

The North Face Cable Route, Long's Peak (14 255ft, 4345 m) September 8th, 1996

On September 7th and 8th I was to be a member of a CMC trip up the old Cable Route on Long's Peak. This trip was being led by Mike Endres and consisted of the same people who did Mike's trip on Holy Cross: myself, Cathy Mckeen and John McBroom. We were supposed to camp about 1.2 miles up from the trailhead Saturday night and then climb the route Sunday.

On Friday a cold front pushed through with much rain and cold temperatures and by Saturday morning Pike's Peak was covered with snow. Cathy had called the ranger's station Friday night and they had informed her that they had gotten four inches of snow on Friday and it was still snowing. The forecast was for cool weather and showers on Saturday and warmer and drier for Sunday. Mike was out of town on business and wouldn't return until late Friday night. Cathy and I saw no reason to leave early Saturday morning just to camp in the rain and cold. We thought it would be better to sleep in Cathy's truck Saturday night and do the route in one day. After all, by camping we would only save 1.2 miles.

Later that afternoon we learned from the ranger station that the route should be ok on Sunday. We left Colorado Springs at 7:00 pm on Saturday night and parked our trucks in the national forest close by the trailhead. We got to sleep around 10:30 and were up again at 3:00. The sky was wonderfully clear and we started out on the trail by 4:20. The total mileage of our route was to be 12 1/2 miles up and down the Cable Route with an elevation gain of 4845ft. The plan was to climb up and then repel down using the old rings from the Cable Route to repel down from.

As we got above timberline the wind started to really pick up and soon it was quite chilly. However, the unobstructed view of the Front Range at pre-dawn was breathtaking and we realized how few opportunities we took to see such views. When we reached the turnoff to Chasm Lake the sun was just starting to rise and Mike quickly got out his camera. Mike loves mountain photography and he had carried a tripod up just for the opportunity of catching Long's just at sunrise. We stayed at this spot for quite some time, photographing, eating, trying to get out of the wind, and using the outhouse (which is a rare opportunity in Colorado mountaineering).

The trail is really good for about the first six miles to the Boulder Field. We were by no means the only ones on the trail. Even after Labor Day there was a steady stream of people attempting Long's. Not all of them were experienced or fit. Many of the people had very light packs, some of them were runners with a tiny fanny pack. They were doing the standard Keyhole Route up Long's, the easiest route, which is 15 miles long with 4845ft elevation gain. It is a scenic route, somewhat difficult with 3rd class scrambling, and it is definitely strenuous. If anything went wrong, many were relying on someone else to help them. We watched a young man trying to encourage a much tired older man (probably his father) up the trail. The younger man kept running up the trail without him and then waiting for him to catch up. I think many an argument has occurred on this trail.

We got to the Boulder Field around 7:30 and found a spot to relax out of the wind behind a rock wall shelter. Here I had the opportunity to use another visitor attraction at the Boulder Field, the privy. This privy is solar powered to aid in

decomposition. There are actually two, side-by-side, perched high up so that you have to climb stairs to enter them. The top half of the privy is non-existent so that you have little smell, a beautiful view of Long's, and you can say hi to your neighbor next door.

Mike was having problems with an old injury and decided not to attempt the climb. He assigned Cathy in his place to take over as leader and he couldn't have selected better. Both John and I are still rock climbing neophytes and this climb wasn't your typical rock climb. We were on a big mountain now with all the added hazards of possible violent weather, rock slides, thin air, heavy packs, and gripping exposure. Therefore, for safety and expediency we decided it would be better for Cathy to lead on the climbing as well unless things just really looked good for training purposes.

