

TALES OF THE

CLIMBING'S TOP 10 URBAN LEGENDS

URBIVY

AMERICAN climbing has spawned untold myths and stories. There are old standbys, like John Yablonski's near-death soloing exploits and John Bachar's \$10,000 challenge to follow him ropeless for a day at Joshua Tree. And there are the campfire yarns about the likes of Derek Hersey and Jim Bridwell. In fact, climbing history teems with deeds too crazy to be false, but too extreme to be true.

By Whitney Boland and Dougald MacDonald
Illustrations by Keith Svihovec

BECAUSE I'M A MASOCHIST, I set out to uncover these so-called "urban legends." After five brutal months, one-too-many phone calls ending in, "That's not how it was!" and hundreds of unanswered emails, I learned that no one knew a thing about anything... or nothing they cared to share with me. (Feeling my pain, Dougald MacDonald researched six of the stories.) I also learned that each tale, whether factual or not, holds certain truths. In fact, our sport's wildest characters — the Vulgarians, El Murrays, and Strappos — and their mighty deeds have spawned a body of lore that's near cemented as fact. Still, perhaps the Gunks local Russ Clune, recycling this classic quote from Joe Kelsey about the Vulgarians, framed the urban-legend phenomenon best: "Some things that should have happened didn't, and other things that never could have happened did."

—Whitney Boland



FRENCH TWIST

LEGEND

In 1987, JB Tribout removed a key foothold on his Verdon Gorge project *Les Specialistes* (5.14b; one of the first routes in the world at the grade) and took it with him on a trip to the United States to prevent Patrick Edlinger from sending the route in his absence.

TRUTH OF THE MATTER

In the late 1980s, the relationship between Tribout and his fellow Frenchman Edlinger was, for lack of better words, on the rocks. Tribout, from the north ("Paris!"), and Edlinger (a southerner) not only had geographical differences but also conflicting views on climbing. Tribout claims that his concern was to "climb all the hardest route[s] of the world and do the maximum of first ascents," while Edlinger was, says Tribout, more interested in "his image in the media." Nevertheless, the foothold incident never happened.

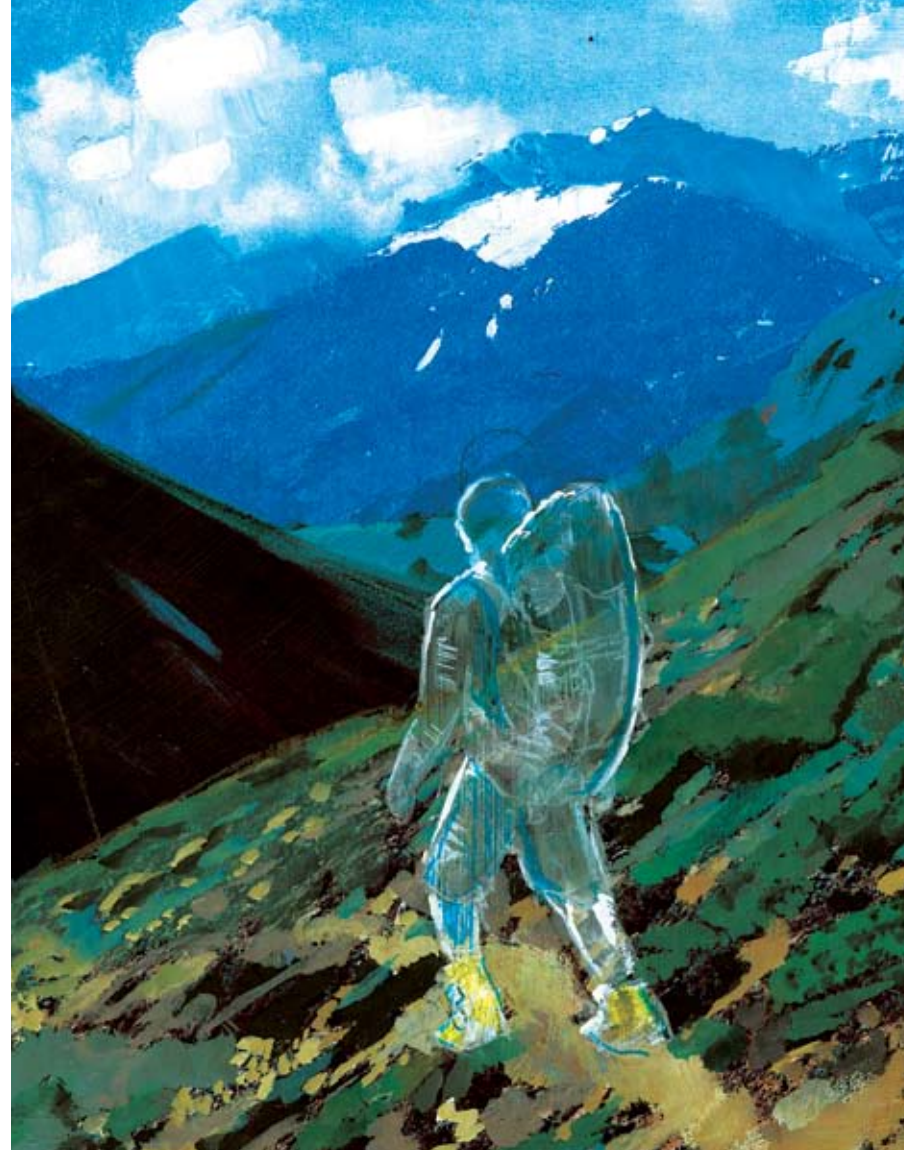
According to Tribout, he bolted *Les Specialistes* with the help of Didier Rabou-tou in 1987. Returning from a climbing competition in Italy, Tribout noticed chalk on grips he distinctly remembers having never touched. "You must remember," he says, "the guy who bolted the route gets priority to climb the route first, especially because we were putting bolts in by hand, not with drill-machines!"

