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Following Tom to the Pyrenees

33 years later

Douglass P. Teschner



I DROPPED THE BAD NEWS TO TOM JOHNSON IN THE ZERMATT campground. I wasn't going to the Pyrenees with him as planned. Instead, I would stay in the Alps to go off guiding with John Cunningham. Cunningham was famous in Scotland for pioneering classic ice climbs. I'd just spent the winter there. When I was lucky to meet him in our Swiss campground, we immediately hit it off and spent several evenings in deep conversation about Scottish climbing.

I felt guilty about disappointing my good friend Tom. He and I had been communicating for months about our plans for the Pyrenees. We had spent the summers of 1969 and 1970 working together in the Appalachian Mountain Club huts in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. He'd visited me in Morocco, where I was a Peace Corps volunteer. We'd climbed together in the Atlas Mountains and in 1976 went to Denali together. He had traveled far to meet me, and would go to the Pyrenees alone.

But I couldn't help myself: When Cunningham asked me to help out with the group he was leading to Grindelwald and the Eiger, I quickly agreed. It was a great opportunity because I really needed the money, however meager. That 1978 summer in the Swiss Alps was a peak of my "glory years," when I climbed as much as possible, pushing myself to more challenging ascents in New England, Wyoming's Tetons, the Pacific Northwest, Alaska, and Mexico. And, as John A. Woodworth wrote in this journal in December 1972, "For a mountaineer, all roads lead to the Alps."¹

So, in 1978, I was back in the Alps. John and Elizabeth Skirving, veterans of my first trip there, arrived from Seattle. We tackled a slew of peaks, culminating with John and me summiting the Matterhorn. The climbing was going well despite the late snowpack that year. Then Tom Johnson arrived, and we climbed the easy Breithorn before the Skirvings had to head home. After this, Tom and I made an exciting climb of the majestic Obergabelhorn, with deep snow hiding steep ice. On the descent, we leaped across crevasses like a couple of guys in one of those old black-and-white climbing movies, then traversed a steep face that thankfully didn't avalanche.

1 "Monte Rosa: An Evocation," XXXIX no. 2, p. 9. Today's generation of climbers might say, "All roads lead to the Himalaya," but Woodworth, who later became my friend on the *Appalachia* Committee, touched my 23-year-old imagination with the thought of climbing where mountaineering was born.

Descending Taillon, which the guidebook had said required "nothing more than a stiff mountain walk." DOUGLASS P. TESCHNER

Our next plan, established weeks before via trans-Atlantic mail (there was no Internet or cell phones back then), was to leave Switzerland and travel south to explore the Pyrenees, the east–west range that forms the border between France and Spain. But Cunningham had come into my life—and so Tom went on alone, and I headed off to meet Cunningham.

I never regretted that time with Cunningham, who sadly drowned soon afterward as he tried to save a student who had fallen into the ocean sea cliff climbing in Wales. Now, looking back, every move I made with Cunningham was special. Bad weather kept us from summiting the Eiger, but we had a memorable evening bivouacked on its west ridge perched on a dramatic ledge overlooking the famous North Face.

Fortunately, however, my friendship with Tom Johnson endured. We both married and raised two boys in the Upper Valley area near the New Hampshire–Vermont border. Hikes and canoe trips were a regular element of our enduring friendship.

In 2011, I was living in Ukraine. I planned a visit to my brother Jim, an artist who lives in the small central France village of Concremiers, timed to coincide with seeing my son Luke, who would be visiting Paris. I had visited Concremiers twice before, and, although I worried about my aging body’s capabilities on big mountains, I was thinking of a side trip to the Alps. Expressing this idea to Jim, he mentioned the Pyrenees as another option, and an idea took form. I added three extra days to my September 2011 itinerary.

Robert Frost wrote in “The Road Not Taken,” “Oh, I marked the first [path] for another day!/Yet knowing how way leads on to way/I doubted if I should ever come back.”

Sometimes life provides exceptions. I had passed up my chance for the Pyrenees 33 years before, but, now, I was handed a second chance! Tom would not be there this time. I knew he would not travel to France for a three-day climb. But in a real way, he was with me.

Though not as spectacular as the Alps, the Pyrenees also host a myriad of peaks, glaciers, and technical rock routes. I have mellowed over the years and don’t have the same drive to justify the anxiety that comes with a technical climb on a major peak, especially when I would have to do all the leading and route finding. And I was not excited about carrying the extra weight of a rope and technical gear given my osteoarthritic knees. But I still call myself a mountaineer and hoped to get up a peak.

I had acquired the excellent guidebook *Walks and Climbs in the Pyrenees* (by Kev Reynolds, Cicerone Guides, 1983) and opted for a peak called Taillon,

among the easiest of the Pyrenees 3,000-meter summits. Despite its location amid the grandeur of the spectacular Cirque de Gavarnie, the summit was accessible by what the guidebook author called “nothing more than a stiff mountain walk.”

