

# Winds of Change

on Canadian  
Limestone

By Andy Genereux

Andy Genereux leading on pitch 6 of General Pain on Mount Yamnuska during the 1988 first ascent of this climb

Opposite: Peter Gatzsch following the big traverse on Excalibur 5.10c



**Climbing for me started on the classic** Rockies trad cliff of Mount Yamnuska. Over my career I've had a love-hate relationship with the cliff. Thirty years have passed and I still return time and time again to this magnificent chunk of stone to get my next adrenaline fix. It's become a rite of passage to scale routes on this exposed limestone cathedral. Lately, however, this basilica of Canadian Rockies tradition has been experiencing a bit of upheaval and change.

"See what you've started!" wrote Allan Derbyshire last summer in an e-mail to me about some bolts that had appeared near an abandoned west end project. Derbyshire is a dedicated Yam traditionalist and staunch member of the old guard and his accusations implied that by introducing modern ethics and practices to the cliff, I was somehow responsible, for what he called "this latest bit of mad bolting." In fact, the bolts were part of a new route called Hot Doggin, which was pushed ground-up using aid techniques by Brandon Pullan and Will Meinen. The .5.12c crux pitch was later freed by a new arrival to the Bow Valley, climbing star Sonnie Trotter.

Reflecting on more than three decades of climbing, I have to admit that in a way, Derbyshire was right. Maybe I am somewhat responsible. Through my career I've helped establish nearly a thousand pitches of new ground around the Rockies in both sport and trad. I was one of the pioneers of sport climbing in Grotto Canyon. I have led, embraced or been embroiled in most of the area's ethical debates and led by example, pushed grades, modern standards and ethical change. Maybe through that combined process, in some way I've helped to get the next generation of climbers motivated to pick up the torch. If that means putting in bolts, so be it.

On Yamnuska, I've helped push 25 major new routes, embracing a range of ethical practices. For most of these climbs I plied the traditionalist trade of ground-up on-sight advancement. In the bold 1980s I placed my first bolts, hand drilling off free stances or marginal hook placements, my shaking body gripped with fear, hoping to finish the damn bolt before plunging off into the abyss. More recently I rope soloed with a power drill, onsight without hooks. However, my biggest change in tactics came with my last three routes. These climbs have all gone in top down after rappel bolting and cleaning, thus I broke with a 50-year tradition on this great cliff.

Making this switch was mostly about safety for me and for future climbers. There are those who disagree with these modern techniques. That's OK, there's plenty of room for all styles to coexist here in the Rockies.

Reading the Mar. 08 issue of *Gripped*, I was disturbed by comments made by John Bachar in his interview. Bachar said "Trad climbing can be free, aid, or mixed – the only requirement is that you start from the bottom." He feels that to be a valid ascent a new route has to go up from the bottom, onsight, not knowing what lies ahead.

No offense to Mr. Bachar and his views. I've probably taken them out of context, but here is my take on things. His ideals might work on the nearly perfect rock where he grew up climbing but they don't really apply to the Canadian Rockies for one big reason: rock quality.

Our often suspect limestone adds significantly to the risk for those pushing new ground with a strict ground-up ethic. This past summer, one of my regular partners, Peter Gatzsch, suffered a badly broken leg after being struck by rock fall generated by his rappel ropes. He and his partner were descending off a new route on Goat Wall. This 700 m mountain has generally better than average rock by Rockies standards but is nowhere close to the bombproof granite of Squamish or California.

On East End Boys, a seminal 1980s route on the eastern reaches of Yamnuska, I had to convince Steve DeMaio, one of the true hardmen from this visionary period, to compromise one of his definitive statements from those heady times. Back in 1997 he wanted me to help partake in an effort to claim the first free ascent of his infamous 1986



## Bolts in the Bow Valley: A Timeline

### • 1967

Some of the first bolts are placed in the Bow Valley on Yamnuska, first on Corkscrew, then, in 1969 on Balrog. Rockies legend Brian Greenwood would figure in both routes. These 1/4 inch bolts enabled short sections of aid to connect free climbing. They were a huge leap in ethics at the time.

### • 1971

Iron Suspenders, a major aid route, is completed by Billy Davidson and George Homer on Wakonda Buttress in the CMC Valley. This is the first climb to employ direct aid for much of its climbing, large numbers of bolts and rivets are deployed.

• On Yamnuska, Kahl Wall goes up by Don Vockeroth with newly arrived West Coast climber Tim Auger. Bolts are again used to overcome blander sections of rock, connecting disjointed corner systems. Aid is needed, but the future of free climbing out on the blank expanses has been demonstrated and climbers never look back.

