

WE WORK IN OUR SPARE TIME

It's a simple matter of mathematics—two people working six months a year are just as good as one person working twelve months to support two people.

For five years (since Herb's discharge from the Army in 1946) we had operated successfully on this principle. During our annual six months vacation we had uncoiled our climbing rope on about every piece of up-ended rock we could find from the sandstone mesas of the southwest to the glacier-scoured granite of New England, with short forays into both Canada and Mexico.

Our home was a small panel delivery truck, which we equipped with cabinets, drawers, and cooking and sleeping quarters—a kind of permanent tent or overhang on wheels.

The jobs we had held during the period were as varied as the climbing we had done. Frying "fish and chips" in Denver, shoe repairing in Kentucky, and bookkeeping for an ice cream company (with the advantage of buying ice cream wholesale) were just a few.

But now we felt that a change was in order. Two things urged us to this decision. The seasonal work which we found easiest to obtain and most lucra-

tive was resort work. However the same quality which made us love the loneliness of the mountains made us dislike the continual fever pitch of activity we learned to associate with a resort, whether it be a dude ranch in Arizona or a ski resort in New Hampshire.

Also we had discovered the Needles near Custer in the South Dakota Black Hills. Here we decided was enough vertical rock to keep us happy and black-and-blue for the rest of our lives. In a daze of elation we sank some of our savings in twenty acres of fields and jack-pines just four miles (through the woods) from the highest and most rugged of the spires.

This was a powerful incentive to settle down, and the idea of living the year around in such a wonderful setting was more than we could resist. We built a semi-circular stone wall against a low cliff on our land, put a roof on the resulting enclosure, and moved in. Total cost for the "Conncape" was \$75. A wood stove and an axe solved the heating problem, and a couple of rain barrels to catch run-off from the roof kept us in wash water. It was a simple matter

to bring drinking water every few days from a spring in the Needles.

Our only unsolved problem was getting cash for food, jeans, and an occasional new climbing rope. (Pitons could be scrounged from the cracks of Devils Tower nearby!)

Getting a regular job in Custer was out of the question. It wouldn't allow us the freedom to climb that we wanted. Our dream was to do our work at home and to choose the hours we worked. We had no objection to working long and hard on a cold rainy day—but when the sun came out we wanted to be off for a day of climbing. That we have actually found a livelihood which gives us all this and more is still a continual surprise to us.

The hand-carving of leather, we discovered, can be done without a huge investment, in a small space (the Conncape is not spacious), and does not require electricity or great quantities of water. What's more, we found that in this age of plastics and automation, goods of hand-carved leather are novel enough yet practical enough to appeal.

At first our line included just the conventional handbags, belts and wallets that most leather workers offer. Then a climbing friend remarked, "I need a belt, but I'm not sure a flower design is what I want. Could you carve pitons instead of flowers?" The design later developed to include ice axe, rope, pitons and a mountain range in the background, and so was born our "Mountaineer's Belt." It was then an obvious step to adapt the climbing motif to other items we make—wallets, key cases, bookends, etc.

Our leather goods will, of course, never match the Needles and Devils Tower as attractions for the many climbers who pass through this area in the summertime. But whatever the reason that brings them here, the good times we have with visiting climbers rank high among our blessings.

Don't look for us in a shop by the road. We are back in the woods where life is more primitive and serene. However, as one of the minor curiosities of the Hills, the Conncape is probably worth the bumpy side trip, and we will certainly enjoy meeting any climbers and "Summit" readers who visit us.

We lived in a truck when we alternately climbed and worked our way from coast to coast. One section of the bed folds onto the other during the day, making a bench along the wall and an aisle down the center.



by herb & jan conn

Herb leads a chimney in the Needles about five miles from our home. The rock is a coarse granite, much firmer than it appears.

The "Canncave" in winter—a good day to stay home and work! The snow on the picnic table will be melted for drinking water or made into snow ice cream.

