



## **TRIP REPORT: Ice Climbing around Ouray, Colorado**

By Dan Pate

The trip to Ouray, Colorado in January 2004 was the third year in a row that Kevin Donovan and I have traveled there to ice climb with various companions. This trip was already in the planning stages when Kevin, Bill, and I were in Ouray last year. It has become a tradition, and not one to be missed. This year the group of offenders included Bill Mcnight, Dave Thoms, Kevin Donovan, and myself. The four of us climbed Mt. Rainier, and Mt. Shuksan in 2002, and have since been referred to as the "Imperial Klingon Mountaineering Squad" or "Team SEB". If you want to know what an "SEB" is you will have to ask one of us in person. I am loath to put it in print (my kids might read this).

Ouray is a very unique place. The locals have built an ice park that is nothing short of amazing. They have piped in water to the top of the various parts of the canyon, and then spray it down the cliffs at night. The result is the most concentrated area of water ice climbing in the world. Each year they add new routes, and areas to the park. The number of named routes in the park now stands at 162. This does not include the numerous natural ice routes in the surrounding area.

If anyone has talked to me about ice climbing I'm sure that it did not take long for them to understand that I passionately love it. I'm not exactly sure why I find it so intriguing. Perhaps it is a manifestation of having called Texas home for my entire life. The ice climbing environment is so foreign to my everyday existence that it has a surreal and almost other-worldly quality. When I die, if I go to Heaven I expect it to look like Ouray in the winter. Even if I haven't figured out the reasons for falling in love with ice, I do know where it happened. It happened in Ouray.

### **Day One, Tuesday Jan. 27<sup>th</sup>, 2004**

Bill, Kevin, and I left Fort Worth around 5:00 p.m. on Tuesday. Dave, who lives in Seattle, would be flying into Denver, renting a car, and meeting us in Ouray on Wednesday afternoon. The three of us took off from work early, met at Kevin's house, and stuffed all of our gear into my Isuzu Trooper. As usual we had much more gear than I had imagined, or probably needed. We were able to get out of town without much trouble, and were on our way North-West on Hwy 287 by about 5:30-5:45.

Even though I have driven this road more times than I can possibly remember, the time seemed to go by quite quickly. I really enjoyed spending time with my good friends, talking about climbing (and all the less important stuff in life), and jamming to the tunes on Bill's iPod.

We rolled it Dalhart, TX around 11:00 pm. As planned we spent the night at the Budget Inn. Kevin found this place awhile back and he, and I have stayed there several times since. At first glance it looks like just another No-Tell motel. However, it is cheap, very clean, easy to get into and out of, and run by a very nice family. Also by stopping in Dalhart we had the majority of Texas in the rear-view mirror, and would still get a good night's sleep.

### **Day Two, Wednesday Jan 28<sup>th</sup>, 2004**

The three of us were up and on the road by around 6:00 a.m., on our way to the New Mexico border. Our route took us a different way than we have gone before. In the past we have stayed south going through Taos, NM, on to Pagosa Springs, and Durango. This trip we came into Ouray from the North traveling through Raton, Walsenburg, Westcliffe, Salida, and Montrose.

We stopped just outside of Westcliffe to take a look at the piece of land that Kevin bought there recently. I must say I was very impressed, and a bit envious. His land sits on the eastern edge of the valley where the terrain starts to rise up into the hills. It faces the Sangre de Cristo Mountains almost exactly abeam of the Crestone group. While standing on his land you can see as far south as Mt. Lindsey, and to the north all of the peaks way up toward Salida.

