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# A 15-Year-Old Sets Out Alone for the Tetons

*Part 1 of a climber's memoir*

**Steven Jervis**



WHEN I WAS 10 YEARS OLD I DECIDED TO CLIMB EVERY MOUNTAIN IN the world. I made a list, starting with the Appalachians. When I was halfway through the 53 14,000-foot peaks in Colorado, I realized that my goal might be a little unrealistic. But I could make a start.

Four years later I signed up for a month of guided climbing in the Tetons. I arrived in July 1952, just after my 15th birthday. In an old notebook, I penciled all the highest peaks, including the Grand Teton by three different routes, two of them Robert Underhill classic routes, the East Ridge and the North Ridge. I had modestly allowed for an occasional rest day. My technical climbing at that point was limited to a few weekends in the Shawangunk Mountains in southeastern New York State. I had no idea what the big mountains were like.

I was staying that summer at Betty Woolsey's very comfortable Trail Creek Ranch in Wilson, Wyoming, on the outskirts of Grand Teton National Park. Woolsey had been a champion skier, captain of the American team at the 1936 Winter Olympics. She had climbed with the great Fritz Wiessner. She told me that Wiessner disliked guidebooks and preferred to find his own way. He was certain that the North Ridge of the Grand Teton began at the Gunsight Notch, composed of some of the most rotten rock in the range. His unsuccessful attempt culminated in a three-person shoulder stand, with Bill House on the bottom, then Wiessner and Woolsey, the lightest, on top. The party (of six) had no time for the North Ridge, although they did reach the top of the Grandstand, where the proper difficulties begin. To my regret, I never asked Woolsey about this, nor about her participation in the 1936 expedition to Mount Waddington, the highest peak in British Columbia's Coast Range, when by Wiessner and House made the first ascent..

That August 1952 became a terrible time for Woolsey. Her 19-year-old cousin, Corinne, visited from Switzerland. She made an easy climb with a group of women, but chose to descend by a difficult chimney, unroped. She fell to her death. Woolsey said nothing to me about this, but she looked understandably grim and depressed.

Despite its comforts, the ranch was not a good location for a young climber without a driver's license, much less a car. Woolsey was no longer climbing, nor were any of her guests when I was there. The mountains were an hour north, and I had to take what rides might be offered. One morning I

*Steven Jervis, right, with Leigh Ortenburger after they climbed Symmetry Spire in 1953.*

OSKAR DORFMANN

had to leave at 3:30 A.M. for a 7:30 start. Just as I was going, some of the staff returned from Jackson Hole. "Drinking and gambling," I said with headshaking disapproval.

The guide service, run by Glenn Exum, had a small but enterprising team, many of whom later ventured to the Himalaya and environs. Leigh Ortenburger climbed on Makalu; Dick Pownall on Everest; Willi Unsoeld on both these peaks. Unsoeld pioneered a new route on Everest and climbed in the Karakoram (Masherbrum, first ascent). Art Gilkey climbed on K2.

Exum was in his 40s and had settled into a modest routine. He often took beginners to the practice rocks, and he guided the Grand Teton at least once a week. I wondered whether he ever felt like Eugene O'Neill's actor father, who played the Count of Monte Cristo more than 6,000 times. Exum had rarely ventured beyond the Tetons in recent years, but his conservatism was matched by a single daring ascent.

On July 31, 1931, less than a month past his 20th birthday, alone and wearing football shoes, he found an entirely new route on the Grand. Only two routes had previously been climbed. Glenn's begins on the south side, on an upward angling ledge, "Wall Street." The ledge is very wide at the start, but narrows as you go up. Then it ends in a gap a few feet from a promising ridge. There he took one of the boldest leaps in climbing history. Why he chose to jump this gap is a mystery, as it is possible to climb past it with only moderate difficulty. The place is wildly exposed. Garnet Canyon is more than a thousand feet below, with nothing to stop you. If Glenn had missed . . .

But he did not miss. Then, still solo, he found his way up the ridge that now bears his name. It is a gorgeous route on solid rock, and not very hard in good weather. For more than 80 years it has been the most popular way up the mountain, much more so than the easier but less aesthetic original ascent line from the late nineteenth century.

Before I had a chance at the Grand, I made a couple of shorter climbs. First was Symmetry Spire, by a moderate ridge named for Jack Durrance, who pioneered many routes as a Dartmouth College climber in the later 1930s. My guide was Bob Merriam, a lanky, lantern-jawed cellular biology graduate student in his late 20s. I was stunned by the way Merriam climbed it. He had put me second, perhaps to keep an eye on me, trusting me to belay the third man, C.D. MacDaniel. Most of the time, Merriam stationed me carefully at belay stances, but he did not tie me in. I always had a strong position, but I was glad that C.D. did not test me with a fall. I was even more amazed by the way Merriam led—completely unbelayed! I soon learned that in the big



*The author climbed Mount Owen with Willi Unsoeld. They learned that there is no easy way up.* STEVEN JERVIS



mountains you have to keep moving. Merriam did take a belay, but only on the three hardest pitches.

