

On Becoming an Ice Climber, North Conway, NH, winter of 1994

Any climber who has spent a winter in the Seattle knows the Pacific Northwest is not the epicenter of North American ice climbing. We settle for short little wet smears that form maybe 2 weeks out of the winter. Instead for 90 percent of the winter, we, would-be ice climbers, sit at home fondling our ice weapons and dreaming of those mythical places graced with picture perfect waterfalls in great abundance, such as North Conway, New Hampshire. Ice. Perfect ice. Perfect conditions. In the winter of 1994 at the ripe old age of 28, I decided it was time to stop being an ice-climber wannabe. Thus in late November 1994, I headed East in search of frozen waterfalls. I flew into New York City and met my friend Alan - a west coast climber who was trapped in New York City for a year and steadily going insane. We headed straight for New Hampshire and arrived in the early evening in North Conway.

North Conway - the ice climbing mecca of the NE. It was pouring. There was not a scrap of ice to be seen - anywhere. We did what any self-respecting climber does in these conditions; we got a hotel room, drank beer and played with our climbing gear. After far too many beers, we attempted to sort our 200 lbs of equipment into some reasonable load that we could heft up to the Harvard Mountaineering Cabin in Huntington Ravine on Mt. Washington. The rain HAD to stop. This was North Conway, ice climbing mecca of North America!, damn it. The next morning, it was raining even harder. I think we would have spent another day drinking in town, but I got completely buzzed on too much coffee and we didn't feel like wasting more money on a room. So we packed up 8 cans of Keystone Premium and 60 lbs of gear apiece and headed UP, UP the icy trail - in the dark - in the rain - to the Harvard cabin. Finally, we arrived at the cabin. We had been dreaming of a toasty cabin in the woods where we could lounge about, drink beer and yak till the weather improved - aka vacation. We were in for a surprise. We walked into the cabin, and it was maybe 35 degrees inside! The caretaker was sitting at the table in a DOWN JACKET. We quickly started a fire, but every time I stuck a log in the stove, the caretaker - Mik - would squirm in his chair. Clearly ice climbers are supposed to enjoy the cold. Alan and I settled for a pitiful little fire, and we literally wrapped ourselves around the stove. The cabin reached a balmy 50 degrees. We played "Peak Adventure" that night. Alan cruised the unclimbed route on K2 - answering successfully questions such as: "You pass a poor crippled beggar on the approach to your climb. It is more compassionate to give him a) food, b) money, c) nothing."

The next day the rain stopped but it was still warm. Sometime around 1pm, we left the cabin, and climbed an ice smear up in Tuckerman's ravine. Our ratio of climbing to hiking was 1:2 that day - not bad it would turn out. Back at the cabin, it was a balmy 30 degrees or so, but Mik was gone, climbing with Thad (monosyllabic names are apparently important for ice climbing). We cranked up the stove and we managed to reach 45 degrees before Mik returned and put a damper on our wood burning vice.

Sometime during that night while I was snuggled in my bag, Alan got up and on his return, mumbled something about peeing and a water bottle. I chuckled to myself, amused that his dislike for going out into the cold was so strong that he would pee in his own water bottle. The next morning as we were preparing for a climb up Huntington Ravine, I made a nice fruit drink in my water bottle - which had been sitting out by my pack downstairs. As I took a big swig, Alan said meekly "Eli . . ." He had a strange

pained expression on his face. "that's the water bottle I peed in . . . and didn't wash it out yet". Under any other circumstances, I would have spat out the juice in between a string of obscenities, but you have to understand this was an ICE CLIMBING trip and I was determined to at least act like an ice climber even if we couldn't ice climb. I didn't know much about being an ice climber, but I did have the impression that being disgusting was integral to the image. So I drank it. Yep, I definitely felt more like an ice climber.

Our goal that day was Odell's gully - a W2 ice climb. We reached the base of the ice at 1pm. Alan zipped up a pitch and a half before we ran out of time. We bailed onto an escape ramp and began a long swim, thrash, trash through 4 ft of fluffy snow to get back to the trail. 1:3 ratio that day. Back at the cabin it was 17 degrees! Needless, to say, we were not going through our ample supply of cold beer.

The next day, we planned an early start. Our goal was the famous Pinnacle Gully (W3)- which we were told we simply had to do. That night, we were awoken by a terrific howl of wind and the cabin was shaking and creaking. Looking out the window, I saw that the trees were blown to about a 50 degree angle by the intense winds. At 8am, the winds were 90 mph with gusts to 107. It was below 0 F. So much for Pinnacle Gully. We decided to hike out in search of inspiring ice falls down in the valley. Surely it was cold enough. We carried out about 6 beers apiece. Once in the valley, we set off in search of the great NE ice climb. Instead, we found the not-so-great little stream and smear. We bouldered around a bit. 1:10 ratio that day. At the AMC Lodge at the bottom of Mt. Washington, we were a pitiful pair - our dreams of hacking our way to the top of some glorious waterfall and thereby driving our friends into uncontrollable envy and awe were squashed by this awful balmy weather. Fortunately, the AMC Lodge had an ample supply of coffee and soon I was completely rewired. "Alan, we have GOT to go back up to the cabin. We'll climb Pinnacle tomorrow!" "It's cold up there." "It's supposed to be cold. We're ice climbing." "No, I'm cold. My sleeping bag is terrible, and that cabin is an ice box." "You can have my bag tonight." "No, I couldn't." "I insist." "Ok." I was to regret this act of generosity as I lay shivering that night in Alan's limp excuse for a sleeping bag.

We reached the cabin after dark. It was 15 degrees inside, but no caretaker so we started a puny fire. At 9pm, the regular caretaker, Jim, arrived (notice ice climber-type name). It was still only 45 degrees so we figured he wouldn't be upset about our fire. His first words were: "My god, it's freezing in here! How much wood do you have in there? Geez, you gotta stoke this up!" "but. . but . . but . . ." "Fire up that stove! We're gonna freeze to death!" It was nice and balmy that night - our last night.

We left at 7:30am for a great climb up Pinnacle Gully. The first pitch was a series of short vertical bulges (W3). It was definitely the hardest ice climb that I had led. Of course, my Russian ice screws added an extra grade to the climb as they required near superhuman effort to place in the hard water ice (a problem I'd never encountered in the Pacific Northwest mush). Alan climbed the next pitch and a half (W2), and I finished off with a 3rd W2 pitch. We topped out in the alpine gardens, a treeless windswept area below the summit of Mt. Washington. The wind was blowing around 40 mph. We could just make out the 4 ft high cairns that mark the trail down. A wild place indeed.

We had done it. We could now honestly call ourselves - ice climbers.