

A brief History by Larry DeAngelo and Jerry Handren

Red Rocks stands unique in the world of rock climbing. Its position results from an accidental confluence of the time, the people, and a spectacular escarpment of unclimbed rock. The time was the 1970s and the sport of rock climbing was changing. During the previous decade, American rock climbing was dominated by impressive ascents of Yosemite's big walls. Open any American Alpine Journal of the period and you are sure to find the words: Royal Robbins, Grade VI, 5.9, A4. These walls represented committing steps into the unknown and demanded a large measure of toughness, boldness, and technological innovation. The latter was closely associated with the chrome-moly piton. These were resilient and reusable and well-suited to Yosemite's granite cracks. But, after a decade of wall climbing, two things had become apparent. The first was that big walls were not impossible and they no longer represented an ultimate challenge lying near the limits of the best climbers. The second was that a decade of placing and removing tough steel pitons was taking a heavy toll on the rock. Climbers were ready for new challenges, in both climbing difficulty and in preservation of the rock. The stage was set for the "clean climbing revolution." In Britain there was already a long tradition of climbing with natural protection. The use of runners and chockstones, both artificial and natural, allowed British climbers to extract the maximum challenge from their comparatively limited rock resources. This was something Royal Robbins observed first-hand on trip to Britain in the mid-1960s. He perceived this as the logical next step in American climbing. His 1967 ascent of Nutcracker Sweet (as it was then known) was the first step in popularizing natural protection in Yosemite. His friend Yvon Chouinard began importing British chocks to supplement his already famous line of chrome moly pitons. Chouinard was an innovator, and soon developed his own variation, the Hexentric, and of course it was featured in his catalog. The Chouinard catalog was much more than a mere listing of products. For an entire generation of climbers it was the textbook from which they learned to climb. When "climbing books" were giving advice such as "always maintain three points of contact," the Chouinard catalog showed how to nest pitons in flared cracks and use hero loops to extend reach on difficult aid placements. This was information climbers could use! The 1972 edition carried Doug Robinson's seminal article, "The Whole Natural Art of Protection." Robinson went beyond a simple primer on nut use. He articulated the concept of clean climbing as a way to elevate the elements of boldness, judgment, ingenuity, and commitment. His article was a call to arms that resonated with American climbers and defined the standards of an adventurous new generation.

None of this was news to Joe Herbst, who already knew Doug Robinson from the time he had spent as a helper at the Palisade School of Mountaineering. Growing up in Las Vegas, Joe had Red Rocks in his backyard. As a teenager, he began exploring the canyons and walls. Veteran outdoorsman Howard Booth recalls that it wasn't long before young Joe was advancing beyond his older mentors. Following his Red Rocks apprenticeship, Joe polished his skills in the California Palisades and developed his friendship with Doug Robinson.

And so it happened that in 1970, when Joe returned from summer in the Palisades and autumn in Yosemite, he was well-prepared for the blank climbing canvas that was Red Rocks. And thus it was that this majestic climbing area was born simultaneously with the clean climbing revolution and a widely expanded appreciation of the wilderness experience and ethic. Joe got to work without delay. His attention was drawn to the biggest and most ambitious walls. Immediately he free-soloed Mount Wilson's huge east face. Jubilant Song, on the south face of Windy Peak, and the elegant line of Triassic Sands came next. The latter was a warm-up for an attempt on the Rainbow Wall. This wall, the "Sandstone Halfdome" as Joe thought of it, almost brought disaster to Joe and Yosemite partner Larry Hamilton when a loose flake shredded their gear but spared their lives. Though Joe has left an impressive list of first ascents, perhaps his biggest legacy is the climbs left unrecorded. There are many. Tom Kaufman, a frequent partner of Joe's, estimated that eighty percent of their routes never made it to a guidebook. Anyone who has explored off the beaten path in Red Rocks is sure to have had the experience of climbing for hours only to come across an ancient length of faded and brittle one-inch webbing as the sole reminder of an adventure decades ago. Not content to merely tickle the toes of giants, Joe Herbst immediately targeted the biggest and most imposing walls in the range. His "Big Three" were all accomplished before almost all the shorter walls and crag routes. The Rainbow Wall was climbed in spring, 1973 with Larry Hamilton. In Fall, 1973, Joe and Tom Kaufman climbed the Velvet Wall. As if this were not enough, Joe and Larry Hamilton returned to Wilson in 1975 to climb the impressive Aeolian Wall. Once the big walls were out of the way, Herbst pioneered numerous shorter climbs. In particular he scoured the escarpment for clean-cut Yosemite style cracks such as The Schwa, Red Zinger and Orange Clonus. Herbst was well known as a master of off-widths and left an impressive legacy of grim knee grinders such as Beauty, Wise Guy's Offsize and hardest of all, Unfinished Symphony a route which regularly spits out modern day aspirants. During the early 1970s, the primary problem encountered by Joe Herbst was simply finding partners. Almost all of his routes in this time period were done in the company of out-of-towners. Larry Hamilton was frequently present for the biggest efforts, and Tom Kaufman often rode the bus in from Colorado for a long list of new routes. Jeff Lansing was one of the few locals who was a serious rock climber. His original route on Mescalito in 1968 is the earliest recorded route in the first Red Rocks guidebook. Jeff also provided the impetus for what has paradoxically come to be regarded as a quintessential "Joe Herbst route", Ragged Edges.