### • 1972

CMC Wall is completed over three days of intense effort and becomes the first Yosemite style big wall route in the Rockies. First ascensionists Billy Davidson and Urs Kallen add a second wall route, Yellow Edge, two years later. Both climbs rely heavily on numerous and assorted bolting hardware for success.

### • 1977

Bruce Keller and John Lauchlan climb their infamous route The Maker 5.10b in CMC Valley, behind Yamnuska. It is serious, but more importantly attacks the compact rock of the Ripple Wall using bolts.

**Steve Birch** leading the third pitch of *Freak Out* on the East End Of Mount Yamnuska. This classic 1972 route is still freaking out climbers with its dubious rock quality thirty plus years later. Rated 5.9, it requires the limestone touch; recently two bolts were removed from this climb to keep a more original flavour of the climb. Although several thousand pounds of loose rock have been tossed off by passing climbers, care is still required to keep from having an exciting ride to the end of the rope.

route. The climb had yet to see a second ascent after eleven years. I was game to give it a go, but I wanted good gear.

Taking the power drill along, replacing shit fixed gear and adding new bolts improved our safety and increased our chances of success. I pushed ground-up, using the traditional approach but I wanted to toss bad rock and there was plenty of that. We both took turns cringing at the belay. Adding bolts to his climb was like asking Steve to tear out his heart and sell his soul to the Devil. In the end, he succumbed to the lure of better protection. Eventually, we free climbed the line at 12a. Today, the route has become a hard classic. The angst of how the bolts got there or how the rock quality has greatly improved means little to those that follow.

## Modern practices make routes safer but don't guarantee there will never be a loose hold or climbers won't fall off or be injured. A leader still requires skill and judgment to succeed.

Is the ground-up ethic important? I agree with Bachar that there is no better feeling than envisioning a line, attacking the chunk of virgin stone and succeeding on a new route ground-up. From a practical standpoint, however, rock quality in the Rockies tends to limit where this approach can be justified. Today, maintaining this traditional ethic is not so important to me. I have nothing to prove to anyone. During my career, I've climbed on par with the local talent from my generation and pushed local standards rope-solo. In the end, I realized the only person terrified and affected by the loss of these onsite experiences would be me.

After the cleaning and primping of a new route, no other climber will ever quite experience the same range of emotions or be exposed to the same level of danger or make the same potentially life-altering

decisions. Once a route is established, the experience of the first ascensionists can never be repeated.

In 2004, I endured two separate accidents, breaking my ankles twice, rupturing both Achilles tendons. Afterwards, I had definitely lost some of my ability to accept needless danger associated with establishing new routes ground-up. With both accidents, rock failure led to my falls and subsequent injuries on 5.8 ground. Despite 30 years of climbing experience, my skills and judgment failed to detect these hazards.

For me, being alive at the end of the day is more important than wallowing in on-sight euphoria. Giving up your life trying to conquer a piece of rock is a hard equation to justify.

Back in 1988, on the successful completion of *The Warrior 5.10d X*, on the north face of Mount Loughheed, I got to lead Brian Wallace's pitches after he was killed during the first attempt. Two months after Wallace's tragic demise, I was back on the mountain with his original partners. The mountain was a total crap pile, a nightmare from top to bottom. Before and since that adventure I've never again encountered such poor quality rock. The entire cliff seemed alive.

When I got out onto Wallace's final lead, I put in a bolt 10 m out. It helped protect the belay, gave me some confidence and increased our chance of survival. It was a fine line between injury, death and success on this scary route. Some purists feel using bolts on these alpine routes is sacrilege and takes away from the next, more testosterone rich generation. To me, not placing a bolt and dying is a silly argument.

Is loose rock threatening the leader and the belayer an expected part of the trad experience in the Rockies? For some it may add to their adventure. I have personally experienced the damage and destruction caused by rock failure and gravity. I still search out new adventures using traditional ground-up methods. I'm choosy however, about where I apply this historical ethic.

If my critics had witnessed how loose and big some of the bad

### • 1984

CMC Wall is free climbed by Brian Wallace and Bill Stark. This ascent revolutionizes what can be accomplished, kick-starting the next wave of development.

### • 1985

Sport climbing gets started in Grotto Canyon beginning a revolution in local climbing tactics. Technical grades quickly supersede those on Yamnuska. Early sport routes mimic trad ideals but employ a top-down approach. Still a major shift perspective has taken place. As the number of bolts gradually increases there is a corresponding advance in the technical grades.