Incensed, Tribout learned from a La Palud local that Edlinger was the offending party. "I was angry for sure," says Tribout, "but I did the first ascent a few days after with a big motivation, and that's it!" So why the legend? Perhaps the story merged with another incident from the height of the sending scramble. While working *Les Specialistes*, Tribout snapped a precarious, key foothold that "was close to break[ing], and I had to glue it." A little epoxy later and *Voilà! le send!*

POSTSCRIPT

Sport climbers are insane.

—WB



Willie Benegas was hiking up Playa Ancha at 2 a.m., listening to Pink Floyd on his headphones, when he heard a weird buzzing in the background: ¡El Caminante!

LOCO ON ACONCAGUA

LEGEND

During the 1980s, a climber on Aconcagua went insane from high-altitude cerebral edema and attacked his guide and family.

VARIATIONS

The climber killed three people with an ice axe and threw their bodies into a crevasse. No one summited Aconcagua for a week because the killer had holed up at 18,000 feet.

TRUTH OF THE MATTER

Most of the long-time guides working on South America's highest peak (22,841 feet) say they've never heard this story. Rodrigo Mujica, of Aventuras Patagónicas, says, "I think it is baloney. There are no crevasses on Aconcagua, except one or two on the Polish Glacier way up high. I went to Aconcagua every year in the '80s, and I never heard such a story."

On the other hand, the Aconcagua guide

Damian Benegas says he *has* heard the story but didn't know any details. He adds that the deranged climber's rampage explains the name for Campo Cólera, one of the highest camps on Aconcagua: *cólera* means "rage." On the *other* hand, Mujica says he named this camp Piedras Blancas (White Rocks) in 1984, but over time it came to be called Cólera because so much fecal matter had piled up. *Cólera*, you see, also means "cholera" (i.e., "the trots").

Aconcagua seems to generate mysteries. Both Damian Benegas and his brother, Willie, describe the ghost of an American climber—Erik Bender—said to haunt the dry, windy Playa Ancha valley, along the approach to Aconcagua basecamp. Bender disappeared with the Benegas' cousin Adolfo during an attempt on Aconcagua's South Face in 1990; Bender was a well-known figure in the area, hiking all over the mountain with a huge pack, always dressed in

cut-off jeans and white, plastic Koflach boots. "Now people say they keep seeing him, and we locals always have the paranoia of running into him while walking in the night on Playa Ancha," Damian Benegas says. The ghost has a name: *El Caminante* ("The Walker"). Once, during a speed attempt on the mountain, Willie Benegas was hiking up Playa Ancha at 2 a.m., listening to Pink Floyd on his headphones, when he heard a weird buzzing in the background: ¡*El Caminante!* "I freaked out and started running," he says. "You don't want to believe it, but it's so embedded there."