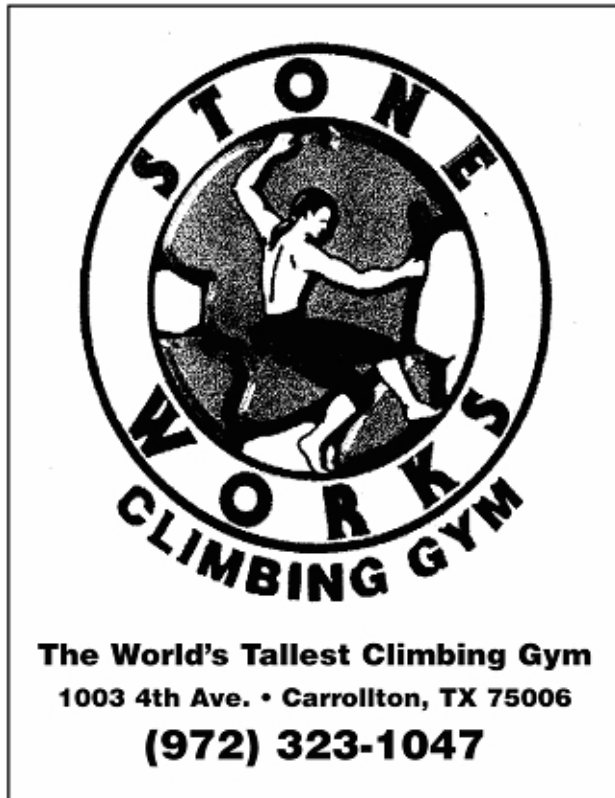
Leaving Kevin's property, we drove on toward Ouray. We stopped in Montrose at Wal-Mart to pick up a few things, and also at Home Depot for a "clamp-on" vise to use for tuning ice tools. After leaving Montrose it is a short drive into Ouray. The entire trip the weather was beautiful. The sun was shining, clear skies, and warm temperatures.

Upon arriving in Ouray the first stop was at Ouray Mountain Sports. The first order of business was to pump the owner for Beta, and to check out all

the shiny new climbing toys. While there Dave wandered in and Team SED was now complete.

After each of us had fondled every piece of climbing hardware in the store we proceeded on to the Ouray Victorian Inn which would be our home for the next few days. "The Vic" as it is commonly known is really the place to stay if you are ice climbing in Ouray. It is the closest accommodation to the climbing area. In fact you can easily walk to some of the lower areas of the Ice Park from there.

Before we left on the trip Kevin and I had ordered some gear and had it sent via UPS to "The Vic" so it would be waiting for us when we arrived. When we checked in they had both of our boxes waiting for us in the office. Kevin had gotten a new pair of mountaineering boots, and I had several new ice screws. It was like having Christmas presents under the tree.



After checking in we retired to the room to unload the truck, sorting gear, and preparing for the next day's climbing. Before we went to dinner I broke out my files, and the vise we picked up in Montrose and got started sharpening my climbing partner's ice tools. I had taken care of mine before we left home, but the others had seen little or no work since they came from the factory. I spent quite a while reworking and sharpening all three pairs of tools.

However, I was rewarded when my companions promised to buy my dinner that night. I also would not have to listen to them cursing the next few days because they were fighting with blunt weapons.

That night we had dinner at "Bien Tiempo", which is one of my favorite restaurants. They serve a variety of Southwestern, and Mexican food that is some of the best I have had anywhere. The prices are also very reasonable. They also serve my favorite beer on tap. Hey, good food, good beer, it's cheap, what else do you want? It is one of the places you must go to if you are in Ouray.

One of the things you notice in Ouray in the winter is that just about everyone there is an ice climber. Ouray has basically been a tourist town, but until recently only in the summer. In the winter the town would be pretty much shut down. However, since development of the ice park that has all changed. In the winter climbers from all over the world descend to climb in the area. The locals have taken advantage of this by catering to the needs of the climbers. Now in the winter there is a lot of activity, but it is still not crowded at all. There are always customers in the restaurants and stores, but there is never a wait.

The weather again was perfect, clear skies and about 20 degrees F. We set up two top-ropes, one on an arete, and another on a face route with some exposed rock. One of the great things about ice climbing is that you can set up a top-rope and then get several different lines out of it without moving the rope. On these two ropes the four of us spent the entire day climbing without have to change the set up.

This being the first day out we were all fresh and full of testosterone so the day ended up with us playing "I can climb a harder line than you can". We finally degenerated into dry tooling - almost as much rock as ice which was tremendous fun. Toward the end of the day I decide that I needed to get in at least one lead today to get my head on straight. I picked the face route that we had been top-roping earlier in the day. It is rated WI 3-4, and has fat ice and lots of good stances to place ice screws. The lead went well (I was could still walk when it was over), and was a lot of fun too.