It didn't feel like the Shawangunks.

SOON I WAS THOUGHT READY FOR GRAND, EXUM RIDGE. OUR CLIMB WAS uneventful, but noteworthy for its participants. The leader was Glenn Exum himself. He had seven followers, far more than usual. We were broken into three groups. Exum led the first, with the least strong followers: Mary Blade and Henry Kritzler, a middle-aged self-described shepherd. (He may have had some additional line of work.) Ellis Blade, Mary's husband, led me on rope two. Last came three members of the Schickele family: Rainier and his two teenage sons, Peter and David. The weather was clear, the climb mostly uneventful. What I most recall is Exum asking one of the Schickele brothers to hold one end of a rope while Exum tossed it down to work out its kinks. But the brother didn't grip the end tight enough, and down went the rope, several hundred feet. Exum descended to retrieve it. "It would have been better to hold it tight," he said in his understated but unbending way. More than 60 years later I came across Peter Schickele at a concert. By then he was known to the world as PDQ Bach, the music satirist. "Come clean, Peter," I said. "Which one of you dropped the rope?"

"Dropped what rope?" he asked. By then PDQ and I were the only survivors of the climbing party, so the question will never be answered.

Having completed the highest peak in the park, I was ready for the second, Mount Owen. It was the last of the major peaks to be climbed (the first ascent was in 1930). There is no easy way up. Here was my introduction to the charismatic Willi Unsoeld, then known as Bill and beardless. He was guiding three of us, including Ellis Blade, up the East Ridge. Unsoeld woke us promptly at 3 A.M.—he never needed an alarm clock. As we crossed the chilly and still dark Teton Glacier, I felt a sudden pang of homesickness. Why wasn't I back in green, sunny Connecticut with my parents and our swimming pool? But then the sun rose and I realized that I was where I belonged.

Unsoeld decided to climb right up the final ridge, which no one had previously done. Even he required some direct aid. Blade followed. We other two prusiked up (using loops known as Prusik loops tied to the main rope). Unsoeld's point was that we could leave behind our heavy ice axes by avoiding the customary snow slope to the south. On the descent someone kicked loose a stone, which didn't miss Unsoeld by much. "A little quicker warning, gentlemen," was all he said, imperturbably.

Bob Merriam had an idea for a new route: the direct east face of Teepee Pillar. He recruited Chris Marshall and me as clients. Marshall was a Stanford University football player who must have weighed a good 200 pounds—60 more than me. He did not fall, so I did not have to see whether I could hold him. In fact nobody fell on this lovely climb on steep, solid rock. Many years later Fred Beckey asked me whether there had been any excitement, such as, “Leader falls.” Perhaps I should have invented something.

Then came the third-highest summit, Mount Moran. Bob Merriam was again my guide. We began our pack-in during the late afternoon. It was lucky that we had waited no longer. We had been walking an hour along String Lake before Merriam realized that we had left the rope in the car. By the time we had retrieved it and reached the idyllic, grassy campsite, it was nearly dark.

Moran by the East Face route (called the CMC route after the Chicago Mountaineering Club’s first ascent in 1941) proved an easy affair, although the farther right we moved the harder it became. If we had gone even farther that way we would have encountered the enormous, improbable black dike that transects the face. The amazing feature is plainly seen from the valley below. On the return, I belayed Merriam on Drizzlepuss, an aptly named dripping overhanging rock cleft.

Finally I made a guideless climb, the nontechnical Mount Saint John, with Bill Buckingham. A few weeks earlier I had met Buckingham at Woolsey’s ranch. He was a year older than I, a native of—but not typical of—Jackson Hole. He had short, sandy hair and wore glasses. Musically gifted, he played a sonata on a keyboard on the ranch porch. He was very smart (a future Phi Beta Kappa at Stanford) and went on to a Princeton University master’s degree in mathematics. I wondered whether he could keep up with me on Mount Saint John. By the time we were halfway up, he was 30 minutes ahead, and I was puffing. He waited patiently for me on the summit.

Buckingham was an unspectacular but reliable climber, very modest about his skills. One of his favorite assessments of a forbidding pitch was, “It’s goable.” As Leigh Ortenburger said, “He gets up things.” That included many new routes in the Tetons, Canada, and Alaska. Buckingham disliked crowded regions and often headed for remote places with a partner or two. He died, much too early and not in the mountains, in 1990.

