

Early Days *by Joanne Urioste*

When I dig down three decades into my memory and try to recreate Red Rock at that time, I remember a profound silence and stillness. There were less than ten serious technical rock climbers living in the Vegas Valley then, so the chances of bumping into a fellow climber in the canyons were slim. The silence was pregnant with possibility, and the sandstone walls were like blank chalkboards, not yet marked. It all seemed like a giant canvas upon which to paint our dreams. The rugged land, the sharp brush, and the harsh climate kept most people out, so we climbers of the early days often felt we owned the place. At that time, it seemed unlikely that the wilderness nature of vast Red Rock Canyon would be threatened by man.

In 1978, my husband, Jorge Urioste, and I climbed Joe Herbst's Original Route on the Velvet Wall, which gave us our first hands-on experience of that canyon. The lower half, up to a pitch above the top of the Black Tower, was continuous and challenging class five climbing. After that, the terrain became broken class four. Jorge and I longed for a route that maintained the 5.9 airiness all the way to the top. Could the corners straight above the Black Tower give us what we craved, or would it simply be another aid climb? The angle looked intimidating and steep! We knew we'd need many bolts, and we knew that we could not stand in balance to place them. Drilling in those days was all by hand, with the blood draining away from the up-stretched arms. Lactic acid quickly built up to



Joanne juggling the fixed lines on the chimneys of Epinephrine.



Jorge on the upper corners of Epinephrine.

painful levels. So each hole had to be executed with purpose and patience. Given that the summer sun made the upper wall un-climbable until 1:00 PM, a one-day first ascent was not possible for us. Complicating factors were the weight of large amounts of water, the burden of many heavy, home-made bolt hangers and drilling equipment, and the lack of camming devices for protection. "Friends" were just becoming available and were still a novelty, so there were only four sizes. They had a more primitive design, and there was uncertainty about how much force they'd actually hold. Thus, our gear consisted of tube chocks to 6 inches, many hexes, wired nuts, pitons, etriers, jumars, hooks, bolting gear, an 11 mm lead rope, a 9 mm haul line, and extra ropes for fixing. The logistics of putting up a first ascent in August under these conditions led to our choice of fixing 1500 feet of rope. We did not simply want to ascend the line, but we wanted to create, through bolting, a free route of excellent quality that would bring many years of fun to subsequent parties. Without further ado, we climbed the chimneys to the top of the Black Tower. The chimneys had no protection bolts or belay bolts in those days, and we did not place any until months after the first ascent had been completed. So the leading was bold and the protection had to be creative. Imagine climbing those chimneys with a 20-pound rack of huge tube chocks, hexes, pitons and a hammer...and very little protection! Pretty soon we were atop the Black Tower. Each day we climbed, we carried supplies as we juggled the ropes: water, bolting hardware, and more ropes for fixing. A couple of hundred feet more brought us to un-traveled terrain, as we headed towards the Elephant's Trunk. The upper corners now loomed directly above us, and the etriers came out of the pack. Jorge was on lead, working like a pack animal. Pounding, sweating, stepping up. Pounding, sweating, stepping up. It was a painfully slow, repetitive cycle. For me,



Jorge hand drilling on Dream of Wild Turkeys.