The Cable Route is on the north face of Long's, to the right of the famous Diamond. You could see many places with ice and snow on them. This wasn't as clear as we would have liked but maybe it wouldn't interfere too badly with our route. We climbed up on talus to Chasm View, a spectacular viewing point for Chasm Lake. At one place there was a large hole in the rock floor of the viewing platform. Upon looking down this hole I realized that there was an unobstructed view of about 1000 feet to the valley below. We also had a breathtaking side view of the Diamond and upon looking we found five climbers working there way up its vertical face. I still can't imagine the skill and fortitude it takes to do such an undertaking.

Now the real climbing was to begin. We had about three hundred feet of roped climbing to do that would end in about 600-700 feet of 3rd and 4th class scrambling to the top. The climbing was rated as 5.6 by Dawson and we were supposed to use the old cable rings as our main belay anchor. As we were sorting our gear and putting on our harnesses, two young men came by and were going to climb without a rope. Cathy questioned them as to their knowledge of what they were about to do. One was a medical student and even with the warnings they went on up the rock. We just shook our heads. We worked out some rope signals in case we couldn't hear each other over the wind and then Cathy went on up with me belaying her.

The rope played out close to the end before Cathy set up the first belay station. I prepared to climb, trailing a second rope to belay John with. Cathy called down that the young men were coming down on the rope. Apparently they had reached a point at which they realized the error of their ways and were lucky to be able to use our rope to get back down. Once they were down I started climbing, cleaning pro as I went. At first it was relatively easy but I reached one crack section where I really started to feel heavy and awkward with my pack and boots and the altitude. Plus, there were sections of ice to avoid as well as the rock was cold. But, I soon made it to Cathy and realized she had found one of the rings; good. She belayed John up as I flaked the rope for her next pitch.

When you are belaying the leader above you usually can't see and hear what is happening. All you can do is feel the rope as it pulls for you to release it or stops pulling. You can try to interpret the stops as the leader is putting in pro there, and then a quick pull is when they need extra rope to clip to the pro. Then when the rope moves for awhile the person is climbing. But you don't know for sure, you can

only guess. You have no idea what difficulties the leader is encountering and trying to overcome. Plus, you have to tell them how much rope they have left so that they know to find a belay location soon.

Soon into the second pitch Cathy told us that she was at a point where the edge dropped off a thousand feet and it was quite unnerving. John and I weren't looking forward to this part. I told her to put in lots of pro here. Then later Cathy yelled to us something about ice. She said that she couldn't find a way around it. I yelled that she shouldn't go on if she didn't like it. Most times, however, going back down isn't a viable option either. There are only two ways down: 1) downclimb and retrieve the pro as you go or 2) rapel off (if you can find a location to place a repel anchor) and leave your expensive pro behind. Therefore, Cathy went up and later called for us to follow.

Very soon into my second pitch I came to the edge of the abyss. Wow! I had never climbed above this much sheer vertical before. I tried not to think too hard about it as I stuck to the matter at hand, getting up safely. You may think "why do this if it's not fun at the time?" Well, that's a good question. I guess it's like childbirth, it may not be fun at the time but it's the resultant reward that makes it worth it. My reward would be solving a difficult problem successfully. Plus, I would like to think, as I have found before, that with more experience this too someday would be fun.

I came to a difficult section with some ice and thought "Cathy is a great climber to lead this above the drop below". Then I had some easier climbing and I could relax some. But then I came to a shelf that was almost covered in ice. I stepped to the right to a dry spot and then looked to see where to go. The rope cut a diagonal to my left and straight up a vertical section. Shit! (Pardon my French). This must be where Cathy was having difficulties. Many thoughts raced through my head. Is there a better way to go? How do I deal with this ice? How the hell did Cathy go up this? It may seem that I was taking minutes of time to do this but in fact all happened in seconds. I soon realized I had only one option, follow the rope! First I had to get underneath the direction of travel and there was ice in between.