- The landmark Trilogy Routes are done by Dave Cheesmond, Brian Gross and Choc Quinn on Yam. In a single season they demonstrate new levels of boldness, employing sparsely used bolts for protection. These climbs establish a benchmark for how traditional climbing should be done.

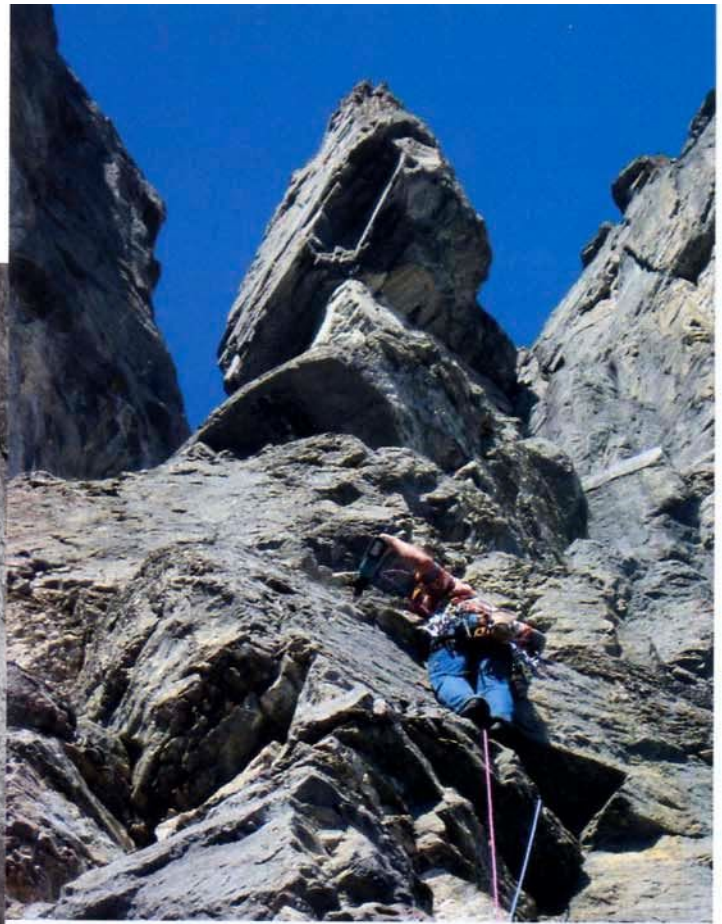
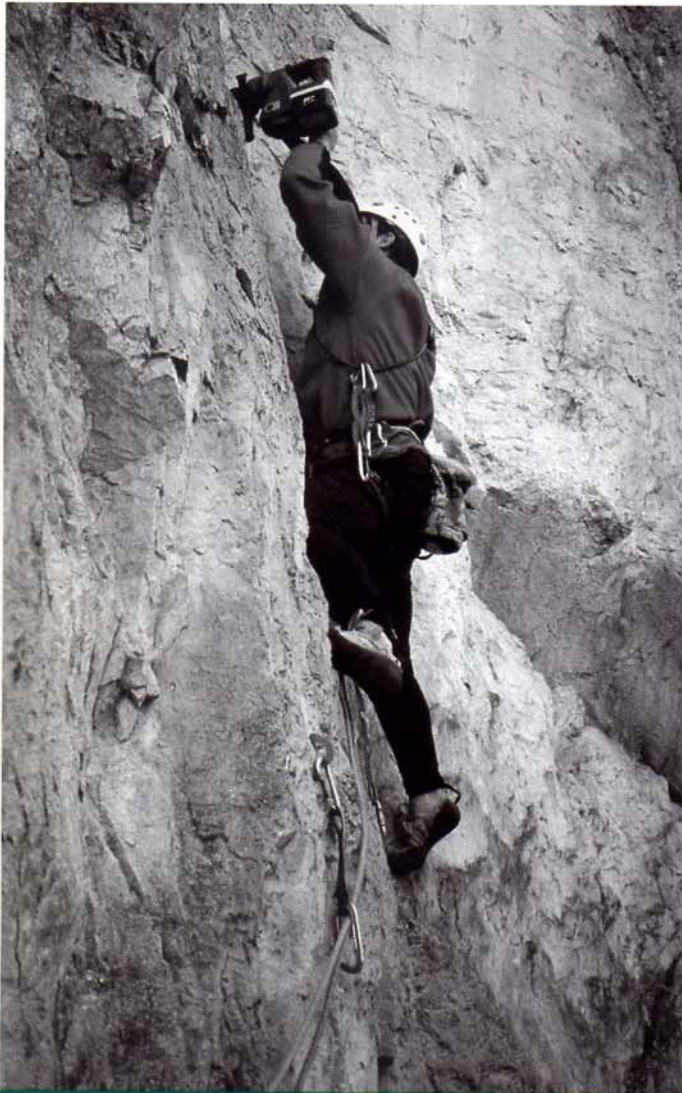
### • 1986

