

ROMANANCING T

"Oh no, it's the Canadians," joked an American climber as our car pulled into North Conway.

At least we hoped he was joking. But with Americans, it's often hard to tell. "Don't worry, it's just good-natured banter," I was assured.

"Yeah, really," said someone else, ambiguous to the extreme.

However, our rating in the New Hampshire popularity stakes was the least of our worries. The White Mountains were shrouded in cloud, and a steady drizzle had already ruled out the possibility of a quick afternoon climb. And if the rain persisted throughout the night, we knew that the Whitehorse Slabs would be treacherous in the morning.

New Hampshire boasts some of the finest rock climbing in the eastern United States. The granite cliffs of Cathedral and Whitehorse are literally criss-crossed with hundreds of routes: from beginners' climbs to routes which require a high level of commitment, physical fitness and expertise.

Cliffs on the white Mountains were first recognized for their rock climbing potential in the late 1920's by members of the Boston-based Appalachian Mountain Club. Using European climbing equipment, all the major cliffs were climbed in succession, beginning in 1928.

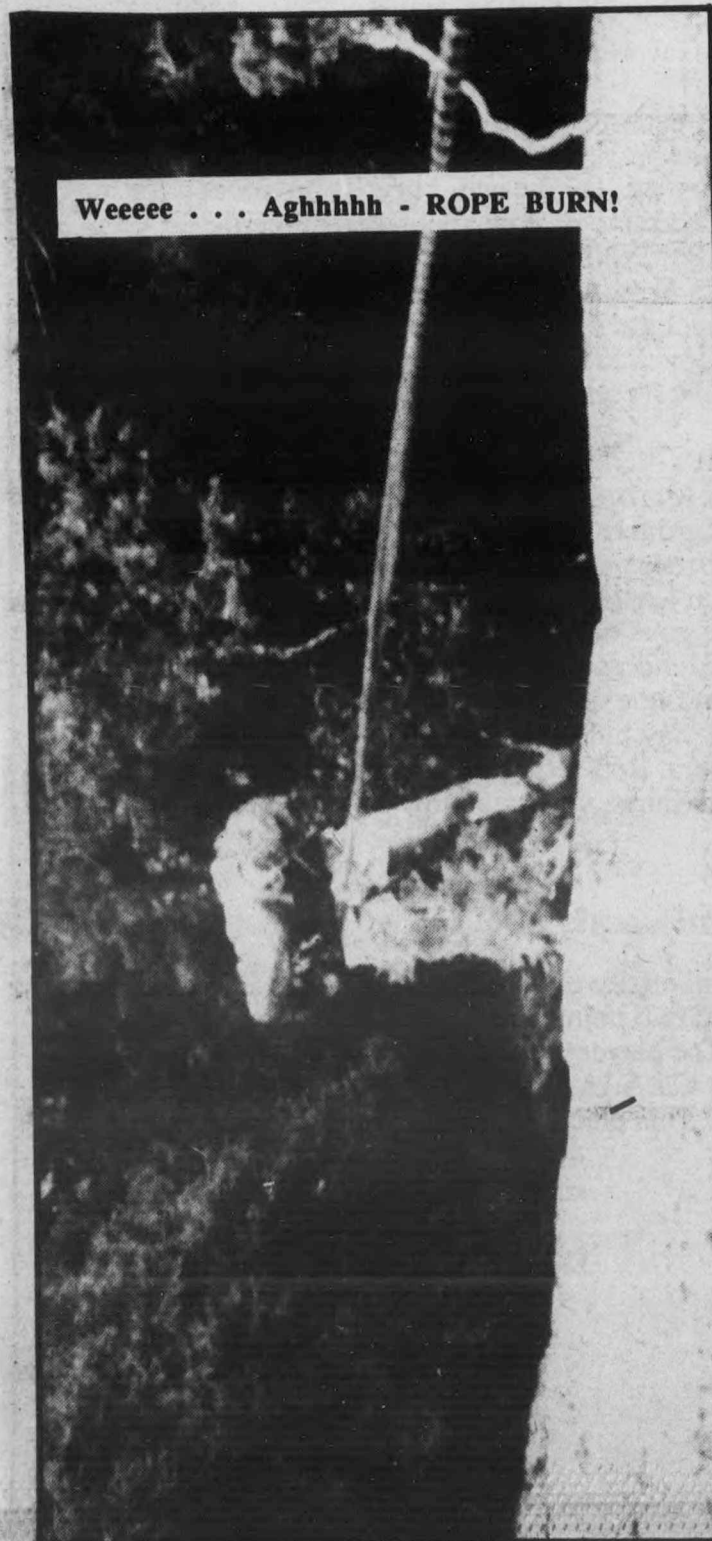
Now, the town of North Conway is a mecca for rock climbers in eastern North America. Fredericton-based climbers have been visiting the imposing granite cliffs since 1982, repeating some of the more popular routes.