POSTSCRIPT

A shadowy mountain, eerie noises, climbers queasy with altitude: maybe it's only a matter of time before victims of the crazed ice-axe murderer begin haunting Campo Cólera—even if said murders never took place. —Dougald MacDonald

Dargis hung from a sling clipped to a single nut in an expanding flake, his brake hand clamped on the remaining 60 to 80 feet of rope.

THOSE VULGAR VULGARIANS

LEGEND

In the early 1960s, a group of rebellious students (the Vulgarians) terrorized the Shawangunks, climbing drunk and naked, and urinating off the cliff tops onto enemies.

TRUTH OF THE MATTER

In the 1960s, to counter the conservative, hoity-toity Appalachian Mountain Club (the Appies), a group of NYC students rallied — in quasi-militia style and armed to the bare chest with passion and (sometimes) nudity — to form the Vulgarians. A do-as-we-want establishment of anti-establishment-ers, this small crew bushwhacked their way out of the suffocating routine of repeating the same routes, a favorite Appie pastime, instead putting up new lines and pushing free-climbing limits. But what about the wee-wee?

According to head Vulgarian Dick Williams, “No, [the urination story] never happened.” The nudity, of course, can be documented with Williams’ first *au naturale* ascent of *Shockley’s Ceiling* (5.6), in 1964, a picture seized by Ed Cooper. However, the Vulgarians never “pissed on people’s heads.” Perhaps the story was confused with another incident, one in which Williams recalls doling out some rooftop heckling from the Bavarian Mountain House, a local restaurant. Although Williams says he then jumped down from the roof, perhaps another Vulgarian had lined up a detractor or two in prime target position just below. Concedes Williams, “It *might* have happened that night” — he’s just not sure.

POSTSCRIPT

Wear raingear when visiting the Gunks.
—WB



BY A HAIR

LEGEND

A climber bailing off El Cap got his shirt stuck in his rap device, accidentally sliced his ropes with a knife, was left hanging by a single nut, and had to be rescued.

VARIATIONS

It was his hair that got stuck.

TRUTH OF THE MATTER

It’s all true, save the rescue part. The climber and his partner rescued themselves... barely. The climbers were John Dargis and Jim Waugh. They retreated, in May 1979, from just below Dolt Tower on the *Nose* after Waugh injured a finger in a fall. Waugh went first, and during a long rappel below the *Stovelegs* placed a No. 7 hex in a flake, clipping the ropes to it as a directional (they were rappelling on double lines). Via email, Waugh described what happened next: “John was on his way down when I noticed that he stopped. ... All of sudden, I saw the ropes go flying extremely right with the wind and John started to fall. As quickly as

this happened, John suddenly stopped.” Dargis’ shirt had jammed into his figure 8, and, weighed down by the haulbag, he couldn’t yank it out. Dargis pulled out a knife to cut the shirt, and then almost as an afterthought, clipped into the #7 hex as a back-up... right before he accidentally severed both ropes above the figure 8.

Dargis now hung from a sling clipped to a single nut in an expanding flake, his brake hand clamped on the remaining 60 to 80 feet of rope trailing down to his partner. Waugh sent up some pieces to reinforce the anchor, and they began yelling for a rescue. Long story short: the rescue would have to wait until the following day, so Waugh decided to pendulum left toward Sickle Ledge using the two lengths of rope.

“By this time, a large crowd had gathered in the Meadows, awaiting what I could only assume was tragedy,” Waugh wrote. “It became obvious that I had not quite enough rope. ... Every time I tried to run as hard as I could, I would jump for a large hold left and slightly down from the ledge, and when I missed you could hear the crowd scream with disappointment.” Finally, Waugh scrambled to the ledge, climbed above Dargis, built another anchor, and dropped the lines to Dargis, telling him to unclip and swing over. From there, they made their way down to Sickle Ledge via one or two raps and some scrambling; fixed lines led to terra firma.

Dargis never returned to El Cap, though Waugh climbed it three more times. “Once on the *Nose*, I experienced an earthquake,” he says. “But that’s another story.”

POSTSCRIPT

Always rig a back-up before you cut your ropes. —DM

RIFLE MOUNTAIN PARK—PSYCHO MAGNET?

LEGEND

In 1992, Rifle Mountain Park, famed for its cryptic limestone (and as a petri dish for North America’s wobbler-pitching “elite”) hosted a series of brutal murders. It was soon seen as a psychopath magnet.