A major ethical debate erupts in Grotto Canyon over hold enhancement on new routes on the Water Wall. This was pursued as a bolt war and would spill over onto Yam's traditional scene. At the time, it was mistakenly thought that the traditionalists were against the canyon rats and their bolting practices. In reality, it was a discussion about whether permanent changes should be made to the rock on a grand scale.

- Jeff Marshall, Brian Gross and Steve DeMaio establish two new bold routes: *Astro Yam 5.11c* and *Above & Beyond 5.11c A0*. These climbs achieve new standards for boldness and technical difficulty on the Yamnuska. Spacious bolting and hand drilling off hooks are the keys to success. *Astro Yam* wrongly becomes embroiled in the chipping debate.

Below: **Andy Genereux** drilling on lead, no hooks, on the first ascent of Glory Day's 5.11c

Right: **Steve Birch** drilling on lead on a new route Missing Link spring 2008, Grillmair Area of Mount Yamnuska



rock was on my latest Yam climbs, or how easily it jettisoned, they might just change their viewpoint. Maybe Bachar can come up here and practice his heady ideals for awhile. It would be interesting to see if his opinions changed after a few classic sorties on unexplored ground in the Rockies.

Is retrofitting existing multi-pitch trad routes acceptable? Since when does crap gear add character to a climb? I was accused of altering an original experience by retrofitting the seminal route CMC Wall. Do 20-year-old boot laces and marginal rivets removed with my nut tool equate to character? These relics simply equaled poor protection that was originally used for bodyweight aid placements. It is hardly adequate to protect hard free climbing 35 years after the

• 1987

On Yam, Genereux and Jones push Spring Fever in a day. The route is serious. They use six only bolts in nine pitches.

• 1988

BJ Wallace is killed pushing a new alpine rock route on the crumbling north face of Mount Lougheed. His reluctance to place a bolt results in a 25 m, factor-two leader fall and a fatal head injury. His tragic death greatly affects leading protagonists pushing the edge of the envelope in trad circles.

• Genereux and Jeff Marshall establish General Pain on Yamnuska. This route is a serious big wall style route. It becomes the last climb of this style on Yamnuska. That same year, DeMaio and Marshall complete Iron Butterfly on Windtower across the Bow Valley. This seminal climb is most likely the most serious and technical aid route in the Rockies to date. Neither climb sees a repeat due to poor rock quality and desperate climbing. Two days following the completion of General Pain, Marshall and Genereux team up with DeMaio to complete the ill-fated route, The Warrior, on Mount Lougheed where BJ was killed two months earlier. This will prove to be the scariest route any of them will ever climb, due to poor rock quality.

fact. Should climbers not expect fixed gear to be safe, with adequate protection available for all levels of ability?

In the Rockies, we tend to subject entry level climbers to bad belays and runout climbing in the name of traditional values. Trying to upgrade belays on aging trad routes can be like going to the dentist. Nobody likes to, but once the drilling is done and there is no longer pain in your mouth, you're glad you did.

Today, if I see a bad belay I just fix it. Replacing aging, corroded pitons with beefy stainless steel bolts is a no-brainer. These modern babies are a fourth the cost of a new piton and have over three times the life span and are not subject to loosening from freeze-thaw cycles like pitons. I think 5.8 climbers deserve the same protection

reduce runouts on lead with a power drill.

Renovating this climb made it more reasonable. Climbers don't need to experience two tied-off knife-blade pitons followed by a serious 30 m runout on crumbling limestone. That crazy pitch is still there for those wanting the original experience, but I put up a new variation to the right that has better climbing, rock and protection. Some would argue that I want to sanitize climbing to make it safe and accessible. My argument is that Spring Fever hardly got climbed after it went up. Following the retrofit it sees 30 or so ascents a year. I want people to repeat my climbs, not die on them.