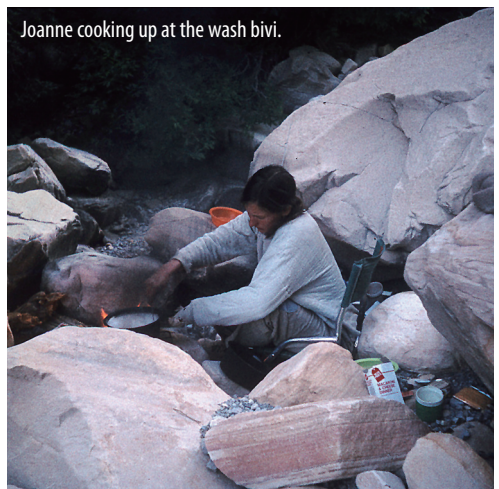
the belay was tough, too. Boredom was like lactic acid of the brain, and the belay seat cut into me, as I continually struggled for comfort and coherence. Suddenly, Jorge was yelling down to me that he was having trouble breathing, that an insect bite was causing an allergic reaction. Systematically, I lowered him and we rappelled the 1000-plus feet to the ground. I peered into his throat, which was now mostly blocked by a tongue swollen to triple its normal size. With no possibility of rescue, we continued hiking slowly to the truck, our only viable possibility. By the time Jorge arrived at the ER in Vegas, he could hardly breathe. He could have collapsed in the desert and died. A shot of epinephrine quickly stopped the swelling and soon our worries were over. That night we hiked back to our camp in Black Velvet Canyon, by moonlight. The next day at 12:45 PM we were juggling the fixed lines to finish the pitch. The name for this route had to be "Epinephrine"!

In the early days of Red Rock, I considered Joe Herbst to be the alpha climber of the area. His forte was offwidth crack climbing and, indeed, he was viewed as a "human cam unit". "Why do I need protection, when my body is securely locked into the crack?", he would say as he was 50 feet above his last tottering tube chock in a beastly flare. This philosophy held true on the many difficult, unprotected offwidth routes he created, such as Malicious Mischief and Holed Up. I loved climbing with Joe, and I learned something every time I watched him glide gracefully up a crack. His appreciation of camming and jamming led to the creation of many routes in the 1 to 6 pitch

range, which generally followed obvious crack systems and required few or no bolts. In addition to these small to medium length climbs, Joe pioneered ascents of the three big walls of the area: The Velvet, The Aeolian, and The Rainbow. The style of all was "fast and light", epitomizing the aesthetic prescription of the age. The big routes were done in one push; there'd be a cold, thirsty bivouac or two on the face; retreat would have been difficult; and the goal was to minimize piton use or drilling in order to preserve the natural state of the route. Hammerless protection was passive. Camalots and Friends did not yet exist. During these ascents, one had to be resourceful, tough, and brave.

Jorge and I felt we were in a less elite category than Joe and his serious partners. We lacked the ability to run it out on 5.10 offwidth, as well as the speed to nail Rainbow Wall in a timely manner, but we shared an aesthetic appreciation of, and reverence for, the big features of Red Rock. Gradually in the late 70's, Jorge and I started linking discontinuous crack systems with bolts rather than bravado, a method at odds with the prescribed style of the day. Our goal was evolving into the philosophy that we'd create routes that would be fun to repeat, not simply ones that we'd ascended "by the skin of our teeth". The price of pursuits that challenge the social norm can be the sting of disapproval and ostracism. Thus, our methods of fixing rope, using siege tactics, and drilling lots of holes were earning us the status of climbing rule-breakers.

On a windless afternoon in August of 1978, Jorge and I had juggled the fixed lines to our high point on Epinephrine, the pitch below the uppermost 5.9 pitch. We intended to finish the last three class 5 pitches and thus complete the route. Looking 1500 feet down into the canyon, we were surprised to see that Joe Herbst's vehicle was parked at the end of the dirt road, and he was hiking into the canyon, probably to observe our progress. We hollered down into the stillness, "Greetings!" Magically, the sound carried as if we were half a ropelength apart. Then we invited him to jug the lines and complete the first ascent with us. Goosebumps tickled me to the core, as he raced up the ropes. I always viewed this day as a glorious expression of friendship. But it also represented much more. It was two worlds blending in mutual approval and celebration. The prophet of boldness had accepted the offering of the elves of route-tinkering, and I felt most honored!



Joanne cooking up at the wash biv.

