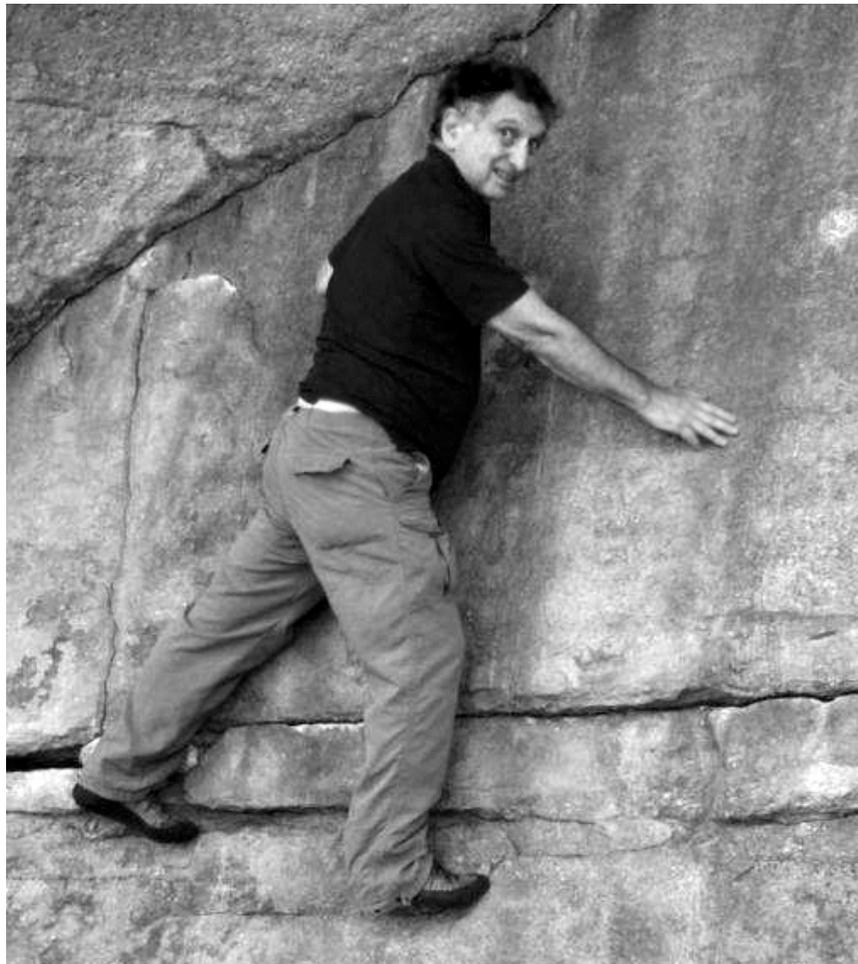


The Shawangunks, Now and Then

A personal history by the only climber from 1952 still out there

Steven Jervis



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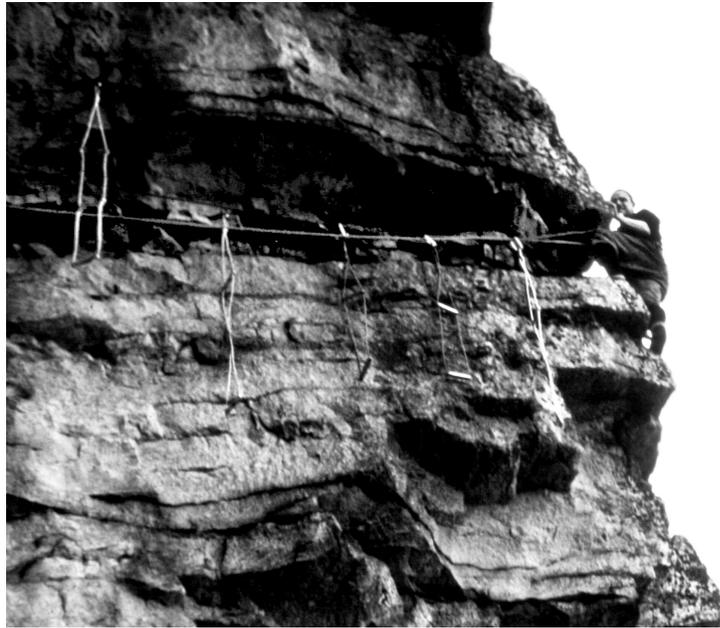
HIGH CORNER, ONE OF THE POPULAR ROCK-CLIMBING ROUTES in the Shawangunk Mountains of New York State, holds a morbid allure, because two climbers have died trying it. It's rated a 5.4 in difficulty in Art Gran's 1964 guidebook, and the last pitch is an enormous dihedral that is sometimes wet and usually in shadow. But today's climbers consider this quite moderate. I climbed it again in November 2009. It has many Gunks features: solid rock, steepness, exposure, overhangs, and great inward-sloping holds. I first climbed High Corner almost exactly 57 years earlier, when I was a 15-year-old beginner. Everything but the rock itself has changed since then. Ropes are longer, equipment has immeasurably improved, and only a few pitons—ancient and rarely trustworthy—remain in the cliffs.

