

THE NEEDLES IN REVIEW

by HERB CONN

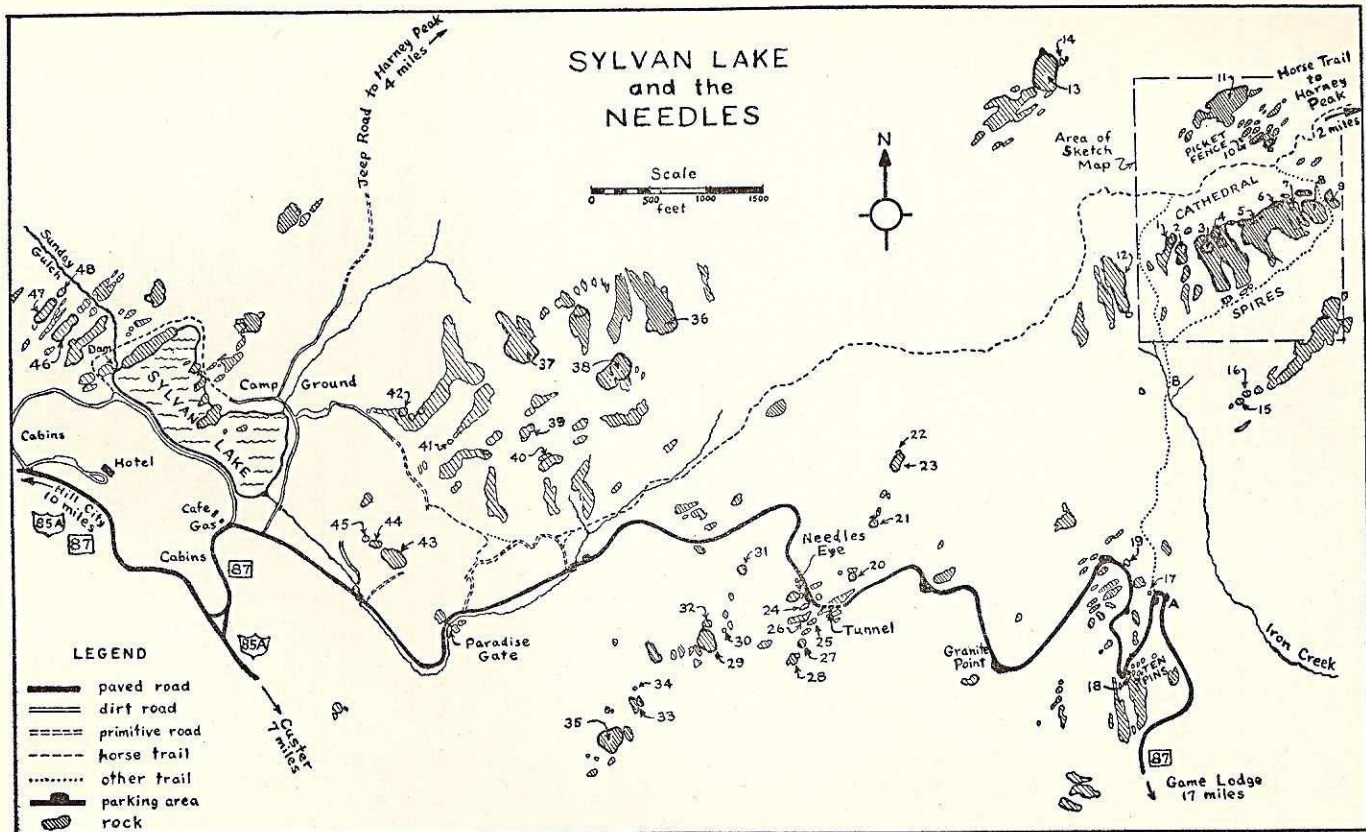
SINCE MY WIFE, JAN, and I encountered the Needles of the Black Hills of South Dakota in 1947, we have lived like two cats in an untended fish market. Now after five summers of enjoying our good fortune it's time we paused for an accounting. But in trying to report on rock-climbing activity to date in the Needles, I fear we may have bitten into a bigger fish than we can handle.

