

## CLIMBING HIGHLIGHTS OF THE BLACK HILLS

by JAN and HERB CONN

AMONG THE MANY ROCK-CLIMBS in the Black Hills Needles, the South Tower is superlative. By superlative I guess we mean involving maximum hard work, discomfort, and that strange mental state so characteristic of climbing—a mixture of exaltation and utter terror.

The South Tower lacks but three or four feet of being the highest summit in the Cathedral Spires. It is the southern peak of Spire Four and appears to be the true high point from anywhere south or west of the spires. Sketch 1 shows the southwest side with our route of ascent marked by a dotted line.

Climbing is easy for almost one hundred feet up the chimney between the South Tower and the lower pinnacles we call the Gruesome Twosome. Thirty feet more on the West Gruesome side of the chimney brings one to a platform of chockstones and a good belay spot from which to tackle the first problem.

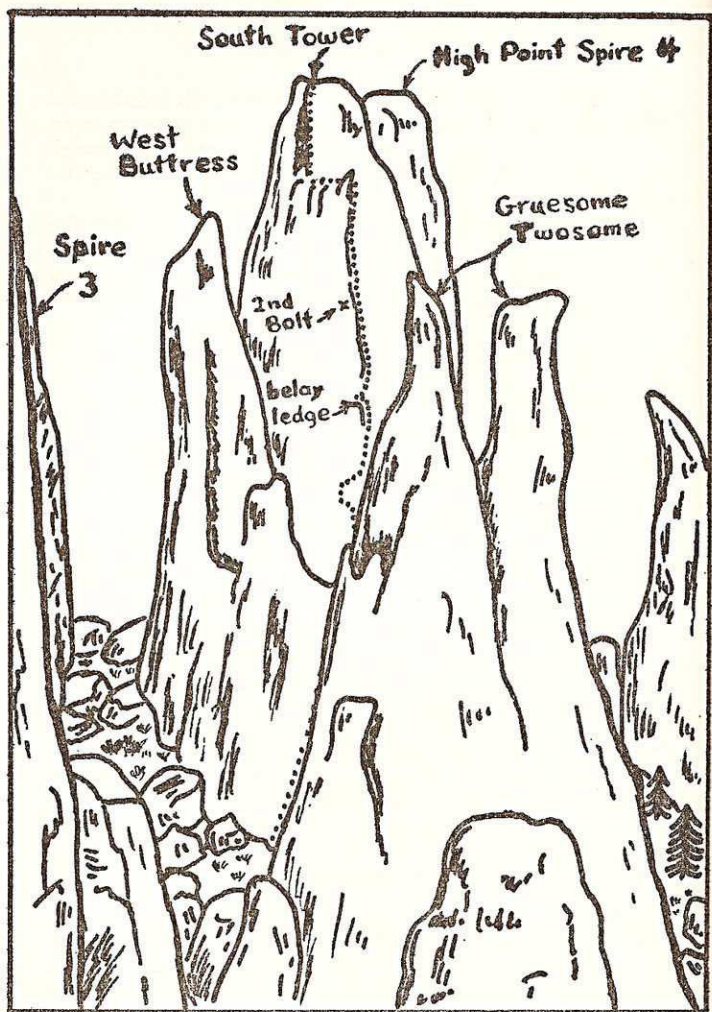
In Sketch 2, the climber has climbed out and up from the chockstones as far as possible on the West Gruesome wall, then made a wide straddle across to the South Tower, which at this point overhangs. His piton is in a good deep crack, so he is well protected as he pushes off with the back foot and heaves around the corner to his left. Hidden there is a ledge for his feet.

We first discovered this little maneuver late in the summer of 1952, after we and others had vainly looked for a route straight up the overhang above the chockstones. Once around the corner, we felt delightfully secure for just a moment—until we realized how desperately we were having to hang on to nothing just to stay there. The next step up was delicate, then a fair handhold enabled us to swing back around to the right onto the wall above where we started. Above the overhang now, we traversed right into a vertical crack. The route follows close to this crack from then on, very difficult most of the way.

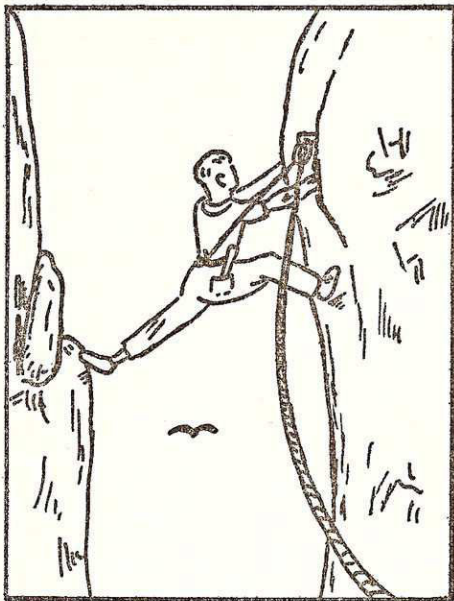
The belay ledge marked on Sketch 1 is fifty feet above the

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Our co-authors JAN and HERB CONN are well known to our readers for their articles on climbing in the Black Hills and adjacent areas; "A New Frontier for the Rock Climber" in *App.* XXVII: 158-163, and "The Needles in Review" *App.* XXIX: 356-365 by Herb Conn, and "Manless Ascent of Devils Tower" *App.* XXIX: 225-227 by Jan Conn. This husband and wife team, now located in Custer, South Dakota, where they carry on a fancy leather goods business, are close to this beautiful rock-climbing area, and can readily reach this climbers' paradise in their free moments. This article presents to us two of the best climbs effected since Herb Conn wrote his comprehensive review of Black Hill ascents.