TRUTH OF THE MATTER

Up a talus field above the road, you’ll find a short, hidden 5.13c — *Dumpster BBQ*. Perhaps the name predicts how you’ll feel after trying the moves, but there’s more to the story than that.

According to an article in the May 13, 1992, *Denver Post*, David A. Bollinger was

arrested April 30 of that year for the murders of an elderly Reno couple — James Vertrees and wife, Rose — found torched in a dumpster at the Rifle rest area along I-70. According to the story, authorities picked up Bollinger in Aurora, driving the Vertrees motor home with no plates — they’d been tipped off when an Aurora woman relayed to a friend in Reno the tale of a certain “Dave” and his dodgy motor home. Vertrees and Bollinger had been penned up in a Nebraska jail together but had no other connection. Prior to the murders, Bollinger was on probation, roaming the country as an unemployed mechanic.

Meanwhile, that autumn, two climbers — Mike Pont and Curt Fry, bivying at the

Wasteland — were awakened at 1 a.m. by a suspicious car creeping slowly up canyon. When they heard gunshots five minutes later, and then the car tearing back toward town, they knew something was wrong. As the climbers later learned, a distraught husband had ferried his wife to the Park in the trunk of his auto, and then plugged her with 11 bullets in a pullout in front of the Skull Cave. The route name *Dumpster BBQ*, says its first ascensionist, Matt Samet, was a reflection of that bloody autumn... and reading too much Bret Easton Ellis.

POSTSCRIPT

Never trust an unemployed mechanic... or the Skull Cave. —WB



“I couldn’t flex my big toe unless I manually pushed the tendon back into place.”

left along a lip, then up. I was at the end of the traverse and brought my right big toe up to a small hold at about waist level, then rocked onto it. I was reaching for the jug at the top when I heard a pretty good pop and I was off. Back on the ground, I found I couldn’t flex my big toe unless I manually pushed the tendon back into place and held it there with a fingertip.”

Murray actually had injured a muscle in his lower leg — the flexor hallucis longus — that connects to the big toe via a long tendon that runs around the inside of the ankle. “The doctor I went to had never heard of such an injury, let alone seen one. ... He told me he thought it might be worth an article in a medical journal, but I don’t know if that ever happened,” says Murray. “[My] toe wasn’t quite as good as new when I got out of the cast, but it was usable. It was years before it felt totally solid again.” That unnamed boulder problem had it in for Murray, who went back a year later, “eager for revenge,” only to rip a muscle near one of his armpits. Murray was out of action for another couple months.

POSTSCRIPT

After a year layoff, Murray sent the Jemez problem. Once again, he was barefoot.

—DM

THE TOES OF EL MURRAY

LEGEND

The bouldering pioneer Bob Murray shucked his shoes to top rope one of the *El Murrays*, on the famed Mushroom Boulder at Hueco Tanks, Texas, and suffered a toe-tendon injury previously unknown to science.

VARIATIONS

Murray barefoot-climbed all three *El Murrays* (V6 to V8) before his injury.

TRUTH OF THE MATTER

Like many urban legends, this story has a grain of truth but mixes up the facts. Murray,

who “did more to develop hard bouldering in the Southwest than any other individual,” according to *Stone Crusade* author John Sherman, confirmed that he suffered a strange injury, though it was in the Jemez Mountains of New Mexico.

“I did have a top rope when it happened — probably a good thing,” Murray wrote in an email. “I was climbing barefoot, as I often did in those days if the problem was seriously overhung. Back then I could generally climb a V grade or two harder without the shoes, on the steeper problems, if my toe flexors were in shape. The problem traversed



HARD KOR

LEGEND

For years, the great Colorado climber Layton Kor lived on lettuce, which he claimed was a superior energy food.

VARIATIONS

Kor turned on to vegetables after seeing a spiritual healer in Texas, whom he visited to cure a mysterious lung ailment.

TRUTH OF THE MATTER

The origin of this one is easy to trace, but the truth is another matter. Bob Culp, Kor's partner on numerous hard routes in Colorado during the early 1960s, wrote a 1970 *Trail and Timberline* article about Boulder climbers, with some of these details later quoted in Chris Jones' superb history *Climbing in North America*. Jones wrote that Kor, in 1960, was bedridden with San Joaquin Valley fever, and that, since the doctors offered no cure, he sought a "spirit healer in Texas who believed in a starvation diet." More than a month later, the 6'4" Kor returned to Colorado weighing 110 pounds. "His recovery may have been prolonged," Jones wrote, "by his lettuce and carrot diet. At lunch stops on climbs he would devour a couple of heads of lettuce and exclaim to no one's conviction, 'You should try it. Lotsa energy in lettuce.'"