A map and a host of names seem essential to an intelligent description of the Needles area. The accompanying maps, based on a survey by the author with a crude homemade transit, are an attempt to put into a black-and-white plane that which is mostly up and down. Most of the formations, besides being unmapped and unclimbed prior to our invasion of the area, were also unnamed. Hence many of the names given (particularly the silly ones) are our own invention. Rather than cluttering up the map with too many of these names we have used numbers which refer to the corresponding name and description in the text. Climbs described were made with rope and pitons for safety (Class 5), not direct aid (Class 6), except where specifically mentioned.

It is not always possible to know if one is the first to reach a summit. We have occasionally found a cluster of scattered stones that might once have been a cairn. Records of ascents, if they are left, may become illegible or be stolen by birds or pack rats. Although we have tried to keep track of climbing done by others in the Needles, our information is quite probably incomplete.

Every year an increasing number of climbers, with Devils Tower or the high mountains farther west as their main objective, drive through the Black Hills for a climb or two in the Needles. In Custer State Park at Sylvan Lake are camping facilities and accommodations for tourists. South Dakota State Route 87, the Needles Highway, leads east in a roundabout fashion from Sylvan Lake through two miles of a climbers' wonderland. This is the area included on the map, the most spectacular and accessible, although not by any means the limit, of the Needles formation. On all sides of Harney Peak coarse granite and pegmatite have been exposed and eroded into fantastic climbing problems, but here on the

HERB CONN has told us something before of his activities in the Black Hills of South Dakota, *Appalachia*, XXVII: 158-163, December, 1948, and now gives us the results of his long association with that region in a comprehensive review of the climbing done to date in the Needles of the Black Hills. His wife, Jan, also a rock-climber will be remembered by our readers as the authoress of an article in our last issue on the first manless ascent of Devils Tower only a short distance from the scene of this article.



south slopes of the peak and east of Sylvan Lake they reach their climax in a closely packed maze called the Cathedral Spires.

If the visiting climber parks his car near the lower of two switchbacks ("A" on the map) he will find a faint trail leading past clear spring water at "B" into the heart of the Cathedral Spires area (shown in detail on the enlarged sketch map). Here, with over one hundred summits towering above him, he may well wonder what to do next.

The Spires divide themselves well into groups, which we have numbered from one to nine beginning at the west end. Until a better system of nomenclature suggests itself, the highest point of each group goes by the corresponding number in lieu of a name, and they are so numbered on the maps.