I HAD COMPLETED FEWER THAN HALF OF MY SCHEDULE OF CLIMBS. I WOULD have to return in 1953. During school term I used my Tetons experience, slightly embellished, as material for my tenth-grade English class essays.

But this time, no remote dude ranch for me. I had convinced my parents that I knew what I was doing (which was partly true) and that I could take care of myself. My small mountain tent and I headed straight for the public campground, just a few hundred yards from Jenny Lake and access to the peaks. The camping limit had been cut in half, to 30 days. That would be just enough for me. Because I was alone, I did not want to appropriate an entire campsite. I chose a small, dusty corner without a fireplace or table as my home for the next month.

I had a small Primus stove with which I cooked—that is, heated—Dinty Moore beef stew, Chef Boyardee spaghetti, or whatever else I could find in a can at the Jenny Lake store a mile away. There I picked up newspapers from Denver and Salt Lake City. I read the baseball box scores obsessively while waiting for my next climb. For a welcome diversion, I helped out at Glenn Exum's training rocks, a short walk from the boat landing across Jenny Lake. There he prepared beginners for the Grand. They learned belaying and, above all, rappelling. The descent from the Grand is a mere scramble except for a sudden airy drop of about 100 feet. The bottom half of the rappel is free: Your feet cannot touch the rock. Reader, take note: we had no body slings or harnesses. You straddled the rope, brought it across your chest and over the opposite shoulder. If you did anything wrong, rope burns were an unpleasant possibility.

Evenings were quiet at the campground, except for the occasional bear. There were entertainments such as when the Schickeles arranged classical music for humming, or later when Unsoeld told how his expedition had failed on Makalu (the fifth highest in the world; it remained unclimbed until 1955). I recall only one detail of Willi's narrative: The local support staff was making tea. They seemed to take a long time about it. That was because, in puzzled irritation, they were tearing open the bags to get at the leaves.

The guides' shack was a short walk from the campground. Glenn's wife Beth managed the concession with serene efficiency. I embarked on another Symmetry Spire route, my third: Templeton's Crack, a prominent gully just right of the Durrance Ridge. Templeton's Crack is a mixture of steep chockstones and easy scree walking. My guide was Mike Brewer, but we were not alone. Just ahead were Unsoeld and his wife Jolene. She was diminutive and looked frail but was a strong climber who had little trouble with the route. I cannot say the same for me. Near the top I tried to follow Brewer up an intimidating wall of gray rock. I ventured to the right. "Don't do the right side," Unsoeld called down calmly. "That's suicide." I moved left. He said, "Don't do the left side. That's suicide." I did get up, eventually.



Next came Buck Mountain, a somewhat obscure destination toward the southern end of the range. This was my first time guided by Leigh Ortenburger. He came to be the great historian of the Tetons, about which he wrote many articles and several guidebooks. His own ascents, in the Andes and Himalaya, were challenging and imaginative. But in 1953 most of this was in the future. My Gunks friend Mary Sylvander joined us on Buck. Mary was a feisty woman in her mid-40s who talked about a husband she called “my lord and master, Hjalmar,” whom some thought imaginary. He had never appeared on Gunks weekends (he was real, however). We packed up to the base of the north face, tenting in well after dark. Mary observed, with characteristic heat, that we could have stopped much sooner. Next day the face went easily; then Ortenburger led us down the West Ridge, which no one had climbed up. There it is in the guidebook: First descent, August 11, 1953.

Ortenburger and Sylvander wondered about the army-surplus helmet I was wearing. Helmets were a rarity in those times. Mine felt heavy and uncomfortable, but it might have protected me from falling rocks. I’ll never know because it soon fell off and found a permanent home in a crevasse in the glacier below. I was past caring about the loss because I had become horribly nauseated. This was my introduction to mountain sickness. “Unpleasant” doesn’t begin to describe it. Yet by the time we reached the valley floor, I was fine. It’s true what they say about this affliction: It’s awful; like seasickness it has two low points: when you think you are going to die, and when you realize that you won’t; and it will go away when you descend.

My most exciting climb that year was the first complete ascent of the Jensen Ridge on Symmetry Spire. In its day, it was one of the hardest routes in the area. Just a moderate now, it must still be taken seriously, particularly because of loose rock in the middle section. My climb was guided by the indomitable Willi (now no longer called Bill) Unsoeld. I made only two contributions: by discouraging Unsoeld from making a wild leap to a jutting flake near the top, and by thinking of the route in the first place. The previous summer from the Durrance Ridge I had seen four climbers on the ridge to the right. They were Unsoeld, his pal Doc Lee, and a couple of college neophytes. I wondered how they could have reached their improbable, airy stances. They were on the Jensen Ridge, perhaps untouched since its first ascent by Bert Jensen in 1938. But Unsoeld, like Jensen, had bypassed the forbidding first 300 feet of the ridge. My proposal was to start at the very bottom.