In the same vein, I put up a 650 m, 5.9 line on Mount Cory in Banff Park a few years back. I used a reasonable number of bolts

to protect compact rock where no natural gear was available and bolted all belays. The nature of the rock dictated that some pitches had substantial bolting while others didn't. I call this route an example of Modern Mixed Trad. This style gives the same level of protection usually found on harder climbs. I could have put this route up with a lot less fixed gear. In fact, I onsight soloed the first half of the route years earlier burdened

## Should we expose hundreds of climbers to potentially life threatening loose rock or should we remove these hazards in a controlled manner on rappel? Rap bolting, establishing good fixed gear in the right locations and cleaning suspect rock makes sense to me.

standards as 5.12 climbers. This does not mean that we should bolt all the old routes into submission. I just want to see critical fixed gear that is corroded, loose, or fatigued replaced with good fixed gear. It's important to maintain the original character of these historical climbs. Does replacing existing fixed gear with new stuff change character? I think not.

I have brought some of my old routes up to a modern standard. An example is Spring Fever on Yam. Now this once serious climb from 1987 is accessible to a broader spectrum of climbers. I tried to find a balance between old style values and modern standards. On the route I replaced or improved belays with bolts and rap hangers. I moved a couple pitches and added some new protection bolts to

with a 70-pound pack to access another project. My idea was to see adequate levels of protection for climbers at the given grade. To that end, this route was very successful. If I had left this as a vintage trad route with serious runouts, it would hardly be climbed. As a community, should we wait for marginal fixed protection to fail before we do something to minimize the threat?

I just don't want climbers to die because of bad belays. This has already happened on the NE Buttress of Ha Ling peak above Canmore. Many of the belays which previously had fixed pitons have been updated with bolts, making this classic 5.6 somewhat safer. Unfortunately, several inexperienced climbers were injured or killed before these changes occurred.

### • 1990

CMC Wall is given a retrofit by Jon Jones and Genereux. Using a power drill, over three long rappels they replace marginal fixed gear and improve belays. With improved protection and information, the route becomes an overnight classic after the controversial tactics are used. Some in the traditionalist camp see their world slipping away and the debate over these unconventional tactics becomes heated.

• The first rap-bolted multi-pitch sport route is established in the Bow Valley. On the east end of Mount Rundle above Canmore, True Grit by Mark Whalen goes in at 5.10b, climbs five pitches, and is completely bolted. This route causes a big stir as it sits on one of the classic traditional crags. Threats are made to chop the route but not much happens.

### • 1991

On Dirty Dancing in the Ghost, Genereux employs top tactics on a multi-pitch climb. He onsight solos a 5.8 climb with a 70-pound pack to access the top of the crag, then spends the day putting in the top four pitches, hand drilling. The crux 12a pitch was established with a traditional ground-up approach.

### • 1992

Genereux and Jones add a new five-pitch variation called CMC Direct to CMC Wall. They use a power drill on lead for the first time on Yam and possibly the Rockies. It makes it possible to conquer 200 m of new ground in only a few hours.



• 1993

Tim Pochay and Genereux establish Southern Exposure 5.11b in the Ghost, the first time a power drill is used to push an entire multi-pitch route ground-up in the Ghost, probably the Rockies.

• Gormenghast is the first 5.12 on Yamnuska, and is put up with extensive hand drilling off aid, then local star Glen Reisenhofer is brought in to unlock the technical crux for the FFA. This climb boasts closer bolt spacing and is similar to a sport standard for protection. The winds of change are blowing on Yamnuska.

• TABVAR (The Association of Bow Valley Rock Climbers) is set up and headed by Jon Jones. This is a climber/industry funded non-profit organization with a mandate to help defer bolting and hardware costs on new routes and improve existing fixed gear.