Ironically, Joe never met his fellow Las Vegas, John Williamson. John also got into climbing in the late 1960s and sought adventure in his local mountains. Suffering from a similar lack of partners, John enlisted his friends into the sport. Most of his climbs fell into one of two categories. The first included short crag routes such as the Fox and the Great Red Book. These were often practice for the second group: long, multi-attempt, often multi-day ascents of complicated mountaineering walls. The east faces of Mount Wilson, Rainbow Mountain and

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Mescalito Tower all received Williamson ascents in this time period. College eventually took John out of Las Vegas, and it was only because of a chance meeting with Joanne Urioste, author of the first Red Rocks climbing guidebook, that some of his routes have been recorded.

The days of isolation and no partners would soon be ending for Red Rocks. Outsiders discovered the area. 1975 saw visits from Geoff Conley (later to do the Resolution Arete) and, (who else?), Fred Beckey. Larry Hamilton's article on the Aeolian Wall appeared in the 1975-76 issue of *Ascent* and piqued interest across the country. A new generation of young climbers from Las Vegas emerged, including Randal Grandstaff, Nick Nordblom, and John Martinet. And, of course, there was the ever widening circle of Joe Herbst's friends.

Of all the new arrivals however none made a more lasting impact than George and Joanne Urioste. They had moved to

town in 1974, but had done almost no climbing in the first year after their arrival, having been put off by their initial forays into Red Rocks which had taken the form of unpleasant bushy scrambles in the blazing heat. However, in 1975 they climbed Catwalk on the Celebration wall and this first good experience opened their eyes to the vast potential of their local area. Once inspired, the Uriostes unleashed a tidal wave of enthusiasm and creative energy that saw them establish over 100 routes over the next decade. Many of these routes, such as *Crimson Chrysalis*, *Epinephrine* and *Levitation 29* are now some of Red Rock's most famous and popular climbs. Many of the Uriostes climbs fit well with the traditional approach epitomized by the routes of Joe Herbst. Routes such as *Black Orpheus* and *Kaleidoscope* cracks were adventurous outings that did not rely heavily on drilled anchors. But the Uriostes also perceived the potential for a different kind of route. Long stretches of beautiful face-climbing could be safely ascended with protection from



Joe Herbst under the big roof on the first ascent of the Aeolian Wall. Photo: Larry Hamilton.

a large number of bolts. This approach yielded many clean and dramatic routes, although it represented a radical departure from accepted style of the day. The strongly mixed opinions regarding this type of climb were one of several factors that presaged the changes coming to Red Rocks in the 1980s.



Joanne Urioste, John Long and Lynn Hill on Levitation 29. Photo: George Urioste.