So in mid-August Unsoeld, Sylvander, and I made the two-hour trudge to the start of the ridge. To my immense dismay, Unsoeld revealed that he

and Doc Lee had climbed the bottom 300 feet two days earlier. Moreover, the first pitch had been largely direct aid, and he wasn't going to repeat that. So we would just have to start up Templeton's and traverse, as he had done a year before. Unless. "There are some slabs to the right," Unsoeld said doubtfully, "but they looked much too hard." To his amazement, they proved easy. After more than 60 years, I remember the next few pitches—steep, beautiful, solid rock. A right-facing corner required a layback. Here Sylvander took a fall—the only one of the day. Unsoeld held it from a tiny stance some 60 feet above. "I wondered what would happen," he said, with his customary calm.

The route eases off after those first 300 feet, but the rock is less sound. Then it gets steeper and harder as you approach a scary overhang. I have no idea how Unsoeld managed it the previous year, but this time he stood beneath a jagged flake. I could see his legs flex for a jump. I shouted something—maybe, "For God's sake, Willi" or just "Don't!" Anyway, he didn't. Instead he entered a cleft that the guidebook describes as awkward and overhanging. After a few moves the ridge opened onto grassy slopes on which sheep could have grazed.

The ridge became a Tetons classic for a time; in 1959 *Appalachia* called it "one of the hardest climbs" in the park. That's now far from true, but like any other steep rock, it can be dangerous. In late August 1976 my Gunks friend Chuck Loucks took a fatal fall from the easier but less stable middle section of the ridge. Loucks was a strong, careful climber, and a well-loved one. He had apparently thought that the moderate pitch required little protection.

Symmetry Spire and I were not done with each other. The very next day (according to Exum records, though I doubt it was so soon) I was back on the Southwest Ridge with Ortenburger. The second client was an Austrian, Oskar Dorfmann, 49 years old. Oskar was, in the best sense of the word, a character. He was voluble yet modest, and full of European wisdom. One of his many talents was to make humorous watercolors of mountains and their climbers. He had a fat book of these, eminently publishable. (You can find two of them in a book about Glenn Exum published by the Grand Teton Natural History Association.) He resembled the leading Gunks climber Hans Kraus, whom he claimed to know. When I told Kraus that autumn, he laughed and wondered what strange fellow I was bringing into the Appalachian Mountain Club. But Dorfmann did come to New York, joined AMC, and enlivened its rock climbing section for many years with his humor.

Ortenburger asked me to accompany him on an unclimbed pinnacle on the Grand. There were few virgin peaks in the range, and this turned out to

be my only chance to climb one. But on the morning of the attempt, Ortenburger rapped on my window to say he had abandoned the project: Unsoeld had got there first! The pinnacle was accordingly dubbed “Okie’s Thorn” because Ortenburger, who was from Oklahoma, had missed out. As had I. The Unsoeld route is not very hard, rated 5.4.\* A year later, Bill Buckingham established a harder line. This little peak draws scant attention, and the descent is uninviting. The guidebook: “The narrow, steep, and extremely rotten couloir descending west from the notch should be avoided at all costs. The couloir descending to the east, although not so steep, is very nearly as dangerous and is also not recommended.” This description has tempered my regret.

I did have a chance for a guideless technical ascent. Jim McCarthy, the emerging star of the Shawangunks, led a repeat of the previous summer’s Teepe Pillar route. With us was McCarthy’s Princeton friend, Tim Mutch. Mutch was in military service and had driven overnight all the way from Kansas or some such place. Despite his exhaustion, he was fine on the climb except for one slip. He thought that I did not catch him fast enough and expressed serious displeasure.

On the flight home, I bought newspapers at every stop. They carried a story about Art Gilkey, an Exum guide I had never met. He had been on K2, the second-highest mountain in the world and then still unclimbed. The heartbreaking story is familiar to all followers of serious mountaineering. His team was poised for a triumphant ascent, when a fierce storm pummeled them for nearly a week. Gilkey developed life-threatening thrombosis, was lowered in an improvised stretcher, saved by a miraculous belay, but then apparently swept away by an avalanche. As I read on, the Tetons momentarily felt very small.

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\* The Yosemite Decimal System rates technical climbs from 5.1-5.15, with 5.1 the easiest.