

Here is an unabridged version featured in the "Native Stones" column (pages 30-33) of the Canadian climbing periodical, Grippled Magazine Vol.6 #6. December 2004.

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Picks and Spurs - Incredible Ice in the Wild West

The early 1990s was a "golden" era for ice climbers. The gear was improving, the magazines and video producers were interested, and many areas hadn't seen a new route flurry for almost a decade. Hanging at Rampart Creek Hostel, leisurely bagging first ascents, impressing visitors from around the world; no one thought they had it better than we did in the Canadian Rockies. Then, in February 1993, I met Bill Pelander and Nancy Prichard at the base of the *Weeping Wall*. The duo were on an extended climbing trip where their previous stop was the South Fork of the Shoshone River near a conservative, ranching town in northeastern Wyoming called Cody - named for an old west entertainer who's biggest claim is the extraordinary number of Bison he killed. Pelander declared, "There are dozens of *Polar Circus*-sized routes stacked up and down the valley." And to add insult to my incredulity, Bill added, "And there is no snow on the approaches and little avalanche hazard." Sounding too great to be true and certain I was already in the center of the universe, I more-or-less discounted what he was telling me.

Two years later, in 1995, I made my first journey to the land of Buffalo Bill Cody. Taking over a bunk house at the "Six Shooter Motel" with Guy Lacelle, David Burger, Mark Twight, Scott Backes and others, we unwittingly started an annual ice climbing get-together that would eventually become known as "The Gathering," attracting professional photographers and endless "wish I was there" spray on the internet. Although we learned during that trip we had long missed out on the best of the reliable, new routes, our enthusiasm for this area with demanding approaches, long and sustained pitches, and little snow was firmly planted in our consciousness as one of the few venues worthy of road tripping away from the Canadian Rockies. Indeed, the South Fork valley is the most concentrated area for ice climbing in the lower 48 states. On any given year there will be over 150 pitches of ice within a ten mile stretch of road. During a banner season, that total will double.

With winter tides turning toward mixed climbing, the South Fork has been somewhat overlooked in recent years. The porous volcanic rock that contributes to the abundant water seepage is best described as "kitty litter" with only a few rare cliffs offering consistent, high quality mixed. Cody is truly a land of hard water ice. Cursed with a lack of detailed beta and obscure winding canyons that conceal many pillars from view; the area has remained the haunt for only the most dedicated and "insider" ice fiends - until now. A new guide book called *Winter Dance. Select Ice Climbs in Southern Montana & Northern Wyoming*, offers in-depth route descriptions and a record of first ascents here-to-fore undocumented.

Being over 7 hours from a major population base like Boulder or Salt Lake City, the collective knowledge of the area has been rather austere when compared to Hyalite Canyon or Colorado with their extensive written histories reaching back to the dawn of modern ice climbing in the early 1970s. With a chronology no less rich, interesting, or important, the South Fork history as presented here is a mere baseline for a colorful story of exploration and discovery in what remains as one of the continent's most wild and scenic climbing destinations.

One of the best stories of Cody's early ice history is the one that never happened. In 1982 Mark Twight moved to Cody in one of his early "escapes" to somewhere new. Staying with local Kirt Cozzens until he could find a job, they began driving around looking for ice when the weather precluded rock climbing. They eventually headed up the South Fork and ended up on Carter Mountain, a nearby subsidiary area that is home to a handful of small, early season drips. After bagging a few underwhelming pitches, and digging out of snowdrifts, they headed home in the dark. For a reason that Mark, to this day, fails to understand or forgive himself for; they never bothered to go back and drive a few more miles up the main road. Had he seen then the concentration of waterfalls that awaited Mark claims, "My life would have changed forever." Imagine the future Dr. Doom donning tightfit Wranglers and living a happy, bucolic life as the original "Cowboy Climber," while enjoying the 5+ month ice season in Cody.