In 1952, we were a rope of four—common in those leader-scarce days. First, we signed out on the cyclostyled sheet on the clipboard provided by the New York Chapter (later the New York–North Jersey Chapter) of the Appalachian Mountain Club, the only group then active in the Gunks. On this clipboard, we noted the time of departure, so that nobody would follow too close behind. It was nice to know which routes were available, but this was of limited concern when a really busy weekend drew 50 participants.

Back then, our ropes were nylon, which had recently replaced hemp. They were 120 feet long. About ten of those feet were used as tie-ins around the waists of the two climbers attached, and for belays. Thus, the maximum length of a pitch was only about 110 feet. A frequent anxious cry, belayer to leader, was, "Only fifteen feet left!" Often, there was little to spare before we reached a belay ledge.

Another problem was the drag from the rope below you. It sometimes seemed that I was hoisting a 100-pound boulder. There were no runner loops in those days. We ran the ropes right through the carabiners clipped to the pitons. The only way to extend the rig was to add a few more biners. The leader carried no more than ten or twelve, so you had to horde them. The pitons stayed in the rocks (which scandalized some Sierra Club visitors, who thought they should be pounded in and out each time), but we did make sure to test them with hammers. Some of them, rings and horizontals, might have been rusting in their cracks for fifteen years. They functioned also as route markers. Chalk was for writing on blackboards, not for desiccating our hands

A half-century after he started climbing, Steven Jervis boulders in the Gunks. Note the chalk marks on the rock, left by younger climbers. He says, "Chalk was for writing on blackboards, not for desiccating our hands to grasp the next hold." PETER JAVIAN



Gunks pioneer Art Gran climbs the Gunks route he named Thin Slabs. Now, like everything else, this climb is done entirely free. COURTESY OF STEVEN JERVIS

to grasp the next hold. As for our feet: We wore tennis shoes, laced as tight as possible. They weren't much good on edgy holds or in rain, but we could walk in them. This was useful, because the way off the cliff was to follow the trail south along the ridge crest until we could scramble down to the Uberfall on the carriage road, where the clipboard was stored and climbers congregated.

High Corner in 2009 was very different. We approached in our walking shoes; our climbing pairs—Sportivas, Anasazis, or the other kinds of light, flat-rubber-soled pairs in use today—were in our packs, along with racks of climbing hardware and other necessities, like lunch. We had not signed out. Nobody does. There has not been a clipboard at the Uberfall for nearly 50 years. These days we head for our routes and hope they're free. On a weekend, there will likely be a waiting line. This was a Monday late in the season, but this cliff saw as much activity as it would have on a sunny weekend in 1952. High Corner was open, so up we went, three of us. We had two 200-foot ropes, which we attached not to our waists but to our climbing harnesses. (Climbing without a harness is like driving without a seat belt, only more so. Cars had no seat belts in 1952, and climbers had no harnesses.) Around the leader's shoulder hung a hardware rack that 50 years earlier would have been thought science fiction: loops, wired nuts, stoppers, chocks, and especially friends. These intricate retractable camming devices have revolutionized protectability in the Gunks, where they fit perfectly the abundant horizontal cracks. You carry many more carabiners than before, often looped

together, but they are lighter. And then there is a cordelette, a thin but strong cord of many uses. One of them is to equalize the belay tie-in to several points. Don't count on pitons; they are probably all gone. The final belay point on High Corner is full of nasty pin scars.