After dinner we stopped in at "Mouse's Chocolate Shop", which is also the local internet café. We checked our e-mail, did a little internet surfing, and dosed up on chocolate before heading back to the room. Back at the room we finalize our

plans for the next day, did some last minute sorting of gear, and called the office for a 6:00 am wake up call.

### Day Three, Thursday Jan 29<sup>th</sup>, 2004

We got our wake up call (15 minutes late), dressed ourselves (yes, we have finally learned how to do it our own way), sorted more gear, and then headed over to the breakfast room by 7:00 am. One of the nice things about "The Vic" is their breakfast room. They serve breakfast starting at 7:00 am. There are eggs, cereal, toast, O.J., milk, etc... Nothing special, but it is nice to have everything set up and ready to go when you are trying to get out and climb.

We threw all our packs in the truck then drove up to the bridge below the "School Room" area of the park. When we arrive there was only one or two cars there so it looks like we would not have to fight anyone for the climbs we wanted. We had decided to climb in the "New Funtier". It's one of the new areas that have been recently opened up, and none of us has climbed there before. The hike in is very short, and only takes about 15-20 minutes from the truck.



*Lieutenant Dan in full gear*

Late in the day we are all tired and call an end to the fun. We climb out with our packs, break down the top ropes, exit back to the truck, and on to our room at "The Vic". This evening we have dinner at "The Bon Ton". Again, this is one of my favorite places to eat, and also arguably the best restaurant in Ouray. They have a variety of fare including Italian, seafood, and steak. Everything they serve is first class, the portions are large, and the wait staff is great (they also serve my favorite beer). When we are finally finished I can hardly stand up I am so full. Again we stop off at "Mouse's Chocolate" for some web surfing, and treats. Then it is back to the room to sort gear and then to bed.

### Day Four, Friday Jan 30<sup>th</sup>, 2004

Friday was sort of a repeat of the previous day. We decided to go back to "The New Funtier" area to climb some of the other lines we scoped out the day before. Again we set up two ropes, one on a big section of chandelier ice, and the other down a nice moderate dihedral route. The chandelier ice was by far the most challenging, and we bashed and shattered our way up several lines on that route.

However, the dihedral turned out to be the most fun, and we spend most of the day playing on it. It is relatively easy with a lot of consolidated icicles along the top left side. After top-roping it with tools Kevin decides to give it a try with out them, only using crampons and gloved hands. The rest of us followed his example and it turned out to be tremendous fun, and great practice for foot work and balance. I was amazed at what could be climbed without using the ice tools.

The next order of business was for each of us to get a lead in. We all took turns leading the dihedral route. This was also both Dave's, and Bill's first lead on ice. They both survived it, and actually made it look easy.

After packing out from the climbs, and cleaning up back at the room we were back into town for dinner. Again we ate at "Bien Tiempo" (yes it's that good), and then made the obligatory stop at the internet café on our way back to the room. After returning to the "The Vic" we went through the gear sorting ritual, made plans for the next day, then sacked out for our last night in Ouray. Before going to bed we watched the weather report, and it was calling for a major change in the weather tomorrow. We would learn that the weathermen do not always tell lies.

**Day Five, Saturday Jan 31<sup>st</sup>, 2004**

Saturday morning dawned cloudy, colder, and snowing. After breakfast we said our farewells to Dave. He had to get back to Denver to catch a flight that evening. Because of the distance he had to drive, and the weather taking a turn for the worst he decided not to climb and leave first thing that morning for the airport. We later learned that this was a very good decision. Dave barely made it to the airport in time to catch his flight due to the poor road conditions caused by the storm.

Since we would be leaving for home today after we finished climbing we needed to get all of our gear packed into the truck, and then checked out from the hotel. Fortunately this did not take long and we were on our way to the last climb of the trip.