1981 was a watershed year in the history of Red Rocks climbing. Joe Herbst had climbed his last new route the previous year and that year John Long and Lynn Hill moved to town lured by the possibility of lucrative work in the casinos and the virgin walls of Red Rocks. Long had been a friend of Joe Herbst back in the early 70s and had done the epic second ascent of Jubilant Song and even a few first ascents at Joe's local crag, Chocolate Rocks. By 1981 Long was a well established force in the climbing world having been a part of such ground-breaking ascents as Astroman and the first one day ascent of the Nose in Yosemite. That winter the Uriostes had been working on a new line on the Eagle Wall and Joanne had been able to follow all of the pitches free, when they heard about the new arrivals they recruited them to attempt a free lead of their route. Jorge jumared the fixed lines taking photographs while Joanne, Lynn and John climbed the first free ascent of Levitation 29. This route quickly captured the imagination of the climbing community and put Red Rocks in the eye of a much wider climbing audience. Long and Hill didn't stay for long, but while he was here Long participated in a few major ascents such as a Woodrow on the Aeolian Wall with Richard Harrison, and the unheralded but very bold Negro Blanco on the Dark Shadows Wall, on this last route Lynn Hill took a huge fall trying to get into the corner above the chimney on the first pitch. Long was also active in the Calico boulderfield where he launched his not inconsiderable bulk up Angels Dyno, a bold V7. Perhaps Long's most important contribution however was in persuading his old Stonemaster friend Richard Harrison to come and check out Las Vegas and Red Rocks. Harrison had been with Long way back in 1973 when they did Jubilant Song. After Long moved to Vegas, Harrison found himself driving up from LA so frequently that he decided to make the move himself. After Long and Hill left, Harrison stayed and soon became the center of a small group of climbers that was to change the face of Red Rocks climbing. At the age of twenty nine Harrison was seasoned climber, with a long list of impressive ascents and a well deserved reputation for boldness and strict ethics. He was not very impressed with what was currently going on in Red Rocks and had nothing but disdain for the consumer friendly approach used by the Uriostes and their friends to establish routes. He soon hooked up

with a group of climbers who were just getting into the sport; local kids Paul Van Betten and Sal Mamusia as well as Nick Nordblom and the older Wendell Broussard started climbing with Harrison and absorbing his ideas about style and boldness. The kids were fast learners, climbing 5.11 shortly after starting and 5.12 within the year. They quickly repeated most of the established lines (At least those that they knew about) and were soon pushing the standards of difficulty and boldness well beyond anything that Red Rocks had seen before. Jay Smith and Paul Crawford, climbers from the Tahoe area and friends of Harrison from Yosemite became regular visitors around this time and enthusiastically joined the fray. Other local climbers were involved at various stages. Robert Finlay, Bob Conz, Danny Meyers, Mike Ward (who also started Desert Rock Sports) and many others. On any given day various subsets of this group would go out and attack any line that looked feasible. The sheer volume of routes established in a few short years was amazing, literally hundreds of routes all over Red Rocks. Some milestone ascents during this period include Cloud Tower, which was climbed onsite by Van Betten, Harrison and Nordblom. After battling his way up the final corner in the blazing sun, Van Betten was so exhausted that he promptly threw up at the belay. Another great ascent was Welcome to Red Rocks in Pine Creek, a wild pitch up an, intricate and bold corner/arete which Mamusia was able to lead on his first try. A route that really epitomizes what this group was all about was the first ascent of Blitzkrieg on the Hidden Wall by Richard



Richard Harrison on the first ascent of Buffalo Wall. Photo: Paul Van Betten.

