, it's really nice out.'

Pause.

'I was just thinking of a short day. It wouldn't be long.'

I hear his wife saying something in the background. Sean says he'll call back in an hour or so. Fifteen minutes later 'Let's go climbing' is in my ear. Quick plans are made: he has to go by work to pick up his Gore-Tex pants—he leaves them there for cleaning out giant vats—and I need to start some bread. We meet at my house in Golden and leave at one o'clock. At one-fifteen we're parked, and at one-twenty we're at the base.

'This is the first time we've climbed together, eh Sean?'

'Yeah.'

'So what are all these little metal thingies?'

Sean pulls on his boots. He has great boots, massive leather Kastingers with wooden insoles, which he shows off to me. I've got woolen knickers truncated from German army surplus pants. He's got homemade Gore-Tex pants. I've got homemade wrist leashes. Between us, if we tried, we could probably be totally cool. It's about forty degrees, but the ice is cold, brittle, and I wade through chunks of dinner plate to the start.

As usual, the ice is much steeper than when I when I was looking at it. Enough people have whacked holes into it so that I could hook all the way up, but I feel insecure, put in a screw, and bash away. Twenty feet up I pull the bulge and stand up on the first platform. I'm alone, now, and beginning not to hear the cars on the road across Clear Creek. The second step is shorter, fifteen feet, but the ice is more rotten. I put in another screw, but awkwardly. From below, the third step had looked trivial, but since then it has grown to ten vertical feet. I put in a third screw and hook up to level ice near a small tree. I find a #3 Camalot placement, pound in a Snarg, and loop the tree. A boulder makes a nice seat to watch the tour busses rushing gamblers to certain loss in Central City. Sean slips on the rotten ice on the second step, but he's light, and I hardly feel him; he begins concentrating and moving better. When he gets to the top he compliments me on the lead, but I'm a little embarrassed because I've dropped a biner and my footwork felt sloppy. Up the gully I can see a big hollow Swiss cheese curtain.

Sean leads up a short bulge to dirt and boulders, and belays from a single laughable Camalot. I laugh at it.

'You weren't going anywhere,' he says. This is true. We walk up to the curtain and have a look. It's immediately apparent that this section is harder—probably too hard, maybe WI6 on the left to WI5 on the right. I really don't know what these numbers mean, though.

'It's my first leading of the season.'

'We could go around and top rope it.'

‘It’s awfully thin.’

‘I’m not going to lead it.’

‘From over here it’s even thinner.’

‘The left side is for Duncan.’

On the right side steep ice leads to a ledge before the final bulge. Three columns of ice reach to the top from the ledge. From the left, the first is about eight inches thick and lies close to the rock, if not on it. The second, four feet away, is bigger, a foot to two feet thick, but freestanding and beat up. The third is big, five or six feet wide, but crumbly looking and overhanging at the top. This column continues down below the ledge, but looks shaky.

I put on a rack of four screws and start up while Sean hides under a ledge. I get up ten feet, side pull, and look around. The ice doesn’t look solid enough to hit often, but I try anyway. Every blow brings down big chunks of ice. I tire, and leaning off the side pull, laboriously crank in a short thin screw, but about two thirds of the way in starts spinning freely: it has reached air. Feeling like I am about to reach air and a lot of it, I look around for another placement and start another screw. The full length cranks in hard, and I feel better. I start hooking and move up until the screw is at my knees. My tools are hooked loosely in thin pockets a couple feet from the ledge below the thin columns, and I know my crampons are about to reach the rotten ice. I also know I’m reaching a strength limit. I remind myself that this is supposed to be an easy afternoon out, and reluctantly downclimb. While I stand at the bottom a watermelon sized chunk spontaneously leaps off and slides past my feet.

We untie and leave the rope to hike around to view the top. The section with the columns looks bad, and I decide not to do it today. Since it is getting darker, we decide to head down. I tie in again to retrieve the screw, and refreshed, reach it easily. I start up again, regain my high point, and then one move higher. My tools are hooked deeply just under the ledge and I know that it would be easy to pull up on to the ledge and escape to dirt on the right—but what’s the point? I’ve decided not to try the columns today. I go back down, pull the screw, climb down, and swear a bit. About this time I remember that I own a Spectre, but the momentum is all downhill now and we are ready to enjoy a fine day.

On the way back we stop and pick up my carabiner. Sean points out some rock climbs he’s done on the nearby walls, and suggests a 5.12 in my plastic boots. I assure him that the boots would make no difference whatsoever. He’s a much better rock climber than I. Back at his bug we heave off the

packs and begin unlacing.

Coming down from the casinos, a new red car pulls to a sudden stop beside us and the window slides down. Two young women stare at us. The driver leans over and asks Sean if we want to share some dope with them. I shake my head in disbelief.

‘Whatcha doin’?’ the passenger asks. She’s small, with dark hair and red lips. Her gaze wavers a bit.

‘We just got off the ice,’ Sean said.

‘You’ve been ice skating?’

‘No, ice climbing.’

She gawks at us. It’s apparent she’s very drunk.

‘You sure you don’t want to smoke with us?’

‘Yeah. That’s okay. You drive carefully.’

The driver holds a lighter to a Coke can she’s fashioned into a pipe, and then pulls away, leaving a slight acrid smell in the air. We laugh.

The vats that Sean cleans while wearing his Gore-Tex pants are used to make beer. Sean is brewmaster at a brewpub, and he’s brought a half-gallon of his latest in a glass jug. It’s dark brown, and very fine indeed.

‘You know, if we had been two young single climbers, those girls would have made our day.’

‘Yeah.’

It’s a warm thought. The beer is wonderful.