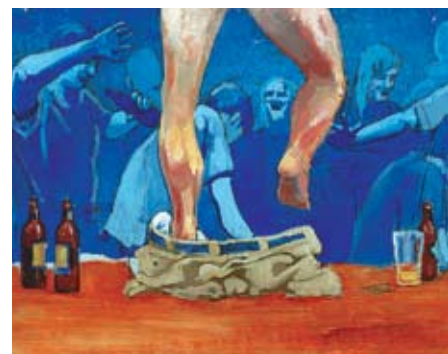
Contacted at his home in Arizona, Kor confirmed that he had suffered respiratory

problems since he was young. But the lettuce and carrots? "I tried to be a vegetarian for a time, but it didn't take," Kor said. "I can't imagine someone would survive long on just lettuce." Regardless, Kor was an outsized man who performed outsized feats, and he tended to accrue legends. For example, Kor says that he's often (mistakenly) cited for a famous quote from the Yosemite days — "The day you do the Lost Arrow Chimney is the day you do the most work of your life" — that actually was uttered by Frank Sacherer. And *Kor's Corner* (5.12a), at Colorado's Garden of the Gods, which the guidebooks claim Kor aided in 1965? "Never climbed it," Kor said.

Although photos of Kor from back in the day usually show him aid climbing, one legend that can't be disputed was that of his extraordinary free-climbing prowess. Recalling the 1961 first ascent of the Northwest Face of Chiefs Head, in Rocky Mountain National Park, Culp said one completely unprotected pitch "may have been hard 5.9." The route remained unrepeated for 14 years — and that no-pro pitch is indeed 5.9+.

POSTSCRIPT

Two gray-haired legends recalling events from 45 years ago: one obviously has forgotten a few details, though Culp, a self-described "perfectionist," probably has the edge in accuracy. —DM



INDECENT EXPOSURE

LEGEND

Roger "Strappo" Hughes was thrown out of Yosemite Valley for performing the "hammerhead-shark" trick (the deformation of

an uncircumcised penis with a matchstick) in a crowded Mountain Room Bar.

VARIATIONS

Strappo was thrown out of Yosemite Valley for performing one of many, many other stunts in the Mountain Room Bar.

TRUTH OF THE MATTER

The truth here is tamer than fiction, but only just. It was June 1982, and Strappo had begun celebrating early with two friends fresh off the first British one-day ascent of the *Nose*. They'd joined an all-day "glugathon," said to involve Warren Harding, naked women, and a swimming hole high above the Ahwanee Hotel, before heading to the bar.

"Let's liven up this shithole," Strappo told a friend, asking him to pay half his anticipated fine. As Strappo wrote last year in an unpublished account of the night's events, "Moments later, I am running along the top of the bar and joyfully wiggling my private parts at a demented, horror-struck crowd. In the midst of all this perverted, frenzied dashing about, I suddenly power straight into an overhead ceiling beam. *Thwack!* This was definitely not in the brochure, for now I am suddenly laid out naked on the bar."

Rangers carted off Strappo and threw him in jail, soon to appear before the magistrate. "Through cross-examination, it is revealed that I already spent two months grubbing around Camp 4, when the maximum legal stay limit is only two weeks. I plead with the judge for enough time to climb just one more wall, but when he casts an eye toward the prosecuting attorney, the heartless bastard just looks up and shakes his head. The judge's dramatic conclusion has stayed with me to this day and might be worthy of an Oscar: 'Well, Mr. Hughes. You've climbed the walls. You've climbed the bar. You've climbed the tables and chairs. Now I think it's time that you left.'" Strappo was banned for a year.

POSTSCRIPT

Strappo never said he *didn't* perform the hammerhead-shark trick — he just didn't do it that evening in the Mountain Room.