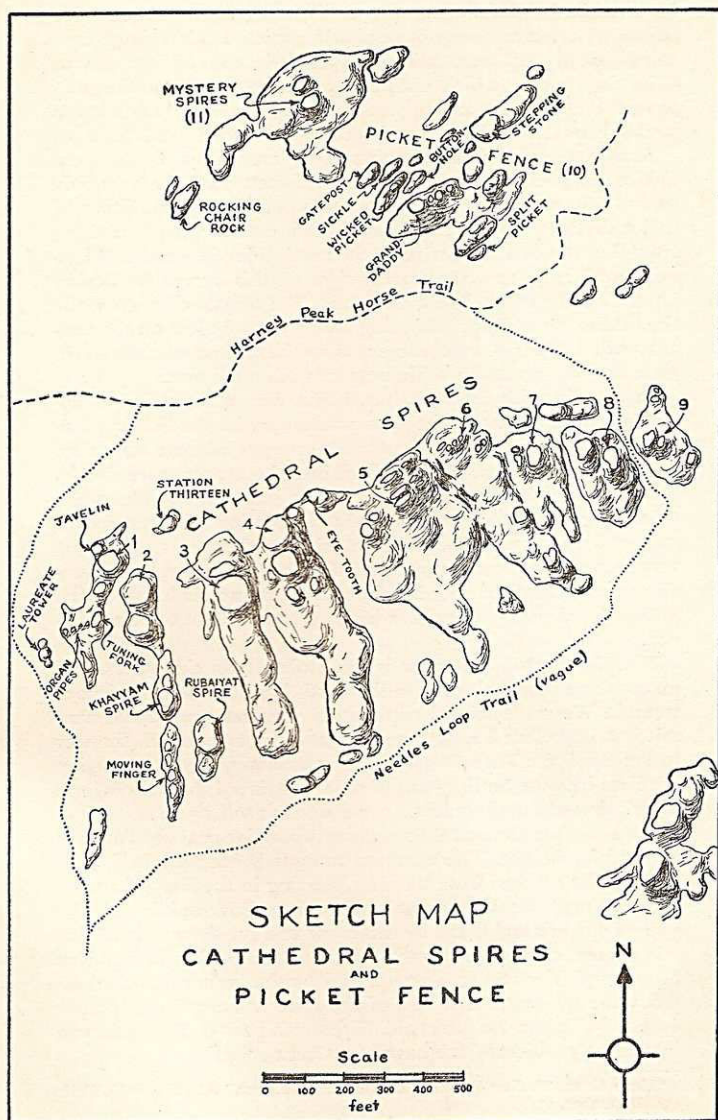
The pile of three blocks neatly balanced end on end is Spire One, called the Praying Madonna by Fritz Wiessner, who was intrigued but lacked time for the ascent. Although Jan and I had originally decreed this spire unclimbable by us, a fresh burst of enthusiasm in June, 1952, took us to the top without any great difficulty. The route, while not severe climbing, is airy, devious, and very satisfying. Starting on the southeast side, 120 feet in and out of a tight little chimney brings one to the ledge atop the first block, which is traversed to the right 180 degrees to the northwest side. Here a hand traverse and an upward scramble take one to an exposed step or two on small nubbles to the second ledge. Moving left on this ledge, again completely around the pinnacle, the route leads to the final 30-foot climb to the top.

The pencil-slim Javelin is obviously a temptation for a lasso artist standing on the first ledge of One. Straightforward climbing technique abandoned us on this pinnacle some 20 feet short of the summit. The unstable looking spire just south of One seems to present an equally barren summit pitch, although so far as we know the climb has never been tried. The Tuning Fork and the Organ Pipes are also unexplored and doubtless deserve investigation.

On Laureate Tower, southwest of One, Fred Beckey and John Dudra of the Seattle Mountaineers demonstrated a lasso and Prusik-knot technique to reach an otherwise unclimbable summit (July, 1952).

First climbed among the Cathedral Spires were Spire Two and Khayyam Spire, by Fritz Wiessner, Bill House, and Lawrence Coveney in 1937. These are the climbs briefly mentioned in Coveney's account of the first ascent of Devils Tower.¹ The likeliest route to the summit of Two and presumably the one used by

¹ Lawrence G. Coveney, "Ascent of Devil's Tower," *Appalachia*, XXI: 477 (December, 1937).



House, who led the ascent, starts easily in a gully on the east side following a vertical seam of pegmatite which contains large crystals of beryl and tourmaline and a whole cliff of rose quartz. Climbing becomes a little trickier as one bears right from the gully toward the northern and higher summit. (The lower summit has probably not been climbed and is certainly more difficult.)

Khayyam and Rubaiyat spires were named by Beckey and Dudra in a poetical mood. They reached the top of Khayyam only to find Wiessner's cairn as evidence of a previous ascent. First and major difficulty on this climb is a 15-foot overhanging face rising from the crest of a knife-edge on the north side of the spire. Wiessner describes his route as bearing right up this face, while Beckey bore left using two bolts for direct aid. The Seattle climbers made the first ascent of Rubaiyat, using a long Class 6 pitch on the east-wall. A Class 5 route also exists, we have since discovered, in some arduous cracks and chimneys around to the west.