We used to do the Corner itself in two pitches, which amazed my 2009 partners. "Rope drag," I explained. "Couldn't do it all in one pitch." This meant an intermediate belay atop a footstool-sized chockstone (a rock wedged in a crack to hold the rope), a very uncomfortable position, half in the crack, half out. I hope nobody ever had to hold a leader fall from there.

Once on top in 2009, we rappelled back down. This was one of the biggest changes of all. The path that hundreds of us used to follow every weekend back to the Uberfall is becoming overgrown. Every few hundred feet along the ridge is a rap point, a tree or more likely a pair of expansion bolts. (Bolting for protection is strictly forbidden.) With today's rappel devices and



Steven Jervis on rocks out West in the early years. COURTESY OF STEVEN JERVIS

long ropes, we get down in a jiffy. Although the rappel lines are usually some distance from ascent routes, we may find ourselves zooming right by some folks on their way up. Once on the ground, we're ready for the next climb—that is, if we can find a free one.

I BEGAN CLIMBING WITH THE AMC IN 1952, WHEN I WAS 14. I am still unsure just how this happened. I received an unsolicited phone call from Percy Olton, an AMC veteran whose name I knew from climbing journals: Did I want to join a beginners' weekend in the Gunks that he was leading? He picked me up one April Saturday and drove me and others to the cliffs. Even the driving route from Manhattan was different in those days: there was no New York State Thruway. So we motored up picturesque but slow Route 9W past the jagged peak of High Tor and through Newburgh. New Paltz, now the home of a climbing store and many restaurants, was bypassed to the east. Instead, we went through the village of Gardiner, where we might stop for coffee. Thence to Schlueter's, an inn whose clientele was almost entirely AMC climbers. It was cozy, and a bargain even by the standards of the time: \$11 for Saturday night and three meals (on Sunday, a box lunch). The place had no liquor license but was great for evening conviviality, dinner at long tables, and sometimes a slide show of summer mountaineering. But that April Saturday I spent more time in Schlueter's than I wanted.

Cloudy city weather had given way to a downpour. All 30 or so of us ate our lunches and waited for things to dry off. "It's just a clearing shower," people said. It was rueful joke. The rain did not abate, but by mid-afternoon everyone was restive. Percy sat with a clipboard, while being approached with the plea, "Can you get me on a rope, Percy?" This seemed to be the thing to say, so I tried it myself. Soon I found myself on the carriage road that runs below the cliffs. Our group of four was headed for what I was assured was just a beginner's route, named Minty. George Smith, a fast-developing leader and a very kind man, was in charge. Minty is indeed for beginners, but when wet it can be treacherous, especially if you are wearing tennis shoes. George put me second so he could keep an eye on me. The first step is the hardest: a single layback move to lift your left foot to a receptive ledge. I managed this, but got into trouble on the next pitch. George was keeping my rope a bit snug. I reached a carabiner and found I could not unclip from it. "Well," George called down, "you're going to have to, my boy." I could see his point. I could not climb through the biner. I did finally unclip it, after a damp struggle, with water cascading down my sleeves. At least the clouds hid any

exposure—we could see up only about 50 feet. Soon I reached the top along with George Evans and Harris Tallan, who remained climbing partners of mine for many years after. The handsome George Smith later posed as the “Man with the Hathaway Shirt” in a full-page magazine advertisement. He was clinging to an airy perch, with snow-covered mountains in the background. The perch was a Gunks boulder next to the carriage road; the photographer had supplied the mountains.