SKETCH 1

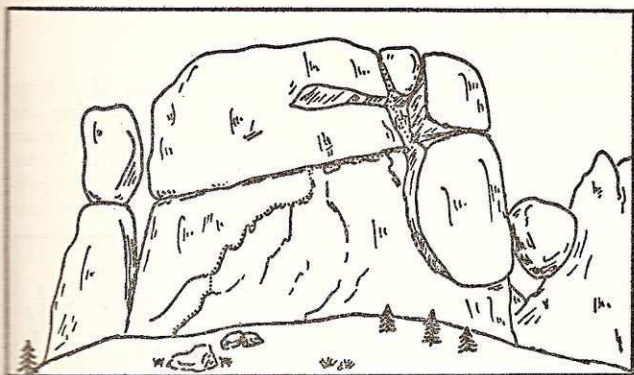


SKETCH 2

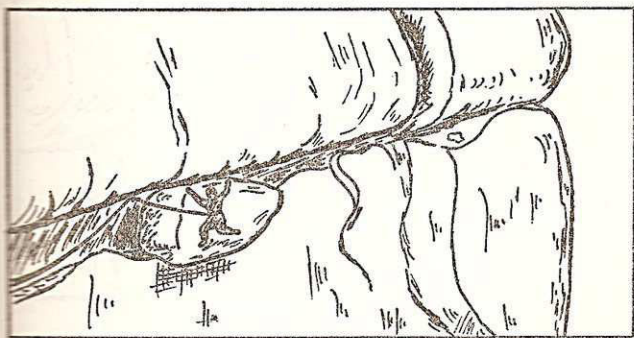
start of the pitch. This little haven deserves special mention, if for no other reason than that we have spent many cramped hours sitting there. The ledge slopes, and there is nothing definite to brace the feet against, so one is very conscious of the sheer drop below. We placed an expansion bolt anchor here so the belayer could more easily relax and enjoy the view, which is breath taking. Most of the southern Black Hills and the Badlands are visible, with the gaunt shape of the West Gruesome jabbing up through the middle of the scene like something that should be on the moon.

The seventy feet above the belay ledge are pretty bleak. There is an intermittent crack which seldom takes a decent piton. We put in a great quantity of poor pitons, each of which withstood a gingerly test. With this sort of protection we felt the need of a second piton as soon as we were waist-high to the first.

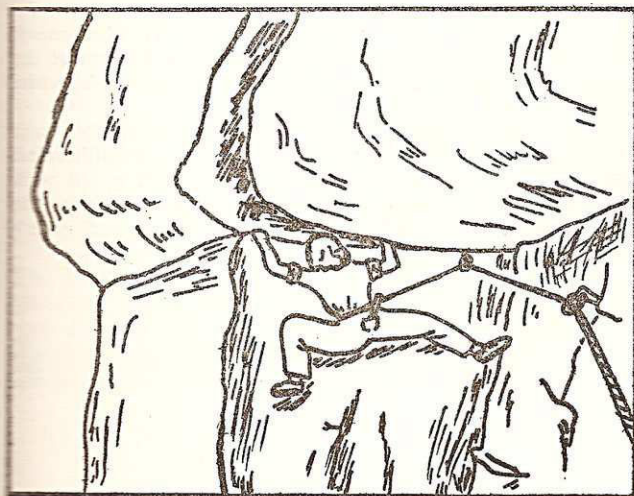
At the one spot we could spare both hands for the job, we put in a second expansion bolt. Not until our third attempt, in June



SKETCH 4



SKETCH 5



SKETCH 6

The traverse starts with a bang on the outside of a huge block only half-supported by the ledge and overhanging the ground 150 feet below. (See Sketch 5.) To say that the entire sixty feet is a hand traverse is exaggerating only a little. There are only one or two spots all the way across where the ledge is wide enough or far enough under the overhang to accommodate more than just the hands, the head, and occasionally one elbow.

The broken-out area between the lower and upper overhangs is cut by deep fractures which provide good holds. At the upper overhang it is necessary to swing out on a ledge for the hands (Sketch 6) to the outer edge of the overhang, as only at its outer edge is the chimney above wide enough to wriggle up into (Sketch 7). This chimney leads to the top.

The awesome nearness of huge overhangs and the constancy of the exposure make this climb spectacular. As the face below the traverse is too high for a single rappel with the normal length of rappel rope, some alternate plans for coming down should be made. We found it no

harder to climb back across the traverse than to cross it on the way up. We understand that Dave Sowles and Tom McCormack of the Stanford Alpine Club, who made a second ascent of the route in September 1954, managed a rappel off the opposite (southeast) side.

Sketch 8, if we could draw it, would show the climber back on the ground at last, a little dazed, and completely disheveled. He is probably looking with distaste at the short uphill walk ahead to camp or car, for he feels a sudden preference for the horizontal—which will wear off, no doubt, with a good night's sleep.



SKETCH 7