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My Only Rescue

The Chimney, Katahdin, 1951

Steven Jervis



I HAVE BEEN FORTUNATE IN MY CLIMBING CAREER. I HAVE NEVER HAD to be rescued. I might have been. Like most other climbers, I took risks and could have gotten into trouble. Once in Peru I tried to dodge a big, falling rock by running in crampons on a patch of hard ice. Only an instinctive last-minute lunge for a hold saved me from a fall into a huge crevasse. Nearer to home, I was caught by winter darkness on Mount Washington. Our lateness had already been reported to staffers down in Pinkham Notch, at the base of the mountain. I raced down in time to cancel the rescue mission that was forming. Later that winter, several of my Harvard Mountaineering Club friends were lost for most of a night; one had to be hospitalized for frostbite.

The emergency that has stuck with me for more than 65 years is one that called *me* into sudden service as a helper. In late July 1951, I participated in my only mountain rescue, on Maine's Katahdin. I had just turned 14. I was briefly touring New England peaks with Don Moser, then 22. My parents had hired Don to amuse my brother and me when they were otherwise engaged. I knew almost nothing about technical climbing, but that was more than Don knew. I wanted to ascend the prominent Chimney Peak to the east of Katahdin's summit. I had heard about the route and seen photographs of the crux: a giant chockstone (a large stone wedged in a vertical crack) that could be passed on the left. This normally required a rope. I had one but scarcely knew how to use it. I was able to do little more than tie a bowline. Had events developed differently, Don and I might have been the ones who needed to be rescued.

Luckily for us, we deferred the Chimney for our second day in the area. On the first day, we scrambled up Pamola, Katahdin's eastern summit, taking time to look heroic on Index Rock (a giant boulder), and then traversed the Knife Edge to the true summit. That evening, back at Chimney Pond Campground, I looked up at our next day's challenge. But as I was doing so, a rumor began quietly to circulate, like a ground fog: there had been an accident. In the Chimney. A young woman had been hurt in a fall; how badly was unclear. A vague call for volunteers went out. Don and I immediately started to repeat our day's hike. By the time we had summited Pamola and dropped down to the top of the Chimney, it was dark and getting cold fast. We were the first to arrive. We had the good sense—or the fear—not to descend by ourselves to the victim. After an hour or more rescuers arrived—nearly 30 of

Seen from Katahdin's Knife Edge, the Chimney route on the ridge's Pamola Peak follows a deep crack at the center culminating in the rounded rock. HADRIANOPOLIS/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

them. Some climbed down. Toward dawn, they emerged with a stretcher carrying Marcia Doolittle. We took turns handing the stretcher down the very rocky terrain to Chimney Pond. After we finally arrived back at the campsite, Don and I slept through much of the day.

We learned more about the accident. Marcia, about 22 years old, had been with her boyfriend, David, when she slipped, high up on what should have been relatively easy ground. Both were experienced and had done the Chimney three times before. They had no rope, for which they were reprimanded in the American Alpine Club's accident report: "It is questionable, however, whether it is wise for anyone to attempt a variation of such apparent difficulty without the protection of a rope. A rope should be considered basic equipment for all climbs on solid rock which involve any difficulty."

It had been a nasty fall. Marcia appeared, her face battered, on the front page of the *New York Daily News*. There was also an article in a local paper, in which I appeared, my name misspelled beyond recognition. The accident received extensive coverage in the December 1951 issue of this journal. (Jean Stephenson wrote a detailed log of the rescue, *Appalachia* 20 no. 5, pages 595–597). The account urged caution, suggested that the rescued should have borne the costs of the rescue and concluded with "an old English Alpinist slogan": "It's not brave, but merely silly, to take a chance on getting killed."

Marcia made a full recovery and married David. She wrote a personal letter of thanks to every one of her rescuers. I should have thanked her. Had she not fallen that day, I might have fallen the next.

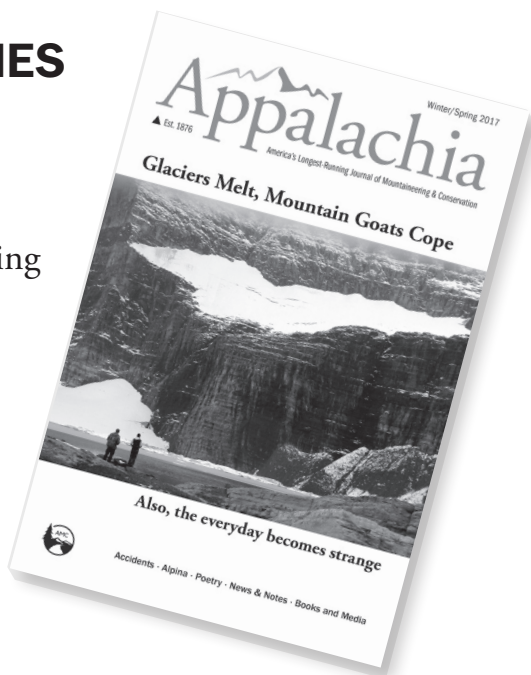
STEVEN JERVIS is a retired professor of English at Brooklyn College. He has been climbing for more than 60 years and hopes to continue a while longer without needing a rescue. He is editing *Appalachia's* Alpina section starting with this issue.

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