And this year was no exception. A group of eight climbers, most of whom had attended a basic climbing course offered by the UNB Rock and Ice Club, spent Thanksgiving romancing the stone in Mew Hampshire.

Saturday morning dawned sharp and clear. Although it had rained during the night, we optimistically figured that the slabs would have had time to dry off.

We were wrong. It was wet. Very wet. This was particularly upsetting to us because slab climbing relies almost exclusively on friction: Climbers are very rarely afforded the luxury of a handhold. Maximum friction is usually achieved by getting as much rubber on the rock as possible. Recent technological advanced in the manufacture of climbing boots have led to the development of a super-sticky sole which bonds to the rock as if it were coated with molasses. But on slimy, lichen covered rock, it can prove almost impossible to get a decent foothold.

Nevertheless, after taking a few undignified and painful slides, the lead climber made a belay atop the first pitch of our 800 foot odyssey. The other climbers followed, held in comparative safety by a top rope.



Because of the risks involved, lead climbing is very different to seconding. In the event of a fall, the leader has to rely on the specially designed camming devices, chocks and nuts which were jammed into place on the way up. These devices are usually wedged in obvious fault lines and cracks in the rock--although the leader often has to be quite creative when placing protection.

But on the slabs, there are very few places to wedge protection. Instead, climbers clip into pre-drilled bolts which are dotted about all over the crag. In theory this sounds fine, but in practice the run-out between bolts can be 150 feet (or a rope's length). Sighs of relief can usually be heard once a climber "clips" a bolt.

As we climbed higher, the rock started to dry. Far beneath us, Echo Lake became visible, its light blue water set in stark contrast to the russet hues of New Hampshire's much vaunted foliage. Around us, the jangling of climbing hardware made us aware that we were not alone.

By early afternoon, we had begun our descent. Everyone had enjoyed the experience and there was a sense of achievement on having completed a fairly lengthy multi-pitch climb.

"It was awesome," said Pete Lloyd, a third year biology student. At one point, Pete had taken the sharp end of the rope to lead his first pitch.

"Man, that was exciting," said Pete. "It's a whole different ball game, this leading business. The adrenaline started pumping and, oh man, it's something else."

Like Pete says, leading certainly isn't boring. And it isn't for the faint-hearted. Anyone who has hung off a desperate move while trying to find protection knows that leading can be frightening.

But there is a difference between "good" fear and "bad" fear. Good fear makes you think. . . it gives you the courage to back down from a climb you know is beyond your ability, or, for that matter, the concentration necessary to make a difficult move.

On the other hand, bad fear causes panic, an elevated pulse, and irrational behaviour--suck as "going for it" when your KNOW you shouldn't. Preemptive fear is your brain's way of saying: "try this if you like, but I'm going to hide in the basement."

However, held securely on a top rope, beginners can afford to take a few chances.

And the dialogue between climber and belayer can often be colourful.

Sherry Pellerin, a fourth year computer science student, taught those American climbers within earshot a few choice expressions as she floundered beneath an overhang on Cathedral Ledge.

"I don't like overhangs," Sherry groaned. "I want to come down. Look, can I be lowered?"

But her belayer wasn't sympathetic. "I'm not going to lower you," he said, holding her tight on a top rope. "Besides," he grinned, "you called me nasty names this morning."

"I can't reach that hold. My goddamn pony tail is in the way. This is crazy. . . Is my left foot in a good position. It turned out out that her left foot was in a good position. As she stood up, her belayer hauled in a few more feet of rope--enough to get her over the crux.

Climbing is so much fun.

ARTICLE BY MARK STEVENS