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Two summers later, Jorge and I were back in Black Velvet Canyon, this time with a fully stocked camp right in the dry riverbed at the base of the wall. We had humped in large loads, with canned food and beer to last for weeks. Occasionally, friends would pop in for sun bathing, skinny-dipping and campfire partying. It was a life of morning relaxation followed by post-one-o'clock-effort, when the Velvet Wall went into the shade. In these times there were no rangers with no-bolting and no-camping rules. One day, a drizzle turned into a torrential flood tearing down the canyon like raging chocolate five feet deep. We had about 30 seconds to recognize the potential trouble, throw our climbing gear into the tent and drag the tent to safety on higher ground. Most of the canned goods and beer were swept away and deposited under gravel somewhere between our camp and Lake Mead! I'll never forget my culture shock that night, as we drove into town to re-supply our food, with the cheesy neon glare intruding upon our desert solitude.

Our reason for camping in the canyon was to work on another climb. At this time there were no routes to the left of Epinephrine on the main portion of the Black Velvet Wall. Randy Grandstaff had told us that he'd completed an aid climb linking the three prominent discontinuous cracks on the wall. But earlier in the spring, Jorge and I had attempted the route he'd described and realized that he'd rapped off after only two pitches. That reconnaissance gave us a close view of the angle and features of the face, and we believed that it could be a great free climb. Again, we'd need a lot of bolts, and that meant we'd need lots of fixed ropes. Little by little, over the period of a couple of weeks, we pushed upward a pitch a day, until we'd completed all 12 pitches. Then we cleaned the ropes and made a continuous free ascent, climbing all the way to the summit of the peak, to please our alpine instincts. Because we had used more bolts and more siege tactics than ever before, we were being categorized as naughty "turkeys" by the climbing community. And this route was our dream-come-true. Thus we chose to name it "Dream of Wild Turkeys".

Over the course of the next few years, Jorge and I created several more high quality, long routes on the Velvet Wall, including Sour Mash, Gobbler/Yellow Brick Road, Refried Brains, and Prince of Darkness. Our goal focused on route creation

rather than on route ascension. Climbers are very aware of the aesthetics of their style of route ascension. Was a route completed fast, with no falls, no rests, no beta, minimal gear, and with a positive emotional connection between the partners? These elements rate the quality of the ascent. In our focus on route creation, Jorge and I took an engineering approach. What was the most expedient way to create a great route that others would enjoy? We called it "route installation". Aid, no problem. Siege tactics, no problem. But our intent was that the end product be long, continuous and free. And fun to repeat! We never imagined that our routes would become so popular, but they started seeing many ascents by a wide variety of climbers. Our routes tended to be of continuous difficulty, with solid rock and lots of exposure, which attracted elite climbers. Additionally, we made sure our routes were well-protected, which made them appealing to weekend warriors, as well.

Two very noteworthy climbs were established on Black Velvet Wall after Jorge and I completed the bulk of our activity. Fiddler on the Roof (Wonderly, Egbert, Richards, 1990) is a masterpiece of route creation specifically designed to guide subsequent parties through an emotional wonderland of climbing experience. It is not for the weekend warrior! And Rock Warrior (Harrison, Smith, Nordblom, 1983) has even less protection. It was put up in a single push with no fixed ropes or aid. Thus the first ascensionists had to be willing and able to down-climb steep, tricky 5.10, with potential falls long enough to kill them, if they found themselves at a dead end in their route-finding. It is a strong statement of commitment to the "Emboldened Rule"!

Today we see Summerlin spilling over into Red Rock Canyon. Las Vegas has expanded to the eastern edge of Blue Diamond Hill, and development is in the making for the top of the Hill. Bonnie Springs is building custom homes a few miles from the mouth of Black Velvet Canyon. Oliver Ranch is becoming a facility for school children. And the amount of traffic in Red Rock grows and grows. The illusion we had in 1978 of an eternally pristine Red Rock is coming to a disappointing end. Even as its wilderness character fades, climbers can still climb, and I hope they do so with an appreciation of the variety of historical elements that have clashed and melded to make the Red Rock experience of today.

The first attempt at Dream of Wild Turkeys.
Jorge Urioste at the hanging bivi.