It was very difficult crossing back without downclimbing. I cheated and held onto the rope long enough to get a somewhat firm stance. Then I had to remove the pro Cathy had used to save herself a long fall if she hadn't made it up this vertical piece. Now, somehow I had to make it up. I stemmed with my feet off of both sides on small ledges that I hoped would support my big fat boots. Then I physically pulled and pushed myself up hoping like hell that I didn't slip back. I made it! It was easier from here. Thank you. Thank you. I just had more ice and moss to contend with. When I saw Cathy I exclaimed "What a woman, I can't believe you led that. Excellent job". I sang her praises numerous times afterwards, I was very impressed. Cathy later said that she thought that move would be rated 5.7 under normal circumstances.

The belay stance that Cathy was currently in was not one using a rapel ring. She had set up numerous pieces of pro for the anchor but the belayer's position was not on a flat ledge but on a sloping slab that leaned towards the sharp drop-off. There was really no room for John as well. Therefore, after I warmed up my freezing hands, I belayed Cathy to the next belay position before I belayed John to the second. Fortunately, the climbing from here was a lot easier and without the sheer

exposure of the second pitch. Plus, we found another rapel ring, we were back on route. John came up with the same amazed expression on his face that I probably had. We both climbed up to Cathy and at this point we could shed the rope.

Now I felt free from both the rope and the danger. I was in my own element now and Cathy asked if I would take the lead. No problem. I scanned ahead for as Dawson puts it "the path of least resistance". My path tended to be that which had the most solid rock, I'm not a fan of loose rock and scree. Therefore, I went up towards a long trough in the rock that seemed to go all the way to the upper ridge of Long's. This was all good 3rd and 4th class climbing with maybe a small bit of lower 5th class. Other than an occasional ice and snow patch, this was pretty fun climbing. Maybe one day the roped climbing will feel as comfortable and fun.

However, the climbing was also strenuous as we neared 14,000 feet. When I made it to the ridge I was hoping that there wasn't a big gap between where I was at and the summit. I didn't want to descend back down to re-ascend later or find an incredibly hard section. As I looked around I could see many people on a high point, this must be the summit. As we walked further the going was very easy, almost a sidewalk. Soon we could see that we were almost at the summit. What a feeling of accomplishment, we had made it!

The time was around 2:00, a little late for summiting but the weather was still looking very good. However, we did feel a little compelled to get back down off of the difficult sections before we rested too long. We thought that it would be better to return by the standard Keyhole Route. We hadn't found the middle rapel rings (or rings). Chances are they were all in a relatively straight line and if we rapelled off the top ring we should go right to it. But, for all we knew it could be missing and we also weren't enthusiastic about the loose rock and sheets of ice. So we decided on the Keyhole Route and Cathy got to see a new trail (both John and I had done the Keyhole Route before).

The Keyhole Route is really an enjoyable route as well. It has some good 3rd class scrambling and a moderate level of exposure. It also has some great views. We made it over The Homestretch, through The Narrows, and down The Trough. As we were working over towards The Keyhole I became incredibly hungry and didn't think I could go on without a break. Cathy agreed, we really hadn't eaten much since before the start of the roped climbing. We stopped and took a nice long break in the sun. The rest of the trip was pretty uneventful. We went through The Keyhole and back down to The Boulder Field. Mike was still there waiting for us, he must have gotten pretty bored. The trail back was as long as the first time I had done Long's Peak, it seems to go on forever. I think that's how Long's Peak got its name, it's a very long peak. We made it back to the parking lot at 7:00 and attempted to rehydrate ourselves because all of us were dehydrated (except Mike of course). Following a change of boots to shoes (ah!), changing to a clean shirt (ooh!), and washing our face (um!), we drove to Lyons for dinner at a Mexican restaurant. As usual I was famished and ordered the "extra large combination platter", which I couldn't completely finish. Then we had the long drive home, fortunately Cathy let me sleep an hour so that I didn't have any problems driving from Colorado Springs to Divide. I made it home by 11:30 and then I was up and back to work as usual the next morning. I'm going to have start leading an easier life (not!). 9-11-96 D.S.