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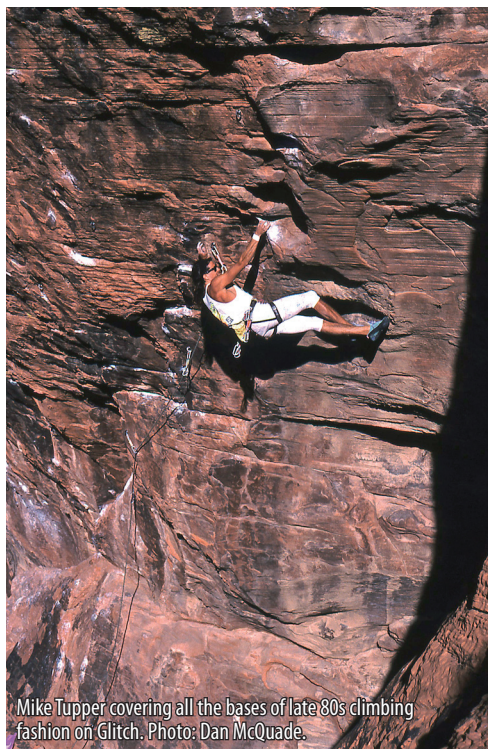
Harrison and Sal Mamusia in 1982. A bold, one day blast up a tall, remote wall that no one was even sure how to get to prior to the first ascent. No fixed lines, no bivi gear; as Earl Wiggans used to say about his Black Canyon climbs at the time, "Just a rope, a rack and the shirt on your back". In a two week period in 1988 Van Betten and Les Hutchison took this committing style to its limit with the first one day ascents (car to car) of the Original routes on Rainbow Wall and the Aeolian Wall.

While Harrison's group were doing routes in the purest ground up style with as few bolts as possible, the Uriostes were still very active, fixing ropes for multi day expeditions and bolting their way up routes like Yellow Brick Road and Prince of Darkness. Some routes such as Times Up on Brownstone Wall even had bolts beside good natural placements. Needless to say this created much angst amongst Harrison, Van Betten and their friends. Many of the routes by these two groups are only a few yards apart, creating a stark contrast in styles. For example, the deadly Sandstone Samurai and Prince of Darkness, one of the most heavily bolted long routes in the country at the time it was done. Really the controversy centered around a different vision of what new routes were about. To a certain extent for Harrison's group a route was a statement, a gauntlet thrown down as a challenge to other climbers. For the Uriostes a new route was a gift, carefully manicured, to be enjoyed by other climbers. The level of disagreement was such that Harrison's group refused to give Joanne any information for her guidebook which was published in 1984. After the arrival of their children in 1986 the Uriostes stepped out of climbing to become full-time parents. In retrospect, regardless of what you think of the style of their first ascents, the Uriostes made an incredible contribution to Red Rocks climbing, establishing a host of classic routes that continue to attract climbers from around the world.

Climbers had periodically explored the low rocks of the Calico Hills over the years, but never with much focus. Prior to 1986 Van Betten and Harrison considered the rock to be little better than mud. However in 1986 that all changed. In May that year Nordblom and Danny Meyers wandered over to a crackline on what was later to become the Fixx Cliff. When they got to the base of the crack they realized that it looked pretty good and raced back to the car to get their gear for the first ascent of Saved By Zero. In July Van Betten and Nordblom ventured into the Front Corridor and established 1000 New Routes, the name signifying the realization that although the rock in the Calico Hills was not the same bulletproof stone as could be found in the canyons, it was really climbable and could produce good routes. This discovery coincided with a sea of change that was occurring in the climbing world at large in the mid 1980s. Steep face climbing was becoming all the rage, and this is exactly what the Calico Hills offered. Natural protection was limited but it was still possible to establish new routes on the lead, placing bolts from hooks and using gear placements when they appeared. A flood of new routes quickly followed on cliffs such as Fixx Cliff, The Front Corridor, Toast and Broast, and best of all Running Man.

Around this time another climber started to make his presence felt. Mike Tupper was a Las Vegas local but spent a lot of time traveling and had been to France, Australia and other hot beds of world climbing. Prior to the mid 1980s most climbing in America was done placing protection on the lead and lowering