In keeping with the Rubaiyat theme, one of the string of unclimbed needles just to the west must surely be the Moving Finger. From our observation the name seems apt in more ways than one, and we have hesitated to check into the matter more closely.

The summit of the lean 150-foot spire just north of the saddle separating Two and Three proved to be Station Thirteen in our map-making survey. This name stuck, for there was something very thirteenish about our ascent (July, 1949), between hard thundershowers, climaxed with 200-foot exposure in a slight concavity, polished and gently rounded, which we had thought to be a chimney.

The third group of spires is less broken than the others, and except for a small sub-peak to the north has but one conspicuous summit. We made several exploratory ventures toward the summit in 1949 before finding a route that hung together all the way to the top. Spire Three, we decided, is pre-eminently a fascinating problem in route finding—and should remain so. Don't look for a description of the route here, 'cause we ain't telling.

Tallest of the Cathedral Spires, the two major peaks of Four are almost of a height. The northern summit is actually the higher and may be reached from the west, starting in the back of a wide chimney near the high point of the Three-Four saddle. We described our original climb by this route in a previous article.² Another route, climbed in 1951 by Washington, D. C., climbers Ray Moore and Tony Soler, accompanied by the author, attacked directly the 350-foot north wall of the spire and required a courte échelle and piton for direct aid. The south peak of Four poses an intriguing problem which has not yet been solved.

² Herb Conn, "A New Frontier for the Rock Climber," *Appalachia*, XXVII: 158 (December, 1948).

A cluster of pinnacles at the southern end of the Four mass attracts the attention of all who follow the trail below them. As yet no climbing has been attempted here, probably with good reason.

Between Four and Five the slender pointed Eye-Tooth *has* been tried, unsuccessfully. A near-by pinnacle, more closely attached to Four, looks much like the Eye-Tooth from some angles but may be an easier climb.

The "Goat Route," an enjoyable scramble requiring the rope in only a spot or two, leads rather unbelievably up the impressive southeast wall of Five. The summit pinnacles, arranged like troops in formation, may be reached from the Goat Route, by a chimney on the west side, and probably by other routes. Some of the more isolated peaks of Five present individual problems so far unattempted.

At their eastern end, the Cathedral Spires are lower and more closely grouped. Six has a row of high points like the teeth of a comb, any of which can be reached with one pitch of moderately easy climbing. There are two or three startling pinnacles which merit investigation on the ridge southeast from Six. Seven, Eight, and Nine, although not "walk-ups," are short climbs without special interest.

Our favorite climbing area is the Picket Fence (10), north of the Spires and across the Harney Peak trail. Here grass-carpeted walkways lead among towering pinnacle walls 100 to 200 feet high and barely an arm's reach apart. Crawlways and squeezeways lead deeper into the labyrinth, but only by donning rope and hardware may one climb above to an exclusive realm dotted by the tiny summits. Not one of these climbs disappointed us by being too simple or uninteresting. There is a high-angle pitch in extremely delicate balance with 150 feet of undiluted exposure leading to the three-stepped summit of the Wicked Picket. An easier but unique climb is up through the Buttonhole, then back across the top of the hole and up to a peak hardly roomy enough for a comfortable seat. The Split Picket is formed of two frail pillars joined at the top. The Sickle turned us back twice, but on our third attempt with two bolts for safety, we reached the curving tip, which overhangs the grass 150 feet below.

At the end of the Picket Fence are the Mystery Spires (11). This massive group offers an opportunity for much climbing and route finding, but as is often the case with large rock masses, there is an easy route to the top.

Other rock masses whose summits are easy of access are the Bartzan (12) and Little Devil's Tower (13). (Refer back to map of entire area.) From the uphill side both are simple scrambles, with sheer walls several hundred feet high facing the downhill direction. The Crow's Nest (14) proved to be a short but difficult climb

on its south ridge (September, 1952), and there are other pinnacles in this group which look equally promising.