—DM

THE BOY BEHIND THE IRON DOOR

LEGEND

Joshua Tree National Park is home to spout-top trees straight from the twisted depths of a Dr. Seuss book. It is also home to other oddities, like the Iron Door. Nestled in the Outback near the Patagonia Pile formation, the Iron Door Boulders (aka the Flintstone Boulders) house a metal door leading to what the late Michael Reardon described as "a creepy hole in the ground that you can barely fit your body into." The darkest legend holds that, in the 1930s, a family of miners and settlers living near Joshua Tree sequestered their mentally unstable child here as punishment, occasionally feeding him through the opening.

VARIATIONS

Local farmers used the cave to house rustlers conspicuous enough to get caught, before sending them to jail. The settlers used the hole to store explosives or gold.

TRUTH OF THE MATTER

The Iron Door is less a hole in the ground and more a half-manmade, half-natural structure in an overhanging boulder formation. John Sherman, in *Stone Crusade*, claims there is also "an air vent built into the wall (that) would support the story" that Bill Keys, a local rancher, locked his son in the small room. In an email exchange, Sherman remembered "hearing that (a local man) kept a kid in the IDC, and that's why there's a vent." Bob Gaines, a guide for Vertical Adventures (and Josh local for some 25 years), holds the imprisonment legend as false: "The ranch was so far away [a half-mile] — why would he go all the way there? Why not just lock the kid in the basement?" (As a side note, Russ Walling says, "Yabo lived here for a few years.")

The Park Service, too, claims the legend is bogus, an unfortunate twisting of the facts. It's true that Keys, a famed Russian pioneer, settled in what would become the Park in the early 1900s. We know that Keys' death in 1969 locked away the legend and that he had a rocky relationship with the

community over water rights. And we know that Keys, a loner and hard-working rancher, later had a deadly run-in with neighbor Worth Bagley, leaving Keys convicted of manslaughter but later pardoned. And finally, we know that Keys, a gold miner, perhaps used this room to house ore.

POSTSCRIPT

The Iron Door cave is a creepy place, readily lending itself to a conflation of the truths of Keys' troubled life with a revisionist take on this strange and misunderstood man.

—WB

THE STRAIGHT AND NARROW

LEGEND

Climbers in Pennsylvania, desperate for good cracks, rented a concrete saw and cut their own.

VARIATIONS

Many well-known East Coast climbers were said to be in on the dirty deed.

TRUTH OF THE MATTER

The crack is called *Manufactured* (5.11c) and was sliced into a 75-degree limestone slab at Bellefonte Quarry in 1988 by Jim Bowers, the most active local at the time. The 75-foot, shallow (1" deep at the bottom then tips at the top) finger crack is protected with five bolts, supplemented by nuts. The deed apparently took several days. In a self-published guidebook, Bowers joked that the climb was also known as "*To Saw or Not to Be, I Came I Saw I Conquered, Blazing Diamonds*, etc." He added, "Well, what can I possibly say about this route? To sum it all up, it cost 80 bucks."

Other people had plenty to say about the crack, arguing that it was pretty much the worst-case scenario in "chipping." Although the walls at Bellefonte are manmade, Bowers expressed some ethical ambivalence in a letter to *Climbing* following an article about the quarry. (*Climbing* No. 113 attached an Editor's Note to this article, "Bellefonte: A Backwater Quarry Comes of Age," condemning the crack as "vandalism.")

"First of all, we do not condone chipping holds at Bellefonte," Bowers wrote in his letter. "With regard to the finger crack [...], in hindsight perhaps we made a mistake. Frankly, at the time we didn't see anything wrong: it was a blank wall, there was no ego involved, and we just wanted a 5.11



finger crack to play on." That said, Bowers added, he was aghast later to discover that a young climber had chipped a huge hold in a blank wall at Bellefonte: "I was about to chew the guy out, but realized that I had helped saw a bloody crack in a wall. How could I say that what he did was wrong, and what I did was acceptable?"

Despite his own misgivings ("No, I did not have anything to do with it," Eric Hörst wrote in an email), Hörst bagged the crack's first free lead that fall.

POSTSCRIPT

Manufactured today gathers dust, but only because long-simmering access issues boiled over after a non-climber died at Bellefonte in 2005. "It is extremely important that climbers do not visit Bellefonte Quarry" until the access can be resolved, says the Climbing Conservancy of Central Pennsylvania.

—DM

Whitney Boland, of Kentucky, still spends a good chunk of time at Rifle despite its gory history, while Senior Contributing Editor Dougald MacDonald climbs with shoes on and keeps his hair short.