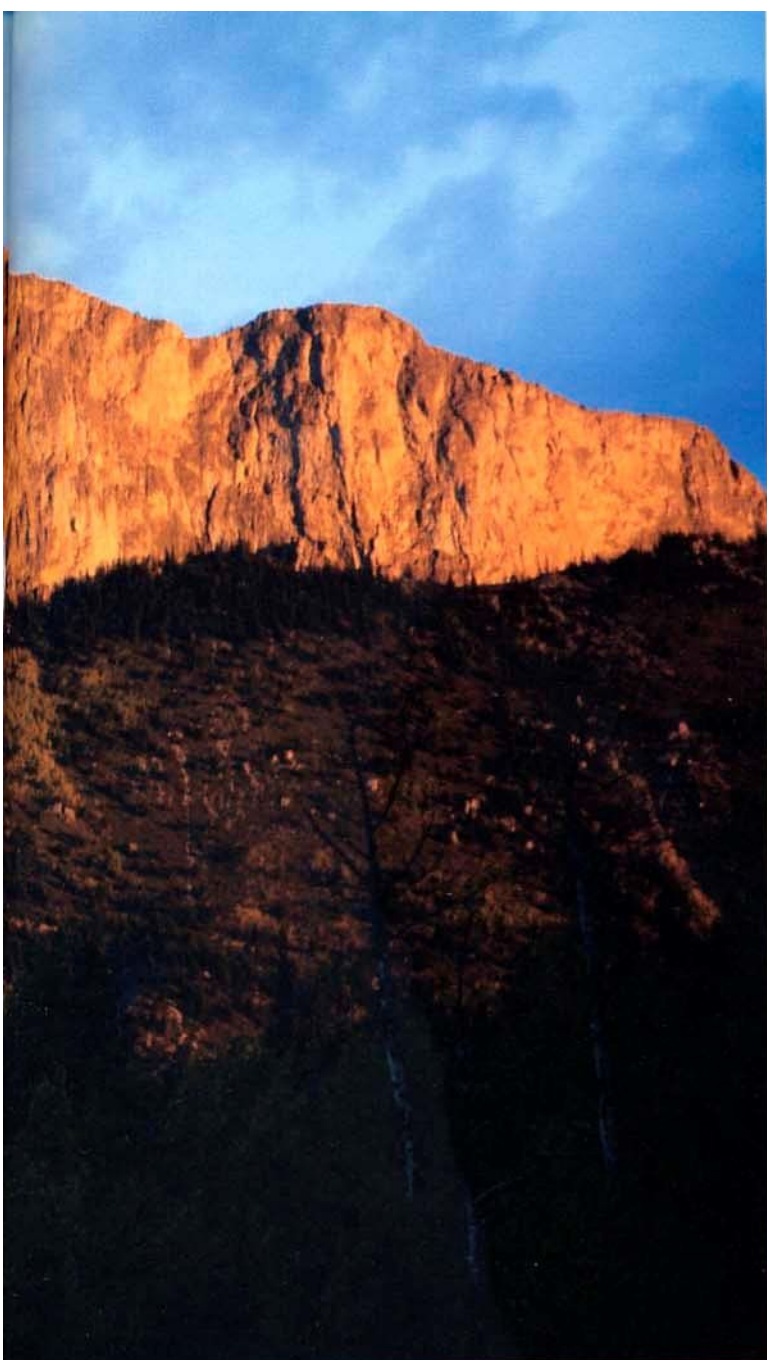
• 1994

The north face of Ha Ling peak above Canmore sees the installation of a 22-pitch rappel installed sport route. Sisyphus Summits 5.10d by Hugh Lenney and Roger Chayer. This climb again pushes buttons on the traditionalist radar. Threats are made and debates are again heated. In the end its popularity can't be denied and the route is left intact.

• 1997

DeMaio and Genereux free climb DeMaio's pinnacle 80s route, East End Boys at 5.12a. They replace 25-year-old 1/4 inch bolts, upgrade belays and clean off piles of loose rock, while leading using a power drill. These tactics make the climb safer but cause emotional turmoil for DeMaio.

"The Crown Jewel" of Rockies  
trad climbing, Mount Yamnuska



To help with these looming issues, TABVAR (The Association of Bow Valley Rock Climbers) was founded in 1993. Tirelessly organized and run by long-time local activist Jon Jones, this organization is a climber- and industry-funded non-profit group. Its mandate is to help defer fixed hardware costs on new routes, improve existing fixed gear and participate in environmental stewardship and trail maintenance at local crags. TABVAR has been instrumental in improving fixed gear in the Bow Valley and helped support the expansion of new routes in all styles, raising over \$70,000 for these causes.

Should we expose hundreds of climbers to potentially life-threatening loose rock or should we remove these hazards in a controlled manner on rappel? Rap bolting, establishing good fixed gear in the right locations and cleaning suspect rock makes sense to me. On crags like Yamnuska, which have easy access from the top, these techniques are efficient and can produce fine multi-pitch routes if the person has the right skill set and experience. But do modern tactics make these climbs less valid than those established ground-up?

Modern practices make routes safer but don't guarantee there will never be a loose hold or climbers won't fall off or be injured. A leader still requires skill and judgment to succeed. However, they or their partner shouldn't die if a mistake is made.