back to the ground (or the anchor on multi pitch climbs) after a fall. But on the new breed of desperate steep face climbs that were being established at places like Mt Arapiles in Australia and Buoux in France styles were changing. Top roping, bolting on rappel and hangdogging (called working a route nowadays) were all common practice. When Tupper and his friends Greg Mayer and Don Welsh imported these tactics to Red Rocks it created a storm of controversy. The first sign of trouble was on Risky Business, a beautiful route up the impressive wall to the left of the venerable old classic Dark Shadows in Pine Creek. While Tupper and Mayer were working on the route their fixed ropes were stripped. However the real onslaught didn't start until the winter of 1988. In December Tupper, Welsh, Mayer and Boone Speed and Bill Boyle from Salt Lake City developed the Gallery and the Wall of Confusion, establishing what are now the most popular climbs in Red Rocks. Next came the Wake up Wall, then Janes and Trundle Wall. In the winter of 1991 Tupper and Mayer, in their search for steeper and harder climbs, were starting to excavate the Scoop when Tupper went out exploring on a rest day, and came across The Trophy. The impressive but crumbling projects of The Scoop were quickly abandoned for the much nicer rock of The Trophy producing a great set of routes which added something a bit steeper and less crimpy than usual to the Calico Hills repertoire. Harrison's group continue to work on their own walls, establishing routes throughout the Calico Hills, still using ground up style and bitterly resenting the tactics used by Tupper and his friends. Over the final years of the 1980s this feud played out in the form of numerous confrontations, incidents, and accusations, until things finally simmered down in the early 90s. During these years the action was not limited to the Calico Hills. In 1989 Tupper and Mayer finally mastered the desperate thin crack



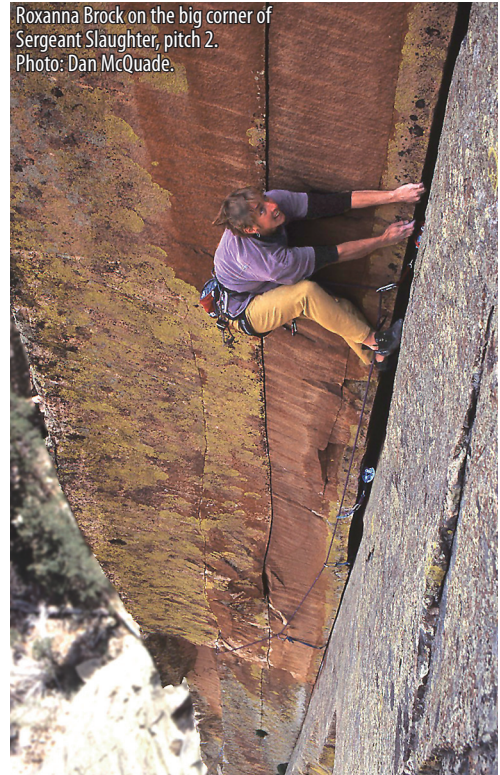
Mike Tupper covering all the bases of late 80s climbing fashion on Glitch. Photo: Dan McQuade.

crux of Terminal Velocity in Pine Creek after working on the route for a year. They also added several more routes to the Dark Shadows wall, including Excellent Adventure, a superb companion route to Risky Business. Van Betten, Harrison and their friends continued to add routes at a hectic pace. Although seldom of the highest level of difficulty, a lot of these lines were scary leads of the sort that leave today's average 5.13 climber quaking in their boots. Aside from the difficulty or the seriousness, many of these new canyon routes were simply superb adding greatly to the variety and quality of routes available in Red Rocks. With so much rock available it is not surprising that other climbers were able to sneak in and make important contributions. Dave Wonderly, Dave Evans and Warren Egbert in particular added many routes throughout the canyons. They developed the huge and remote Western Spaces Wall and added Fiddler on the Roof and The Delicate Sound of Thunder, two of Black Velvet Canyons best routes.

Red Rocks had changed drastically in the decade between the early 80s and the early 90s. In 1980 there was no guidebook, few had even heard of the place. Climbing was limited to a small group of cognoscenti, indeed it was unusual not to have a canyon to yourself on any given day. By the early 1990s many of the canyon routes had achieved the status of world renowned classics and long lines of climbers at the base of routes such as Crimson Chrysalis and Prince of Darkness were common. Also the intense development of the Calico Hills had created what at the time was probably the best winter sport climbing area in the country. Climbers in Red Rocks had generally flown under the radar of the land managers; the BLM had pretty much left climbers to their own devices with no restrictions on bolting or camping. In the early 1990s an unprecedented number of climbers began to descend on Red Rocks during the winter months. The old unofficial campsite at Oak Creek Canyon was packed with climbers all winter and was rapidly becoming completely trashed. Human waste at popular walls, particularly the Gallery was becoming a (smelly) problem; the bolts, chalk and sheer quantity of climbers created a situation that the BLM could no longer ignore. From that point on they began to scrutinize and regulate the activities of climbers much more closely.