The ridge south of the Cathedral Spires is broken off on both ends into isolated pinnacles. At the west end, Andrew (15) and Diana (16) towers were climbed by Dudra and Beckey (July, 1952). One bolt for direct aid was used on Diana. The route on both towers is on the northeast side.

Other climbing areas may best be reached by driving the car, which we left earlier at "A," on up the hill toward Sylvan Lake. First, however, we should notice Sandberg Peak (17), a 30-foot horror conquered by Tyrolean traverse from a near-by rock by Ray Sandberg and Walt Bailey of the University of Colorado (July, 1952). Next on the left are the Ten Pins, a forest of smooth, pointed peaks which should provide fun for the rope-throwing addicts. We managed to climb the King Pin (18) by means of a tremendously long reach on the eastern wall and some airy nubble climbing near the top (June, 1952). The Rolling Pin, the three-pronged Triconi Nail, and many of the others are out of our class. At the upper switchback is the Totem Pole (19), climbed in 1936 by Wiessner.³

In the vicinity of the Needles Eye Tunnel are a number of excellent climbs between 50 and 150 feet in height. Just north of the road is the Gnomon (20), a climb we described previously.⁴ The Stumbling Block (21), 500 feet farther up the ridge, is only a 60-foot climb above the obvious starting point on the north side. Those 60 feet, however, gave us considerable trouble (July, 1949). Next formation of interest is the Point (22), a sharp sliver on the side of the more massive rock we call Beside The Point (23). From the notch between them it is possible to climb unroped to the larger summit, but a rope, several pitons, a pair of well-fitting sneakers, and a cool head are recommended for the 25-foot excursion onto the Point.

At the south end of the Needles Eye parking area is the Hitching Post (24), a 60-foot finger which may well be the most frequently climbed of any of the Needles. It is close to a favorite stop for tourists and is about the limit in climbing difficulty of what the athletic but untrained person will do unroped. The register we left on top has collected at least eleven names during two summers.

Other Needles bordering the parking area, including the tower across the road from the Hitching Post and the Needles Eye rock itself, appear unclimbable, and we have not attempted them. We are content to leave the job to someone well equipped with bolts and immune to the large audience he will draw. On the Holy

³ Lawrence G. Coveney, "Rock Climbs in the Black Hills" (note), *Appalachia*, XXI: 269 (December, 1936).

⁴ Herb Conn, *op. cit.*

Terror (25), we waited in a conveniently hidden recess reminiscent of the Cooning Place on the Grand Teton for an audience to leave. This recess has earned the name "Spooning Place." The name, Holey Terror, is derived from the hole in which the climb starts as an open chimney, and the terror inspired by the pull over the overhang above the Spooning Place. The Fan (26) is an easier rock to climb, and we found what appeared to be the remains of a cairn on top.

Below these rocks and out of sight from the road is the bulbous monstrosity (27) we call the Sore Thumb. Here Tony Soler and Ray Moore tried to engineer a human pendulum to swing the climber into a stance halfway up between overhangs above and below. Their plans for climbing above the stance were not revealed, for the pendulum failed, leaving Tony swinging in midair unable to reach the rock. The Sore Thumb, therefore, remains unclimbed.

A few yards beyond the Sore Thumb is Exclamation Point (28), the last promontory on the ridge. In August, 1947, Jan and I climbed the north side, 125 feet of quite difficult going, to a summit complete with swimming pool and unlimited southern exposure.

In the vicinity of Crocket Tor (29), which is itself an easy climb, are the Conniedid (30), Retable Rock (31), and the Fist (32). These three are splendid climbs that will not disappoint the climber, although they are not conspicuous enough to attract immediate interest. The route on each should be fairly obvious. The Prince and the Pauper (33) are twin summits accessible from the chimney between them, although the final pitch on the Pauper (east peak) is quite severe. In every storm we expect near-by Pinpoint Pinnacle (34) to topple, for there is an ominous crack through its frail mid-section. As a climb it is a brief 30 feet on holds that are barely adequate.