Like many a rainy day, Saturday was followed by bright clear weather. The cliffs that had been draped in fog emerged in all their intimidating glory. The first climb of the day was Easy Overhang, favorite of all beginner routes. Our leader was Maria Millar, followed by her husband, Dave. They specialized in fostering starting climbers and took special care of me and the other young neophyte in the party. We did the climb in five pitches. Yes, five (two was normal, even then). This enabled the Millars to monitor our every move, but it made for some crowded belay stances. The overhang was prominent. It was later pried off as loose and therefore hazardous. I know that Easy Overhang is an easy route, but it was quite exposed—and thrilling for a 14-year-old.

It would be a month before I was allowed to climb again, because, under the rules of the New York Chapter, I was a beginner. But I had found a calling. My high school classmates spent the weekend at parties or bowling alleys; I spent mine at the Gunks. I found that there was a fourth category of weekend: the bootleg weekend. The name was redolent of seedy promise. When nothing was scheduled, I could just climb independently, if I could arrange transportation and find an AMC-qualified leader. They were in very short supply. My friend Bob Graef drove me up the third weekend in June. Neither Bob nor I was a qualified leader, but we got lucky. On the carriage road, we found Bill Shockley, all by himself. He was one of only 21 “Appies” (as club members were then called) permitted to lead, a number far smaller in practice. This was Shockley before he established Shockley’s Ceiling, a spectacular and tremendously popular route. It was also before he won the Nobel Prize in Physics and (later) gained notoriety for his strange racial theories. (In Joel Shurkin’s 2006 biography,¹ Shockley’s life reads as a Greek tragedy. Unfortunately, Shurkin botches the narrative of Bill’s climbing career.)

Bill was waiting to climb with his daughter. Fortunately for Bob and me, she had not appeared, so he teamed with us—for the full day, as it turned out.

¹ *Broken Genius: The Rise and Fall of William Shockley, Creator of the Electronic Age* (Macmillan).

He had heard that the Rensselaer Mountain Club had established a nice new route. Because there was no guidebook, Bill had to rely on hearsay about its location. He did find it, but chose a first-pitch belay in an awkward, cramped alcove, never used today. All three of us somehow squeezed in. Then Bill, out of our sight, regained the route, passed the crux on the second pitch. These days the two pitches are done as one—another benefit of longer ropes. The route is known as RMC; it is only a few minutes from the Uberfall. Expect waiting lines, especially on weekends.

Fresh from this triumph, Bill tried Overhanging Layback. He had followed Fritz Wiessner on the first ascent in 1946, but Bill had not done it since. I do not know whether anyone else had. Few climbers had even heard of it. It was one of the hardest routes at the time and as intimidating as its name. Bill started up on two ropes. He went 30 easy feet up an inside corner to an alcove below the crux. Here he rested on tension from the ropes. He must have been there at least ten minutes. The first-ascent pitons were still in the rock. He moved out to the right below the overhang, then retreated. Another rest on tension. Then a few muscley but smooth moves—he was up and over! When I followed, I had the same sense of breathless exultation that Bill must have had. I was sure that cliffs were where I belonged.

In July, most Gunkies were off in the big mountains or dodging the heat elsewhere. No more bootleg weekends. I was heading for the Tetons in August to climb with Exum Guide Service experts, but how could I remain idle for July? “I’ll get out of shape,” I wailed to my skeptical parents. “It would be dangerous for me not to climb.” I wore them out. Soon I was on my way back to the Gunks with Don, the 23-year-old companion who was supposed to calm and amuse my brother and me. I now owned a rope, hammer, and carabiners. I had no instruction on how to use them on the lead, but that didn’t stop me. I led Don up five easy routes in a couple of days. He had never climbed before, so he could not notice whatever I was doing wrong. This was a truly reckless venture, but nobody saw us, so I escaped reprimand from the AMC. (That came later.) In September, back from the Tetons, I returned to the Gunks as an intermediate, for five scheduled weekends.