As the 90s rolled around new faces started to emerge. The discovery of the superb limestone on Mount Charleston brought many climbers to town. Although the limestone was the main attraction for most of these climbers it was snowbound for the winter months which left plenty of time to climb in Red Rocks. Dan McQuade and Leo Henson in particular added many routes to the Calico Hills. Henson developed many new cliffs throughout the Calico Hills, and was willing to establish routes on just about any vacant piece of rock regardless of quality. Some of these cliffs such as the Tsunami Wall and The Pier have become very popular over the years, while others such as the Sandbox and The Supernova area have never become popular and have never really cleaned up as a result. Henson's finest hour however came not in the Calico Hills but in Juniper Canyon where with the help of Rob Wolfe, and after a year of effort and the addition of around forty bolts he was able to free climb Original Route on Rainbow wall in May 1994. In the Calico hills McQuade developed Cannabis Cliff and cherry picked some of the best remaining lines with his ascents of Monster Skank and Sunsplash in the Front Corridor and

Choad Warrior and Beyond Reason on the Stratocaster Wall. The hardest route of the time was the short but desperate Barracuda on Tsunami Wall, Henson bolted this line but had to recruit visiting Californian Chris Knuth to make the redpoint. McQuade was also active in the canyons. In 1996, on a frigid day in December when the approach slabs were covered in ice, he climbed a superb direct variation to Rainbow Wall with Eric Camillo. Rainbow Country added four beautiful pitches up to 12d, avoiding the easy section in the middle of Original Route, to create the longest, most sustained route in Red Rocks at the time.



Roxanna Brock on the big corner of Sergeant Slaughter, pitch 2.
Photo: Dan McQuade.

In the late 90s Roxanna Brock and Brian McCray began a campaign to free the old aid routes on the Rainbow Wall. The first to fall was Sergeant Slaughter which turned out to be a great climb with a lot of burly crack climbing. Next was Emerald City which had a desperate stemming crux up a blank corner, but overall turned out to be a rather scrappy climb. They also attempted Desert Solitaire but were turned back not so much by difficulty as poor quality climbing. On the right side of the wall they added Brown Recluse, which McCray established solo before going back to climb it free with Brock. McCray and Yosemite climber Warren Hollenger attempted to aid the huge arching roofs to the right of Original Route in February 1999. High on the route, on a traversing pitch to the sanctuary of Over the Rainbow ledge, Hollenger had a bad fall, zippering some pieces and smashing into a broken area. When the dust had cleared Hollenger was left hanging unconscious with numerous broken bones. McCray was able to initiate a rescue thanks to his new cell phone and after a helicopter landed on top of Rainbow Mountain they were able to get Hollenger down to safety; but the experience left its scars and Hollenger

Eric Camillo, at the top of the crux section on the first ascent of Rainbow Country.
Photo: Dan McQuade.



never climbed again. McCray was not one to be deterred and went back and soloed the line a few weeks later. Aside from the hard aid, this involved a scary free pitch through the band of soft white rock above the top of the arch. Overall this route remains the hardest wall climb in red Rocks.

