

THE PALISADES

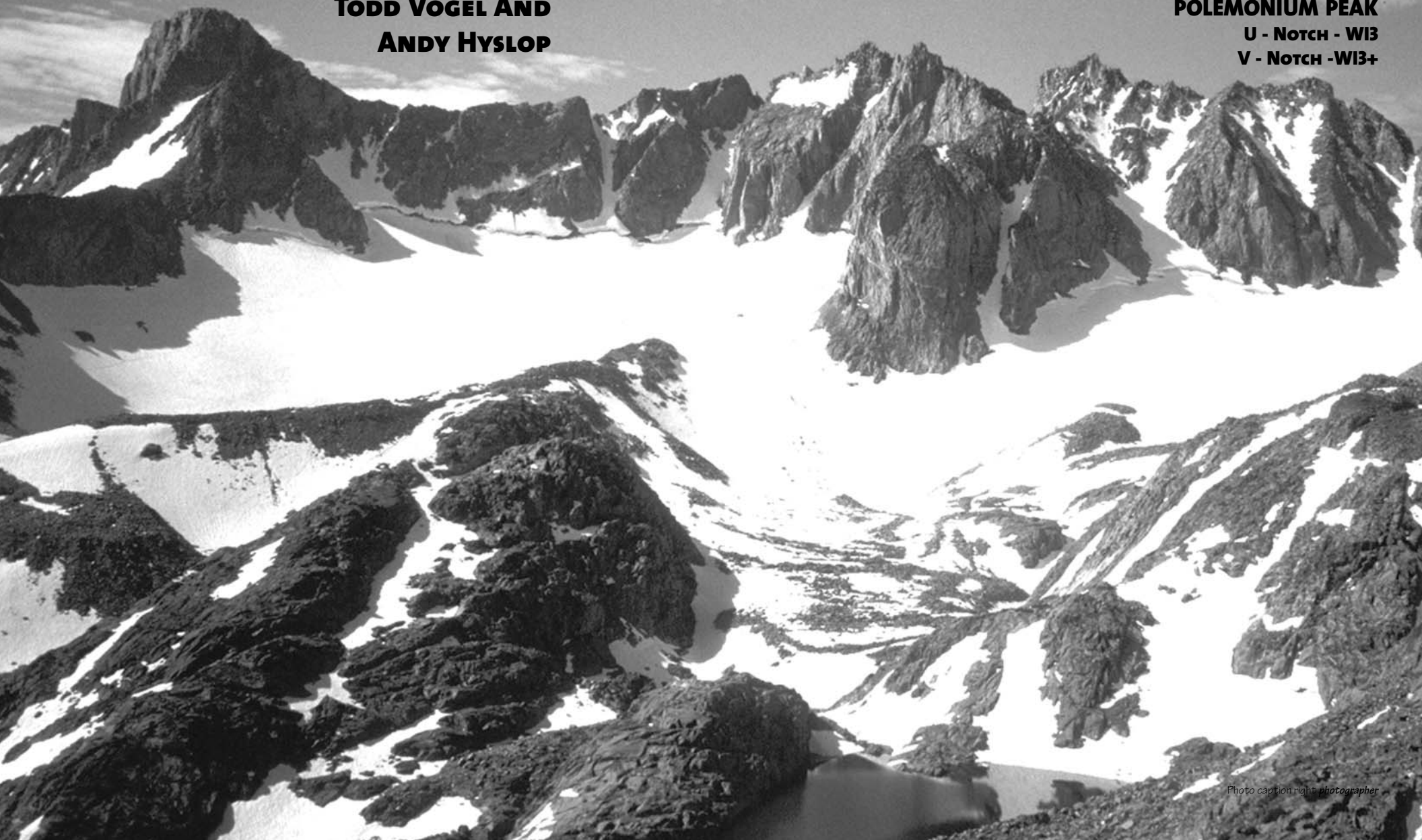
— The Sierra Nevada —

BY
**ROBERT "SP" PARKER,
TODD VOGEL AND
ANDY HYSLOP**

TEMPLE CRAG
VENUSIAN BLIND ARETE - 5.7
MOON GODDESS ARETE - 5.8
SUN RIBBON ARETE - 5.10

MOUNT SILL
THE SWISS ARETE - 5.6

POLEMONIUM PEAK
U - NOTCH - W13
V - NOTCH - W13+



Although Mount Whitney is the highest peak, the Palisades is the throne room of the Sierra Nevada. The Palisades, named by the Brewer party of the Whitney Survey in 1864, are home to seven of California's 14,000ft peaks and some of the regions finest alpine climbing. The Palisades are situated east of the town of Big Pine and are approached from Glacier Lodge trailhead by two narrow and dramatic glacier-carved canyons following trails that zigzag through slopes of sage, manzanita, and Jeffrey Pine to emerge in an alpine wonderland. In summer the flowers by these pine-shaded trails are abundant and kaleidoscopic.

The Palisade is a complex area of milky turquoise lakes fed by glaciers, lofty peaks and passes, deep gullies, hanging basins, sunlight ridges, blocky talus slopes, turrets and towers capped by a blue sky that is often interrupted by rushing clouds. It is a special place where you can refresh your spirits and listen to the heartbeat of the earth.

The first ascent of the Middle Palisades (14,040-feet) was made on August 26, 1921, by Francis P. Farquhar and Ansel F. Hall. 'With a shout we greeted the summit as its first visitors. ... The summit of the mountain is an extremely narrow knife-edge. We had to use great care in moving about, as there were many large blocks just poised on the brink.'