Soon I was ready to engage the New York Chapter’s complicated qualification system. It now seems antiquated and bizarre, and it certainly did not prepare me for the big mountains, or indeed, for any place except the Shawangunks. But the system had a plausible, tragic background. In October 1940, when the Gunks were scarcely known, the club sponsored a trip to Arden, a small crag just west of where the New York Thruway

now runs. When a fall occurred, two climbers were pulled off the top of the climb. One, Don Babenroth, was killed. It was a heavy blow: He was only in his mid-twenties, a promising geologist, and he had just been named the chairman of the chapter's rock climbing committee.

The December 1940 *Appalachia* reported the accident and promised a full account in June 1941. It never appeared—a pity, because the tragedy carried a crucial lesson: Don't belay unless you are secure. The area is heavily forested, but no one was properly tied in to a tree or to anything else, except to another climber.

The main Gunks climbing areas were the private property of the Quaker family that ran the Mohonk House, the great Victorian sprawl of a hotel nearby. No one had forbidden us to climb, but no one had given us permission either. The first serious accident—never mind a fatality—might mean expulsion. One leader asked in 1953, “How long can the inevitable be retarded?” And so the Mountaineering Committee had devised a demanding qualification process before we could lead even one pitch.

We needed the certification of a qualifying leader who had been designated at the beginning, rather like the first five chess grand masters. In 1952, climbers had to be qualified on each climb individually. That meant we had to lead them to the satisfaction of the qualifying leaders who followed, thus earning “legs” on the routes. We had to pass this test twice (for two legs), with a different leader each time. Our success was recorded in a notebook kept at Schlueter's, which was engrossing reading. Of course, we might fail and have to try again. Some qualifiers were casual, others rigorous. One of them had the habit of deliberately falling off to test the other climbers' belaying skills. The process was made more frustrating by the shortage of qualifying leaders, who were often busy with their own climbs. Thus, very, very many times I led the few routes I had qualified for, often followed by beginners. By 1955, I had done Easy Overhang 34 times. One bright September Saturday, I led it twice, as well as two other easy routes: Minty (twice) and Three Pines.

This way you could see every hold and fixed piton in your dreams. It may have been safe, but it didn't prepare me for the big mountains, as I discovered in the Tetons. There, I was astounded to see my guide leading the easier pitches with no belay whatever and often not tying in at belay points. And the leisurely pace of Gunks practice would never work when we had a two-hour approach and more than a thousand feet of climbing to finish before sundown.

A few Gunkies did defy the New York Chapter guidelines—Ted Church for one, and especially Lester Germer. Lester was 55 when I met him, which made him something of an old man by standards of the day. And he appeared old, especially to me: He had the wiry, gray-haired look of a patriarch. I had no idea that he was a physicist of international repute, but I sensed that he was regarded as a bit of an outlaw. The chapter thought him reckless in his disregard of regulations. One Appie leader declared him “past reforming.” Lester developed no new routes, but loved taking people up familiar ones. During my high school years, I followed him 33 times. Despite his renegade’s reputation, Lester was very careful on the rocks. I will never forget his reprimand of my loose waist-loop. “There’s no excuse for that,” he said, in the voice of an Old Testament prophet. Not until late 1956 did the climbing committee designate Lester an unlimited leader.

INCREASING AGE SEEMED ONLY TO FUEL LESTER’S ENTHUSIASM. When he was in his late 60s, I was able to show him routes he had not known. He followed them eagerly. One fall afternoon in 1971, I heard that Lester had taken a leader fall. I rushed over with my partner, Nick Pott. Nick is a doctor, but there was nothing he could do. Lester was dead, not from the fall, perhaps his first ever on the lead, but from an apparent heart attack. He was a week short of his 75th birthday. (Now that I am over 70 myself, I more than ever admire Lester’s tenacity then.)

I had long since had my own brush with chapter regulations. Little more than a year after I had started, I was leading the top pitch of Frog’s Head. The steep sun-drenched rock had small, sharp holds. I ventured up, checked my balance, retreated a step. Then a stern voice from the carriage road 200 feet below: “Steve, I don’t think you should be up there.” It was an older Appie. We did not have a long dialogue. This very public rebuke might have made me more rebellious; instead, it had the opposite effect. I followed the rules henceforward. More than 50 years later, I still wonder whether this mid-climb chastisement was the right instrument of reform.