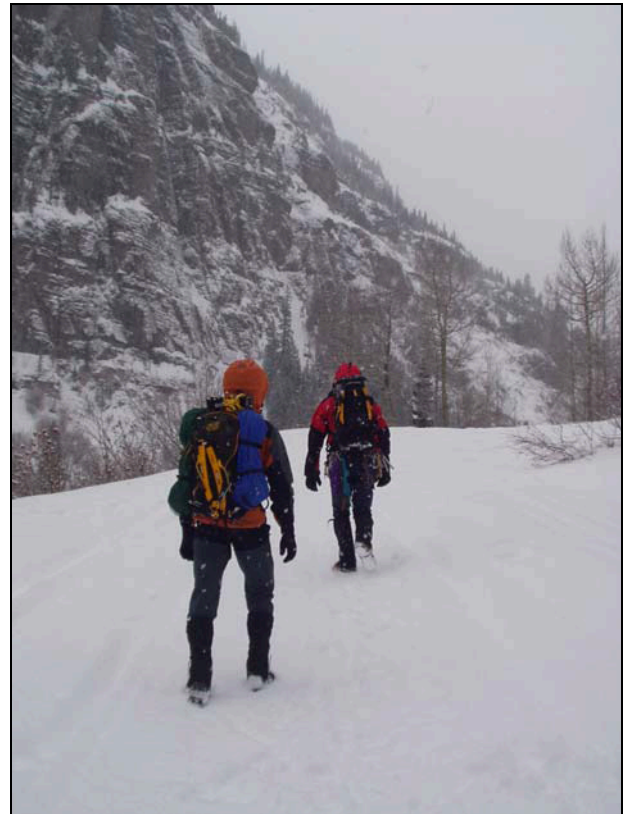
We decided to head out of the park and climb a natural route, deciding on a two pitch route up Camp Bird Road call "The Cleft". I had gotten some beta on it from the owner of Ouray Mountain Sports, and also from the guide book and it look like it would be just what we wanted. It is in an area called "Skylight" several miles above the ice park. There was some discussion about the wisdom of heading up on our first "natural ice" route given the weather conditions. However, we decided that we would give it a try and see what happened.

The drive to the trailhead goes up Camp Bird Road until it ends where they no longer plow it in the winter. The reason for this is that above that point the avalanche danger on the road is to high to keep it open. We parked the truck at the end of the plowed road, and then started the hike in, which is about another half mile farther on.

Since dawn that morning the quantity of snow fall had continued to increase. By the time we were walking in it had already accumulated another 3-4 inches. This would turn out to be a consistent trend. We found the base of the climb without any trouble and it looked pretty much as advertised, then located a spot to stash our packs, and the gear we would not take on the climb.

The start of the climb is scramble up a low angle snow slope to an alcove in the rock to the right side of the climb. This is a great place for the first belay, and is very well protected from any ice/rock fall. After flaking the ropes and anchoring Bill, and Kevin at the belay I launched off on the first pitch. The first part of the climb is 30 ft. section of dead vertical ice. The ice is super-fat down here, but because of the warm conditions over the last few days the quality of the ice was what I would call cheesy/rotten unless you got down deep into it. It proved to be a bit of a

challenge getting good pro into it. However, after adzing off some of the surface ice a long screw would penetrate into hard ice below.

*The Walk into "Skylight"*

After mounting the first section of the pitch the route turns right into a snow filled gully on up to the second belay. The higher I got the crappier, and thinner the ice became. It's annoying when you place a screw and the ice plates off underneath it. I had some rock pro, but the rock was so friable that it was useless. The climb was certainly starting to have an alpine flavor to it. The rock was rotten, the ice was thin, the pro was questionable, and it was snowing harder by the minute. Damn! I wouldn't wish to be anywhere else but here, it just doesn't get any better than this!

I finally got to the trees at the second belay with only 15 ft. of my double 60m ropes to spare. I anchored in and then belayed Bill, and Kevin up. By the time they arrived I was starting to get a little chilled. Not only was the snow fall picking up, but the temperature appeared to be dropping as well (reminder to self: always climb in the back country with a pack, and your belay jacket, and extra warm gloves inside).