The rock isn't the smooth granite found in some parts of the north Sierra, but a highly weathered granitic bedrock that forms a complex rock topography that isn't always rock-solid. This is a big mountain arena with all the attendant objective dangers.

All the Sierra greates have made there mark here. Norman Clyde from his cabin home in Big Pine Creek explored the Palisades extensively and got the first ascents, usually alone, of Mount Gayley, the Palisades most lofty peak North Palisade, Starlight Peak and Thunderbolt, as well as many lesser peaks. Since and before then many climbers have made their mark including; John and Ruth Mendenhall., Robert Underhill, Joseph LeConte, Francis Farquhar, Don Jensen, John Fischer, Smoke Blanchard, Bob Swift, Gordon Wiltsie, Doug Robinson, George Lowe, Bob Harrington, Bruce Binder and Peter Croft. For many years local mountain guides, operating as the Palisades School Of Mountaineering, had a camp near Third lake below Temple Crag .

The area is split in to Palisade north and south by a rocky spur formed by Mount Gayley and the popular Temple Crag. The Palisades crest is a ??mile long ridge and has ?? named peaks, ?? above 14,000-feet with the rest over 13,500-feet. On north side of these summits are a series of glaciers, the most southerly in the US, the biggest being the Palisade glacier.

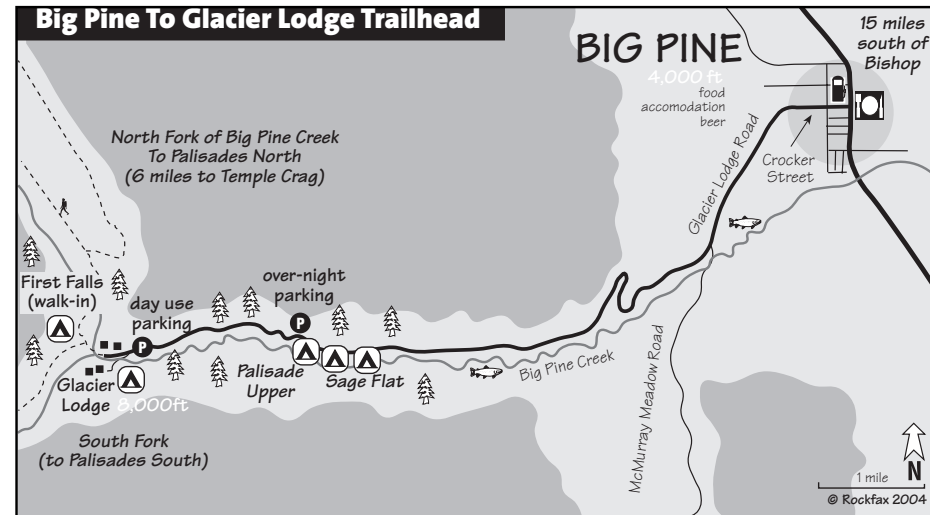
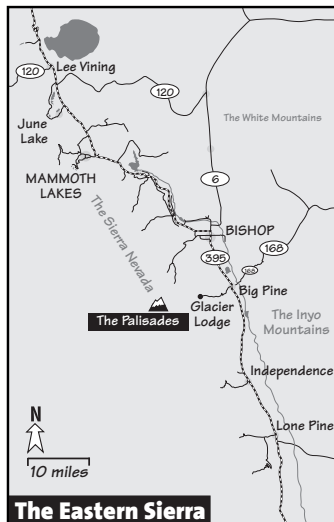
Described in this guidebook are some of the technical challenges of the North Palisade area accessed by the North Fork of Big Pine creek: the celestial aretes of Temple Crag, the mountainous Swiss Arete that summits Mount Sill, and the icy couloirs of U and V-notch above the Palisade glacier.