Despite this episode, I was invited to join the club in 1953. I solicited the required (at the time) letters from two members who had known me at least one year. (AMC membership no longer requires recommendations and can be arranged online.)

In addition to the law-abiding Appies and their fringe, the scene featured Hans Kraus—later famed as John F. Kennedy’s back doctor—and his small group: Ken Prestrud, Bonnie Prudden and her husband, Dick Hirschland,



Lester Germer, a physicist, was in his 50s when Jervis met him. He climbed until he was 74, dying of an apparent heart attack on the rocks soon after this photo was taken.

STEVEN JERVIS

and Lucien Warner. These folks were mysterious to the rest of us, with whom they rarely teamed up. Hans, along with Fritz Wiessner, had pioneered almost all the early routes in the hemp-rope days. By 1952, Fritz had left for Vermont, and Hans's presence dominated the cliffs. He was a distinctive figure, short and powerful; he had a strong European (mainly German) accent and wore a helmet of cloth. He and his group stayed at Schlueter's but rather remotely. (Eventually Hans had his own annex built at the inn.) We rarely knew what they were up to. Unlike Fritz, Hans was an eager practitioner of direct aid. Photographs of him often feature the three-step stirrups that he and his partners improvised. All his climbs are now done without such aid, but they were daring and advanced at the time. Sometimes he would be off to Millbrook, the highest and least-frequented cliff in the area. Almost nobody else ventured there. I tried a few years later with Craig Merrihue, a very strong partner from Harvard, but we didn't get up anything. Hans and company struggled with a new Millbrook route, frighteningly called "Never Again." "There is an overhang," he reported. "Then another one. Then a third one." This was another world to me, as it must have to most of my peers. The route went free in 1968,

thanks to the visionary John Stannard. The guidebook calls the top pitch “extremely loose and scary.”

Hans was very bold. He took a number of leader falls, some of them with injuries, but they never deterred him, not even broken ribs. One evening Bonnie and Dick played Tom Lehrer’s first record of satirical songs. Some were mildly ribald, others left-critical of the Cold War in Eisenhower’s years. Nobody laughed. I didn’t because I had heard the record many times already. The others didn’t because they thought it vulgar, or didn’t get it, or just didn’t find it amusing. Even I, as a callow teenager, could sense a gaping sensibility gap between Hans’s group and the AMC establishment. Some viewed Hans as dictatorial. His reputation intimidated me, but I found him a most generous man. A few years later, when he was unable to come to Harvard to give a lecture, he sponsored American Alpine Club leader Jim McCarthy to take his place. If climbers were injured, they went to the office of Dr. Kraus on Park Avenue. We were his preferred patients; he rarely, if ever, charged us.

A FEW YEARS LATER, THE LEADERSHIP QUALIFICATIONS WERE RELAXED a little. We could now lead any beginners’ climb even if we had legs on only a few. Same for intermediate routes. This loosened things up a bit, but the leader-to-follower ratio remained low. There was a continued emphasis on safety. The 1952 American Alpine Club accident report quotes Norton Smithe, a very active member of the chapter: “We . . . are particularly proud of our safety program. . . . We lay much more stress on judgment than on spectacular climbing when selecting leaders, and have adopted a rather rigid qualification procedure.”

A Sierra Club article on the “dynamic belay” was a hot topic at Schlueter’s. The theory was that if the belayer let the rope pass through her or his hands in a leader fall, then the system, including the hands, would endure less stress. The criticism was that the belay might be dynamic whether you wanted it or not, and that extra falling distance increased the chances of landing on a ledge and breaking something. The club set up a belay-testing device: a heavy weight hung from a beam secured to the cliff 50 feet up. The weight was hauled up a way and then dropped, while the belayer on the ground tried to hold it. It gave quite a jolt and was a good lesson in the limitations of waist belays. Then the Connecticut Chapter held a safety training weekend at Sleeping Giant State Park. A young climber was killed.