By the mid 1980s, however, it was Kirt's younger brother Todd who had picked up the torch along the South Fork. His early routes *Joy After Pain*, *Mean Green*, *Broken Hearts*, *The Main Vein*, and *High on Boulder* remain the most sought after climbs in the valley. Although Todd lived off and on in a variety of climbing hot beds like Boulder, Salt Lake, Bozeman, and traveled as wide as Alaska, his name is forever synonymous with the South Fork, where no other individual has spent more time, nor walked more miles of inclined kitty litter. Over the next two decades, Todd Cozzens would be the first on well over half the pitches now established in the main South Fork valley.

After years of mentoring partners and dragging any willing soul up the newest South Fork standard, Todd decided he needed a little help to fill in gaps. Started in 1989, Todd's now defunct, "Ice Fest" remains an unique event. By invitation only, its express goal was new routes and filling in the blanks on Todd's now legendary hand-sketched map. The first two should have been called "Freeze Fest" as they were based out of wall tents at the Deer Creek Campground. In January 1991, they managed to upgrade accommodations into a bunkhouse at one of the valley ranches but an extended arctic front restricted any outdoor activity to a crawl. The fourth event finally found a stride and hit the banner 1991/92 season resulting in four very productive days with all the major established routes getting climbed along with first ascents of classics like *Classroom Bully*, *Festoring Ice*, and the appropriately named *Ice Fest*. Although almost a quarter of the currently established routes in the South Fork were established in that single season, and

the prospects for future route carnage looked bright, it would be the final Ice Fest. Jeff Cristol, a veteran of the Colorado scene and Todd's partner on many routes now considered classics, recalls, "The Ice Fests were as much a party as serious climbing. I think that's what probably ended up getting all us climbers 86ed from the local cabins once we'd been caught smoking pot."

In 1994, Todd published his fold out Map with a rough sketch of the valley on one side and just enough beta on the other to get you into trouble. When asked about his Map today Todd laughs, "I wanted to help people get around while protecting unexplored areas for our own first ascents." Since there was little outside pressure to snag routes, Todd and other active locals Ric Miller, Pat Mees, and Jim Montgomery could wait for the routes to be in relatively easy shape. Combined with these guys not realizing exactly how good their climbing really was, the South Fork has long been known for its serious sandbags. As the saying goes, "If you can climb well in the South Fork; you can climb well anywhere."

On the list of South Fork pioneers, only one other name stands next to Todd - Stan Price. Another Wyoming native from the small oil towns of central Wyoming, Stan cut his climbing teeth in the late 1970s with Alex Lowe. We all know Alex would go on to become one of the most celebrated alpinists of all time yet Stan, although unknown, has been considered by many to be equally as talented.

With ice climbing being the ephemerally crap shoot that it is, Stan, perhaps more than anyone, has been in the right place at the right time to score all of the hardest pure ice pitches yet climbed in the South Fork. Climbing frequently with Jim Krudener, Matt Bergman, Claus Shock and others, their *Long Neck Bottle*, *Side Show Attraction*, and *Only the Paranoid Survive* have never been seen twice and rival any test piece in Canada. Other rare, yet top shelf, pillars include *No Bragging Rights* (on which he took a huge leader fall), *Bitches Brew*, *Illogicile*, and the daunting 6th and 7th pitches of *Broken Hearts*.

In a relatively confined area like the South Fork, and with few climbers, one would assume the key activists pretty much know each other and would join forces to clean up. Yet Stan and Todd were each actively climbing up and down the valley for years before they ever met. Standing in line at the local McDonald's in 1990, they looked at each other, knowing there were few local activities requiring the clothing they were wearing. Disbelieving there might be another climber around, each assumed the other was going skiing. When the word "climbing" was muttered, surprised introductions were made. In a strange twist of timing and fate, however, they would never rope up together. Both have recently moved away from the Big Horn Basin.

Alex and Stan rekindled their partnership in January 1991 to pull off perhaps the finest two days of climbing the South Fork has ever seen. On the 17th, they

wandered up the popular *Schoolhouse Creek* to a series of narrow pillars that had formed over a side wall. Featuring two long pitches of technical WI 6, *The Last Climb Before the War* might be the hardest pure ice climb in the US. The next day, while Bush 41 began bombing Iraq in the first Gulf War, Alex and Stan wandered up a route that might be one of the best. Attempted once before by Stan, they managed to send three back-to-back pillars in Legg Creek to create *Ovisight*.

