



Larry Hamilton at the end of the big roof on the first ascent of Aeolian Wall.
Photo: Larry Hamilton Collection.

All In *by John Long*

In Spring of 1981, before urban sprawl reached the fringe of Red Rock Canyon, the ten-mile drive out from town followed an arrow-straight, two-lane road cutting through barren, wide open plains. Richard Harrison and I made this drive many times that year, and as the gray, white, and red rocks crouching on the western horizon slowly swelled to giants, our eyes were always drawn toward the hulking Northeast Face of Mount Wilson, shouldering 7,068 feet into the sky. Much more a mountain than a rock face, Wilson had a stand-alone, Sphinx-like majesty, possibly from its great age; for how many

eons had it brooded over the lone and level sands spread out below? Aside from a mixed route along the left margin of the central wall, established eight years before by Red Rocks pioneers Joe Herbst and Larry Hamilton, Old Man Wilson was a mystery.

One evening in Randy Grandstaff's ghetto hacienda just outside Vegas, Richard and I decided to finally go up and see what the Old Man was all about. Early the next morning we tossed together a small rack of nuts and a few pins, three bolts (shorty, quarter-inch Rawls, known as "coffin nails," almost

worthless in soft Red Rock sandstone, but all we had and better than nothing) and one rope, a natty, 150-footer, our last functional cord after four months in the Valley. We jammed two quart bottles of water and several Snickers bars into a day pack, push-started my VW van, and motored for the Red Rocks.

A rutted dirt road led close to the mouth of the canyon. Ten minutes along a dry streambed and we veered left up a brushy slope toward the 60-degree lower wall, a chossy, 1,500-foot long washboard festooned with trees and shrubs. After an hour, we roped up for a scruffy 5.9 corner that deposited us on a big ledge featuring a colossal pine tree that cast a shadow like a thundercloud. We smoked a few Camels and studied the 200-foot, high-angle slab swooping skyward—the start of the upper wall. We needed to get into a big, U-shaped bowl just above the slab, where we hoped to follow crack systems leading up and left. With only three shorty bolts, I knew we could never tick this lower slab, which from below looked casual enough but up close looked bald and hard.

Since this climb was my idea, I started begging Richard's pardon for us having to go down. He said that since we were already there, and had the three bolts, there was no harm in just going up to "Have a look." Then he tied in and ran the rope nearly 100 feet on rickety warts and desperate carbuncles before sinking a bolt. Twenty feet higher, he found a foot long crack and banged home a small angle, then sunk another bolt and brought me up. The U-shaped bowl was still quite a ways above us, but I did have the one bolt and, since we were already there, I decided to climb up a ways just to "Have a look." The wall above steepened and I quickly found myself on sketchy terrain, and drove our final coffin nail. The rock above was smooth as a bottle and the bottom of the bowl hadn't gotten much closer.

The recon was over and we now had to honestly appraise what the hell we were getting ourselves into here. I could climb back to the belay and we could rap off on a single line. We'd have to leave the rope and down-solo that 5.9 corner below, a stunt I wasn't particularly high on but figured we could do if we had to. But once I cast off from here, retreat was impossible with one rope and the only way off was up. From the ground, a continuous crack system looked to run from the left margin of the bowl all the way to the top. But clinging to that slab we couldn't see any of it. We decided to throw the dice.

Like most first ascents on open faces, route finding was crucial. We'd basically free soloed from the start, but I couldn't go running the line here without extreme diligence because I doubted the coffin nail, nor yet the belay anchor, could sustain a king-sized whipper. So I juked around trying various lines and downclimbing back to the bolt before discovering an unlikely traversing line along a pliable black scab, followed by easier but runout dog-paddling to a big ledge at the bottom of the bowl. We were all-in now, and the following hours were some of the most exciting Richard and I ever experienced on a rock climb—not for what we found, but what we feared we might find. Or not find.

We worked up and left, following a fold inside the bowl; the higher we climbed, the less I liked the looks of the off-size roof crack jutting into space at the end of the fold. I cringed to think of punching out that thing with only our one big hex, though it looked as though one of us would soon have to try. Following a suave lieback and stemming pitch, Richard started bridging up

toward the overhang and to our vast relief, found a crack that skirted around left. Then he vanished from view, a trend that continued on the many pitches that followed.

Anxiety runs high on a big first ascent, especially when retreat is physically impossible, and especially so here, where the leader would typically move up twenty or thirty feet and disappear round a corner. When you can't see much of where you're going, if what you're up against can only be imagined, it's a sure bet that in time, your mind will start seeing vultures circling overhead. Lucky for us the cracks kept connecting, though we understood that the higher we climbed, so rose the odds that somewhere, perhaps soon, the crack would blank out or pinch to nothing or run into a holdless roof, leaving us high and dry. The only diversion was to jump out on the lead and get lost in the function, leaving the belayer to count the vultures.

The massive outback tracks of the Red Rock are a miraculous, visceral place, especially in late afternoon, when long shadows slither into canyons and up the great walls. An eerie solitude asserts itself, and a penetrating silence that reaches back forever. And for the belayer perched high on a rock face, as the shadows play over him and his partner mounts out of sight, it is sure he will come to experience what it means to be alone. It can condense the mind wonderfully, or shrivel a person up, or do both in turn. Such are the mighty Red Rocks I will always remember with awe and gratitude.

We climbed for hours, on everything from hand cracks to flares, then suddenly the wall leaned back and a little scrambling found a cairn on the summit. The panoramic view was spectacular, as was our relief that we didn't get marooned on the wall. But the fun was just beginning.

The cairn indicated that ambitious hikers had worked out a descent route somewhere on the Byzantine backside of the mountain, but even if we could have found it we'd have ended up miles from the car. So we scrambled down the right shoulder and dove into the most promising looking gully—and ten minutes later were performing the first of many half-rope-length rappels off saplings and horns. This went on for ages; the further we descended the steeper grew the terrain. Nearing the bottom, out of water and food and almost out of gear, the shadows overtook us.

The second to last rap was partially free hanging and ended on a small ramp. Our entire rack lay on the gully we'd just thrashed down—except for one last knifeblade. We scratched around and managed to slug the blade home in a thin crack where the ramp met the main wall. The rising ring told us it was bomber. Then we chucked the doubled rope into space and peered over. The ends seemed to reach, and fortunately they did, with a few feet to spare. We stumbled out to the dry streambed just as pitch darkness fell. And darkness in those canyons is true darkness.

High above, Mount Wilson stood out from the night sky like giant black sentry. The route we climbed, though hazardous down low, was not nearly the climb I kept imagining in my mind—the one, thank God, that we never found. Only Old Man Wilson can say why the cracks never ran out and never, even for a body length, got impossibly hard. And that jackass descent left us with little more than our clothes. Yet when I look at the guidebook now and see "Woodrow," Grade IV, 5.10a/b, it sounds almost casual.