After a few days in Concremiers, Jim and I drove south through deep-cut valleys and stunning mountain scenery to Gavarnie, a beautiful mountain village overrun with tourists. We did not use the traditional access to the French Alpine Club’s Breche (Sarradets) Hut, the steep hike past one of the highest waterfalls in Europe. We took the easy way, driving up what was once a planned mountain road into Spain, to the crowded Col des Tentes parking lot at 2,208 meters (7,244 feet). From this above-treeline start, the hut approach is mostly easy, with a fair amount of traversing, amid beautiful alpine scenery and shaggy, bell-adorned sheep.

The final part was steeper, including a rocky climb up a watercourse, aided by a chain. It was submersed in water at one point, and I contemplated a drier option requiring a rock climbing-type move, but thought better and retreated into the wet. Up higher, I looked back to see Jim was frozen on that awkward rock move I had passed by, unable to retreat. After a few tense minutes, he finally made it across, to the relief of both of us.

Just over a small pass, we found the impressive stone hut in a majestic location at 2,587 meters (8,488 feet). Fortunately, Jim had reserved two spots as it was packed, much to my surprise in mid-September. Typical of European mountain huts, it brought back a flood of memories from my 1970s climbs in the Alps.

Unlike the AMC huts, it is quite minimalist and cramped. We ate in shifts and slept on shelves. The food was basic, but totally adequate. The crowd spoke Spanish, English, and French. I am fluent in French from my early Peace Corps days, so felt right at home.

When John Skirving and I had climbed the Matterhorn back in 1978, we started at 3 A.M., a true predawn “alpine start” (and we still did not get back down before dark and had to bivouac, but that is another story). But the Pyrenees are much smaller, requiring no such urgency. Wait for the sun to come up, have a nice breakfast, then join the gang heading up the steep slope to the Breche de Roland, a dramatic gash in the cliffs on the France–Spain border. As long as you find the best, but not always obvious, trail, it is pretty straightforward, but wander off and you may be awkwardly slipping and sliding on rock-covered slabs.



The author en route to Taillon Peak. COURTESY OF DOUGLASS P. TESCHNER

From the spectacular Breche, a small—but distinct—climbers' trail crosses over to the Spanish side and turns right, traversing under towering cliffs to gain the ridge beyond. The last obstacle is an easy, if slightly exposed, traverse around a gendarme (this time on the French side), past a small cave where a marker indicated a climber had died during a thunderstorm. That affected my brother, but luckily, no serious clouds hung over us. From there, it was a straightforward hike up the cone to the top of Taillon at 3,144 meters (10,315 feet). The views were great, especially of the glaciated Vignemale Massif to the west.

That peak might have been a good choice for Tom and me 33 years before. I wonder what we would have climbed together? After I abandoned him for Cunningham, Tom had picked easier solo climbs.

At this point in my life, getting up a mountain by an easy route is satisfying enough. And I have dragged along my good-natured brother who, while he would never do this on his own, was reveling in the moments with me.

We reversed the route and, nearing the Breche, dropped down a short distance to a beautiful boulder-strewn meadow on the Spanish side. We ate lunch and napped, and then I got out my rock climbing shoes (the one remnant of my climbing days I had added to the pack) to do some enjoyable bouldering on the ubiquitous rocks. I am not much of a rock climber

anymore but still enjoy caressing rock, roughening fingertips, keeping a hand in the game.

Back at the hut, it was still early so, after a short break, we hiked 30 minutes downhill through a pleasant alpine meadow to a perch where we could get a better view of the magnificent, tiered Gavarnie waterfall, with an overall drop of 422 meters (1,385 feet). The next morning, I did get a predawn alpine start, but only because I wanted to soak in the mountains as much as possible before we headed back to the lowlands. I reached the Breche at sunrise, less the crowds of the prior day, then descended back to the hut in time for breakfast.

Before the hike out, I watched two climbers organize their rock gear on the hut porch in preparation for a technical ascent. I remembered when I'd done those climbs and others watched me with the pangs of envy I now felt. Perhaps that would have been Tom and me back in 1978 (although they'd never recognize the equipment we used back then).

On the drive back to Concremiers, we stopped briefly at Lourdes where I splashed some holy water on my aching knees. There was little apparent result; Jim said I needed more faith.

I mailed a postcard of the Breche Hut to Tom, summarizing the adventure. When I was back in the States, we got together and planned some hikes in our beautiful White Mountains. Finally, Tom recounted his Pyrenees trip. He'd crossed the Breche de Roland from Spain to France and stayed at the same hut. And he reminded me that when he'd descended to the village of Gavarnie, a letter from me had been waiting at the post office marked—as they were in the pre-Internet climbing days—“hold for arrival.”

I had forgotten sending that letter. Our friendship endures. Perhaps the reason I went back to the Pyrenees 33 years later was that Tom and I just think alike.

DOUGLASS P. TESCHNER, a former member of the *Appalachia* Committee and an AMC member since 1965, has a long history of contributions to this journal, most recently “Ding ’Em Down, Revisited: Two Generations in the AMC Huts” in the Summer/Fall 2012 issue. When not in his hometown of Pike, New Hampshire, he lives Kyiv, Ukraine, where he serves as the Peace Corps country director.

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