Even though other Montana pioneers like Chad Chadwick and Bill Dockins had "discovered" the South Fork as early as 1982 (FA: *The Moratorium*), Alex would become the only "non-local" to consistently journey there to exploit the new route potential. Perhaps most famous for his swinging and crashing mixed variation called *Miami Vice*, which was caught on film for the original ice video "On Ice," it would be but the surface of his contribution. Never one to wait for the "best" conditions, Alex climbed the rotten rock behind *The Carotid Artery* to get some gear as high as possible. He then came down and managed to just reach the tip of the stalactite and crank off the remaining 40 meters with no ice gear. Across the valley a year later, an elusive two-pitch smear came in near *The Moratorium*. Todd had been to the base of the wall and stashed a pile of hardware, including bolts, expecting to come back when he found a partner to scratch and probably aid climb up 30 meters of blank rock to gain anemic ice dribbling over some overhangs. Alex showed up one weekend and, belayed by Todd, on-sighted the route, smiling and talking the whole way, *sans bolts*. *Mean Streak* (5.11, WI 7) remains one of the hardest traditional mixed climbs in the world. The pure difficulty of this route might be challenged by two short routes (40 m) Alex climbed around New Year's the next season. Found high above *The Moratorium* is a solid band of basalt with parallel drips that fail to touch. Named for the quality "reading" material discovered at a local Conoco station, *Legal at Last* was yet another dangler on which Alex would perfect his "climb high on the rock, pound a pin, and hope it protects the sketchy icicle" technique he would become known for. Steve House would later repeat the route in M7+ conditions. A few meters to the right is another drip, which Alex lead on-sight through an overhanging wall and thin ice. Alex was prone to using "traditional" grades and gave *Barel Legal* a 5.11, WI 7 - his equivalent of Rockies 5.9, A2. Having repulsed every attempt at a repeat, it is now considered M9 or harder.

By the turn of the century, Todd's infamous map was out of print and much of The Gathering's energy faded with Alex's untimely death. And as the overhanging mixed craze swept over the concisouness of the masses, the South Fork seemed to drift into somewhat of a small, yet steady stream of dedicated regional climbers complimented by the wandering visitor from surrounding states or the midwest. At least three web sites had cropped up to fill the void of information. Yet these stopgaps have only perpetuated Todd's style of reporting only the overall pitch count which, in an area like the South Fork where the overall elevation gain might be hundreds of meters with miles of unroped ice "bouldering," only increases the intimidating, sandbag ambiance of the region.

One site in particular, www.coldfear.com, the brain child of Aaron Mulkey, has stood out by featuring inspiring photos including many from local pro Bobby Model and generally psyching people to frequent the area. Aaron started climbing in 1997, at the now defunct ice farm in Boulder Canyon. After moving to Cody in early 1999 he has been obsessed with the South Fork ever since. For the next three years partnered with another unheralded, yet talented local, Mark DeVries, they cleaned up on odds and end around the valley. They scored ephemeral gems like *Scared for Emily* and *Freak on a Leash* and many of their best routes like *RoShamBo*, *Spying and Flying* and *One Arm Bandit* were lines once attempted by Todd and Stan but never completed. After bagging a dozen new climbs in the South Fork, primarily in the narly-explored Upper Canyon, Aaron has set his sights on the endless wilderness around the area. Although not covered in *Winter Dance*, there are several dozen additional routes in the Cody immediate vicinity; and more going up every year. Long pitches, technical ice conditions, a sense of exploration unrivaled, plenty of room for lots climbers, and more ice than you can climb in a lifetime all add up to make Cody America's premier ice destination.

Logistics

Relevant logistics and travel information can be found in *Winter Dance: Select Ice Climbs in Southern Montana and Northern Wyoming*.