The Gunks did see accidents, some of which were reported in the American Alpine Club reports, but they all were minor. That reputation of safety changed on April 5, 1959. The event is said to have occurred on High Corner; more accurately, it was off High Corner. The young climber from Yale University (not an AMC member) had deviated to the right soon after starting up. The rock is much harder there; it now hosts a couple of 5.8 routes. The first guidebook was still five years in the future. The victim pulled out his piton as he fell. His death did not end climbing in the Gunks, but it came at a time of significant change. The AMC hegemony was waning. Visitors came from Montreal; Pittsburgh; Washington, D.C.; and even farther away. Who could resist those miles of solid quartz conglomerate? Historians of the area emphasize the advent of the “Vulgarians,” who in their unruly demeanor and disrespect for regulations were the opposite of the Appies.

And then in 1963 a whole new arrangement erased the old ambiguities. Large sections of the cliffs were incorporated into what is now the Mohonk Preserve. Suddenly we were all signing liability agreements and paying a small fee for the right to wear permission buttons and climb. Anybody could sign up, and many did. The number of climbers, not to mention walkers and bikers, has exploded since then.

I remember my early AMC weekends walking the three miles to Skytop. I think this crag, a horseshoe-shaped extent looming above a great boulder field, to be the finest in the region. The best climbs are spectacularly exposed. But it is private property, not part of the Mohonk Preserve. You can't climb there now unless you are staying at the Mohonk House and pay one of the outsourced guides. (Rates start at \$324 per person for a day.)

Just before I left for college, I myself was made an unlimited leader. I was amazed but pleased. My transition from naughty kid to authority figure was complete. I was the 24th to be so named. It saddens but does not surprise me to see how many of the preceding 23 are not only no longer climbing but no longer alive. Of those 23, only one to my knowledge died in a climbing accident. That was my friend George Evans, who had been with me on that rainy ascent of Minty so long before. George was a very careful climber, and a skilled one. He fell on the East Face of Mount Whitney, on an airy but fairly easy traverse. The American Alpine Club accidents report commented patronizingly: “Altitude, weather, and endurance lead to difficulties not experienced at places like Stoney Point or the Shawangunks.” George had done plenty of routes in the big mountains, among them the East Ridge

of the Grand Teton with me nearly 30 years before. The mountains are a hazardous environment, even for the most cautious among us.

Although many of their procedures now seem outdated to the point of quaintness, I will always be grateful to the New York Appies for getting me started and keeping an eye on me. It is now almost 60 years since I did my first route in the Gunks. I am the only climber from 1952 still active there. Somehow the routes have become harder. I lament the possible loss of history. Who now remembers to pronounce MARIa Millar and her climb correctly? Or that Norton Smithe's last name sounds like Smith, not Smythe or Smithy? And what about those splendid angle pitons that he used to make himself and sell for 40 cents? They used to be everywhere on the cliffs. Who recalls when the first pitch crack on the route called Baby really had a baby? It was a split chockstone. Both pieces came out, at least once with a lead climber attached. And that foothold below the crux on Frog's Head? Its disappearance pushed the rating up a grade. And the splendid jammed block on the first pitch of Pink Laurel? Too many climbers must have pulled and stood on it. It now lies shattered at the bottom of the route.

My advanced age prompts me to note, crankily, contrasts with the past. The crowds, of course. Too many people enjoy climbing, that's all. And all those kids with their crash pads going bouldering. The boulders even have their own guidebook. Even worse is the young climbers' habit of rappelling down once they have passed the hard part of the climb. What happened to climbing entire routes? Then there are those ubiquitous indoor climbing walls. Someone told me she now rarely does "outdoor climbing." I had thought there was no other kind.

I struggle to follow routes I once led with ease. I cannot even plead age, because my frequent partner, John Thackray, is four years older and still leading 5.9. I often think I should retire, but climbing is living, so I cannot. A big climbing wall has opened near my Brooklyn home. It's called Brooklyn Boulders, but its routes measure 30 feet high. It is frequented by teenagers with tattooed arms who hang horizontally from plastic holds. They hold bouldering competitions there. Rock music bounces off the walls. I find the place a deplorable travesty of real climbing and go there as often as I can.

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