Are these new mixed trad routes a step backward or forward? That depends on your point of view. My latest climbs achieve no new standards. They simply consolidate a change in style. The fact that I made this statement on Yamnuska, the crown jewel of the Canadian Rockies trad scene, might make a bigger impact. These climbs were about moving ethics forward, trying to change attitudes on this traditional bastion but also about developing some great climbing.

Ethics have been an evolving process on Yamnuska since the first route – Grillmair Chimney's 5.6 – was climbed in 1952. I like to think that I've played a positive role in that ongoing process.

Yamabushi 13a/b, finished in 2006 by Will Gadd after several years of effort, culminates the other end of the spectrum. It is the most difficult multi-pitch rock route in Rockies and all nine pitches are bolt protected. A variety of tactics were used, including direct aid, some rappel placed bolts and significant aggressive cleaning. Bolts and

#### • 1997

Genereux establishes Snert's Big Adventure 5.11d on Yamnuska. It takes four days to establish the route ground-up. The route is done rope soloing with a power drill. The climb resembles a modern sport climb but still requires a small rack of gear to be climbed safely. The modern mixed trad ethic is consolidated on Yamnuska.

- Scott Milton climbs Existence Mundane at Acephale. Graded 5.14b, it becomes the hardest sport route in the Rockies to date.

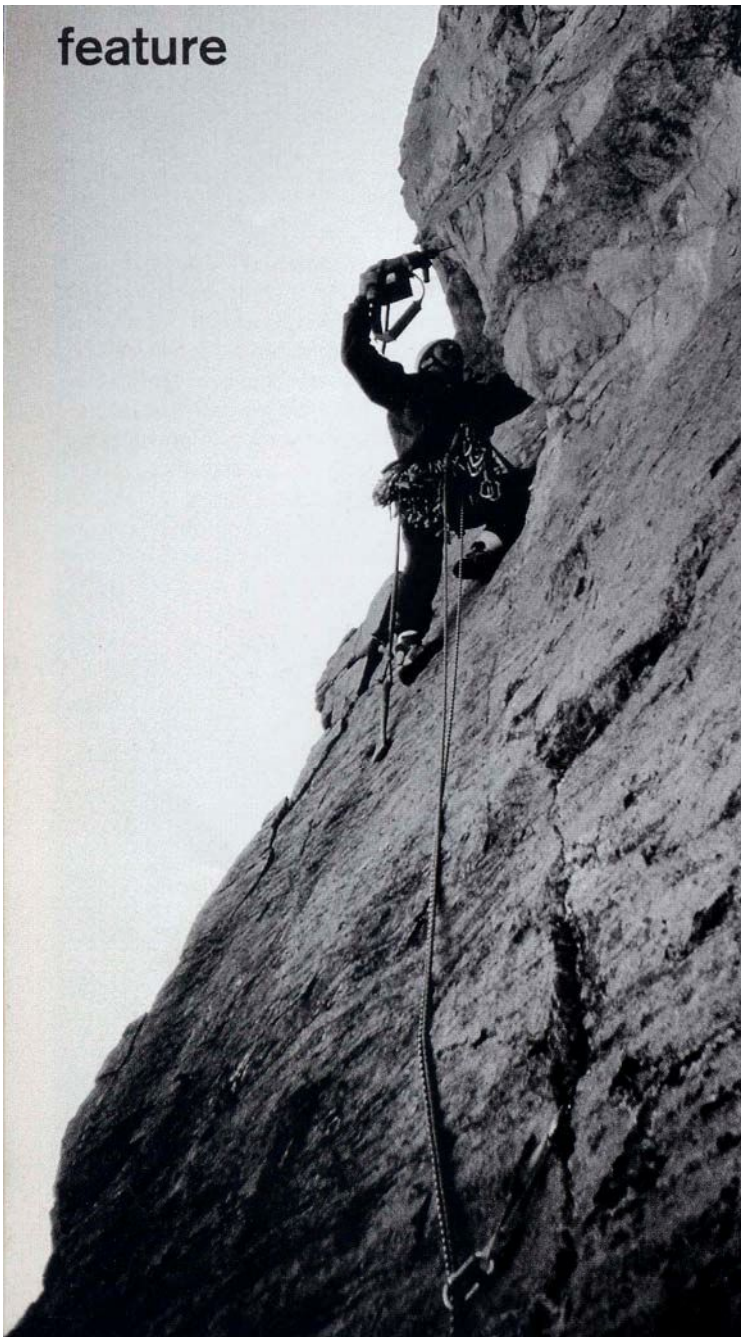
#### • 2002

Spring Fever is retrofitted over two days by Genereux and Jeff Marshall. Some pitches are moved, others have improved protection and the climb becomes popular after sitting in obscurity for 15 years.