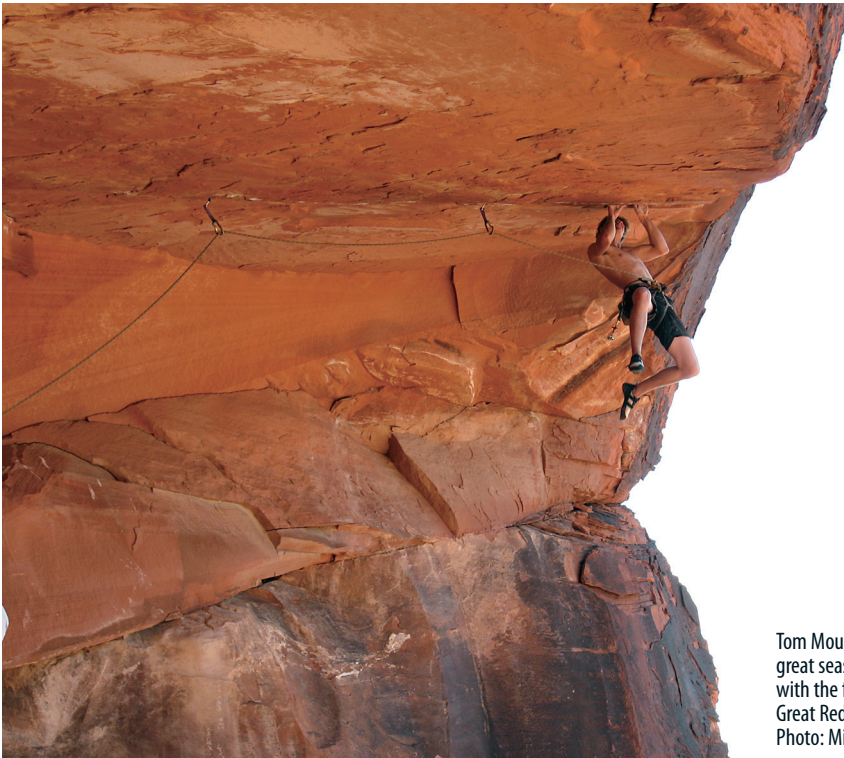
Amazingly, the indefatigable Urioustes reappeared in the mid-1990s and began establishing routes with the same energy as they had previously. Joanne in particular became captivated by the Aeolian Wall adding Women of Mountain Dreams and Gift of the Wind Gods. Although a bolting ban had been in place since 1998 the BLM had not issued any tickets to climbers despite the fact that they were aware that routes were still going in. However in 2000, Roxanna Brock and Gary Fike for Over the Rainbow, and Mark Limage and Chris Burton for Birdland were both threatened with prosecution. With these actions the BLM was making it clear that they meant business and would not tolerate any more bolting. These actions appeared to move new route activity underground. Climbers were still doing new routes but now they just weren't writing the routes up or claiming first ascents of those that involved bolts (creating a guidebook writers nightmare in the process).

In 2004, with Merlin Larsen in the lead, McQuade free climbed a previously aided direct finish to Cloud Tower up a desperate blank corner. They later used this variation to enchain Cloud Tower and Rainbow Wall, a much coveted link up of two of Red Rocks finest hard routes.

In recent years bouldering has been very much in vogue. In fact many younger climbers seldom use ropes when climbing in Red Rocks, preferring to scour the canyons for problems.

On such climber was Jared McMillen. He added many hard problems to Kraft Rocks with pride of place going to Fear of a Black Hat (V9), a 30' high mini route on the cube, a boulder big enough to have its own contour line on the USGS map. Bill Mclemore also added some problems including \$600 project, another tough highball on which Long had been offered a \$600 bounty. More recently, visiting young climber, Ethan Pringle added two stunning problems. The first was Clockwork Orange in Kraft Rocks, the rounded prow to the right of Fear of a Black Hat, a superb highball that had been eyed and tried by numerous notables over the years; at V12 it was probably the hardest piece of climbing in Red Rocks when it was done. The second problem was even harder. Wet Dream climbs a huge roof with a rounded topout on a gigantic block in the Black Velvet Wash, a line that literally thousands of climbers must have walked past and wondered if it would ever go. Although it's not Hueco tanks, Red Rocks has numerous large boulders strewn across the escarpment which offer tremendous potential for British style headpoints, many of these mini routes represent an exciting opportunity to push traditional climbing in Red Rocks to new levels of difficulty and boldness.

One of the amazing things about Red Rocks is that even after thirty years of intense new route development it is still possible to go out and climb new routes at will. In fact in the last few years there seems to have been a renewed interest in doing first ascents, with an avalanche of new routes going in. While some of these routes are more along the lines of rambling adventurous excursions, many are of superb quality and show that Red Rocks still has plenty of hard, clean lines to offer, and likely will for the foreseeable future.



Tom Moulin capping off a great season in Red Rocks with the first free ascent of Great Red Roof, May 2007. Photo: Mike Lorenzo.