*Bill, First Belay - "The Cleft"*

Bill would lead the last pitch to the top and Kevin, and I would follow. From the belay the next pitch looked like it would be pretty straight forward, however it turned out not to be. The route was only covered with a thin coat of ice that had the creasy/rotten consistency that I describe earlier, but worse because it was not as thick. When Bill, got up on the steeper section he could not get any good pro in and his crampons kept shearing out of the ice. I don't know about Bill, but Kevin, and I were getting gripped watching the show. Finally Kevin, and I had enough and we strongly recommended that he get some kind of pro in and bail back to the belay. Bill came to his senses and did as we suggested.

With all of us back at the second belay we set up to rap down to the bottom. The trees had the normal snarl of a thousand rap slings around them with several rap rings, so anchoring the ropes for the rap was a no-brainer. With the three of us down and the ropes pulled we packed up and exited back to the truck. By this time it was snowing quite hard, and the road was starting to accumulate a fair amount of snow.

By the time we were back to the truck and on the way home it was about 1:30 in the afternoon. Given the weather conditions we knew that we were in for a slow drive to Taos where we would spend the

night. However, dealing with driving conditions that day turned out to be the crux of the entire trip. The pass between Silverton and Durango was almost impassable. We finally got down to the lower elevations and the road conditions improved as we rolled into Durango. We thought the worst was over, but we were wrong. The road between Tierra Amarillo, and Tres Piedras is not plowed. By the time we got there it was dark, and snowing like crazy. For at least an hour we saw only one other car on the road. We finally got into Taos just after 9:00 pm. It is normally about a 4 hour drive, but it took us almost 8 hours. I was whipped.



*Kevin getting all mixed up*

We had planned to eat dinner at the Guadalajara Grill, but they were already closed. We found a little café that was still open and it turned out to be pretty good. After checking into the hotel, we hit the sack for some much needed rest.

### **Day Six, Sunday Feb. 1<sup>st</sup>, 2004**

We awoke Sunday morning to find the truck buried under a blanket of snow. After extricating it from a snowy grave we packed up and headed out of town on Hwy 64 toward Eagle Nest. We were getting ourselves prepared for a repeat of the previous day's driving nightmare when the

snow plow passed us on the way into town. I pulled over to the side of the road hoping that he would double back in town and plow the road the opposite direction. Luck was with us and he turned around just after passing us. We pulled in behind him and

### Crag Booty Mystery

By Arne Gelfert

Have you found some crag booty lately? If so, what did you do with it? I found a lonely stopper a while back. A Metolius Curved Stopper # 6. It appeared to be well-placed, it looked like it had seen very little use, and was easy to clean. With a big smile on my face, I clipped it to my harness. Then I stopped. Why - if it was so easy to clean - was it still here? Had someone simply forgotten to clean it? No way! Had someone meant to discard it and leave it behind? Why on earth would someone do that? The piece looked like it was in great condition. Did someone take a fall on this stopper and no longer feel comfortable using it? But if it had taken a fall, it probably wouldn't have been so easy to clean. How very mysterious. I have been carrying the stopper on my rack ever since but have only used it once. There is something eerie about the fact that I cannot explain

why it was left behind. Did someone maybe leave it just so that I would be asking myself this question?

### The Unfinished Climbing Novel

By Arne Gelfert

I looked past my screaming toes into the abyss. 2000 feet of vertical granite. Anything I dropped from here would make a crater down below I thought to myself. I looked up. 1000 feet of shear granite face above me. Empty. No sign of him, He had disappeared over an hour ago. After that, I had been feeding him rope by feel alone.

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had freshly plowed road all the way to Angle Fire.

After this stretch of road the conditions improved dramatically, and we had no more trouble until we were almost back to Fort Worth. Just before we rolled into town we ran into the frog strangling rain storm. I guess Mother Nature had to get in one last shot. We arrived back at Kevin's house tired, and wet, but satisfied that we had had another successful climbing trip to look back on.

### The Virtual Anchor Clinic

The VAC (Virtual Anchor Clinic) is still waiting to be cranked up by a reader willing to show us the last crazy anchor he built. We realize that the creators of the truly craziest anchors are unlikely to have survived their creation to write about it..