#### • 2004

Genereux suffers two separate accidents on Yamnuska due to rock failure, while new routing on easy ground, rope soloing. Multiple ankle fractures and ruptured achilles tendons lead him to question the strict ground-up ethic.

- On Yam, Verstiegenheit 5.12c is finally completed. Sport climbing star Scott Milton is brought in as a hired gun by Shep Steiner to see his nemesis finally freed. The route becomes the most serious and hardest multi-pitch climb in the Rockies. Shep and several partners have employed a number of tactics to get this climb in place. On the lower half they pursue bold ground-up advancement, then relent on the upper half to rappel bolting and cleaning. Even with these tactics the climb takes several years to complete a free ascent. Today it still awaits a one-day continuous free effort. Milton required two days to free the entire climb, rapping back in to the high point on day two. He is reported to still be having nightmares about rock quality on this scary route.



Andy Genereux leading on the first ascent of Master Mind

modern tactics ultimately allowed this climb to become possible.

Modern routes expand the range of experiences a climber can explore in the Rockies, offering an alternative to past ethics and bolder styles but preserving a valid climbing style. Locally, the sport climbing revolution has steadily expanded since the first rappel climbs went into Grotto Canyon in 1985. Today we have nearly 3,000 bolted pitches. Most offer excellent protection and allow climbers to push technical difficulty at all levels. This major stylistic change to top-down inspection, bolting, and cleaning has allowed huge leaps in technical grades.

Scott Milton's 1997 clip-up, Existence Mundane 5.14b at Acephale, the hardest local sport route sits at the pinnacle of these practices. Existence Mundane is a long way from my first efforts in Grotto, 23 years ago, when I put up Lunatic Madness 5.11a, with one bolt, a couple of pre-placed pitons and no cleaning or working the line. It ended up having a ground-fall crux before you made the lone bolt which I hand-drilled from a contorted stance on lead.

How climbers choose to conquer new challenges is still evolving, as proven by Sonnie Trotter on his standard setting route The Path 14a, at Lake Louise. Probably the most difficult trad route in the Rockies, it was originally bolted about 15 years ago, but abandoned due to the difficult moves and bouldery sequences. Inspecting the line on rap-pel, Trotter discovered sufficient natural protection so he decided to chop the original bolts. On 10 days over five weeks he worked the route on top-rope and lead to get it clean. It should be noted that his cliff is bomber quartzite, unlike the majority of the Rockies which is mostly limestone with wide-ranging rock quality.

Maybe like Sonnie, other climbers will be going back to our trad roots to find answers to our eternal quest to define new limits and seek new adventures through climbing. Today, I feel there is still a lot of untapped potential in the Rockies. How it's achieved means something to the first ascent teams. The rest of us get to enjoy the results. For me, the results of other first ascensionists' efforts matter much more than the methods they used to finish their routes.

*Andy Genereux still new routes in the Rockies every season. He lives in Calgary.*

• 2006

Eric Dumerac bolts several belays on an easy route on Mount Louis to speed access to the east-facing Diamond face where he is building a rap-bolted sport route. This is a very controversial issue when it is discovered.

• Genereux rap bolts on Yamnuska for the first time, with Grey Scale 5.11d/12a. Although this practice is carried out at other venues in the Rockies, Yam is the last holdout. This becomes a significant shift in approach on the mountain. The climb is established with a mix of ground-up and top-down practices.

• On Yamnuska, Yamabushi 5.13a/b, is finally completed after several years of effort by Will Gadd. It becomes the most difficult multi-pitch route in the Canadian Rockies. The entire route is bolt protected and has employed a variety of tactics to be established.

• 2007

I install two new routes on Yamnuska, Devils Right Hand 5.11b, Unforgiven 5.11c, using top-down tactics for the most part. These routes have reasonable protection and the bad rock removed, but break with traditional values. Both prove popular, quickly seeing several repeat ascents.

• Sonnie Trotter establishes The Path 5.14R a trad line at Lake Louise's Back of the Lake Crag. The route was equipped with bolts about 20 years prior but had not been free climbed, due to the difficult moves and bouldery sequences. Inspecting the line on rappel, Trotter discovers sufficient natural protection and decides to chop the bolts. Over five weeks, he works the route on top-rope and lead, to get the climb clean even though it is on bomber quartzite rather than much less reliable limestone.