Loeber's Leap (35) was for years the playground of teen-aged youngsters from Lincoln, Nebraska, staying at a summer cottage on the Needles Highway. When in September, 1939, Louise and Dick Putney, Nancy Green, and Robert Luebe reached a summit but not the highest one, they wished long-legged John Loeber was with them for a leap to the true high point. Hence the name, "Loeber's Leap." The two girls were the first to reach the top in August, 1940, and all these events are now recorded on birch bark in a coffee-can register. This massive peak rises 200 to 300 feet, a prominent landmark from any direction.

North of the road, (36) and (37) are huge rocks dominating the skyline. Neither offers any climbing difficulty, and we have discovered nothing of great interest among the rocks between them. We found the Golf Course (38) an airy climb with a long stretch over a gap from the low southwestern spur, but were later morti-

fied to see a family of goats casually following our route with a nimble jump across the gap. There is also, on the north side, a chimney route to the same peak. The broad summit has a set of eighteen (at least) potholes to tempt the golfer, although he might have some trouble returning his ball to the fairway after a wild drive. Fluted Rock (39), although an impressive looking monolith, has an easy route to the top.

To reach the parrot-beaked summit of Polly (40), we started from the notch south of the peak and worked out onto its eastern ridge. A 15-foot pitch under the summit is the only difficulty. The Toothpick (41) is a short but severe climb. Upside Down Rock (42) has two small overhangs to surmount on its southwest face.

A favorite climb of photographers hunting an unusual view of Sylvan Lake is Photographer's Peak (43). An easy route to the top is on the north side. Of more interest to climbers are the two pinnacles beside the main block, Aquarium (44) and Icehouse (45) rocks. Our route up Aquarium (June, 1949) began on the west side up along a slanting crack, then with a few delicate steps into an open-bottomed chimney. Icehouse provided us with a real workout on the first pitch, a flaring jam-crack on the east side (June, 1949). Above, we traversed left and around the corner on a sloping ledge, then angled up and on around the pinnacle.

Below the dam at the outlet of Sylvan Lake, the cliffs rise a surprising distance. Towering above a succession of parallel ridges are two great, sheer-walled blocks, Inner Outlet (46) and Outer Outlet (47). On Inner Outlet, Wiessner's party in 1936 discovered a ladder left by earlier adventurers and threw it down in disgust.⁵ There is a choice of routes in various chimneys on this rock. Outer Outlet, as far as we know, has not been climbed. A 120-foot overhanging chimney on the lake side is the likeliest of several unlikely approaches, although we climbed higher on the 250-foot northwest face before turning back. The giddy overhangs of Vertigo Rock (48) have as yet repelled even the idea of an assault.

This account has only touched upon the climbing possibilities of the area. We have tried to describe where we have climbed and where we have not, for the benefit of those who like to try new climbs. For one who prefers to pioneer in an area completely unexplored, there should be ample opportunities among the needles north of the mapped area, visible from the jeep road to Harney Peak. Another group of needles we have not investigated is north of Harney Peak between Horsethief Lake and Mt. Rushmore.

Often a climber's time is limited, so that he would rather make a good climb successfully than risk disappointment on a new route. We recommend Cathedral Spire Five for nearly 500 feet of

⁵ Coveney, *op. cit.*³

easy scrambling to a rewarding summit. A good 300-foot climb, not difficult, is Spire Two. Spire Four, somewhat more difficult, will attract many who follow the mountaineer's instinct to seek the highest point.

Some real thrillers, in our estimation, are Spire One (200 feet), the Wicked Picket (150 feet), the Gnomon, the Fist, and Retable Rock (each 100-150 feet). One of our favorites for all-around climbing fun is Spire Three. There should be a climb to suit anyone's preference somewhere among the Needles.