WHERE

The Palisades are situated west of Big Pine in the Sierra Nevada and are approached via the north and south forks of Big Pine creek from Glacier Lodge trailhead, 11 miles west of Big Pine which is 15 miles south of Bishop. From Glacier Lodge it is 6 miles along the north fork of Big Pine creek to Temple Crag and 11 miles to the Palisade Glacier.

WHEN

For rockclimbing the season begins in June and extends to the first snows, usually anytime between September and December. In the winter the Palisades are the holy shrine of California backcountry skiing.



PERMITS AND REGULATIONS:

NORTH FORK OF BIG PINE CREEK

Overnight stays require a free WILDERNESS PERMIT. The quota for the North Fork Of Big Pine Creek is 25 people, 60% of which is reservable (\$5 administrative charge) and 40% is walk-in (free) at any of the Forest Service Ranger Stations. For reservations call 760-873-2483 and visit <http://www.r5.fs.fed.us/inyo> to educate yourself fully on backcountry regulations.

Bear Cannisters can be rented for \$5 per week from the Forest Service and local outdoor shops. Bear canisters are not legally required but are recommended for the North Fork of Big Pine Creek. Open wood fires are not allowed. The WHITE MOUNTAIN RANGER STATION in Bishop (760-873-2500) is open from 8 am to 5 pm daily for walk-in Wilderness Permits and bear cannister rental (or Wilson's Eastside Sports in Bishop). In the south, the MT. WHITNEY RANGER STATION in Lone Pine (760-876-6200) is also open daily from 8 am to 5 pm.

MOUNTAIN GUIDES: SIERRA MOUNTAIN CENTER

If you require a mountain guide for alpine route in the Sierra Nevada call Sierra Mountain Center run by SP Parker and Todd Vogel. Call them at 760-873-8526 and a visit to their website is a must www.sierra-mountaincenter.com

APPROACH: TO GLACIER TRAILHEAD AND CAMPING FROM BIG PINE

In Big Pine, turn west on Crocker Street between the Mobile and Texaco Gas Stations. Continue up into the mountains for 11 miles until you see the sign for Big Pine Creek Campground and Glacier Lodge. At Glacier Lodge there are several Forest Service Campgrounds (reservations 877-444-6777) and the excellent Glacier Lodge Resort (www.jewelofthesierra.com) where you will find a campground (\$15), cabins (\$70 a night) and a small convenience store (open 7am - 8pm).

At the time of writing the construction of a mountain hut at Glacier Lodge to accommodate 60 - 80 people is planned for the spring of 2004.

PARKING

If you are doing the route in a day, park at the last parking area just before the gate and the start of the trail. Overnight parking is lower down the road.

The Palisades

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TEMPLE CRAG - NORTHEAST FACE

- 1. Venusian Blind Arête 5.7
- 2. Moon Goddess Arête 5.8
- 3. Sun Ribbon Arête 5.9

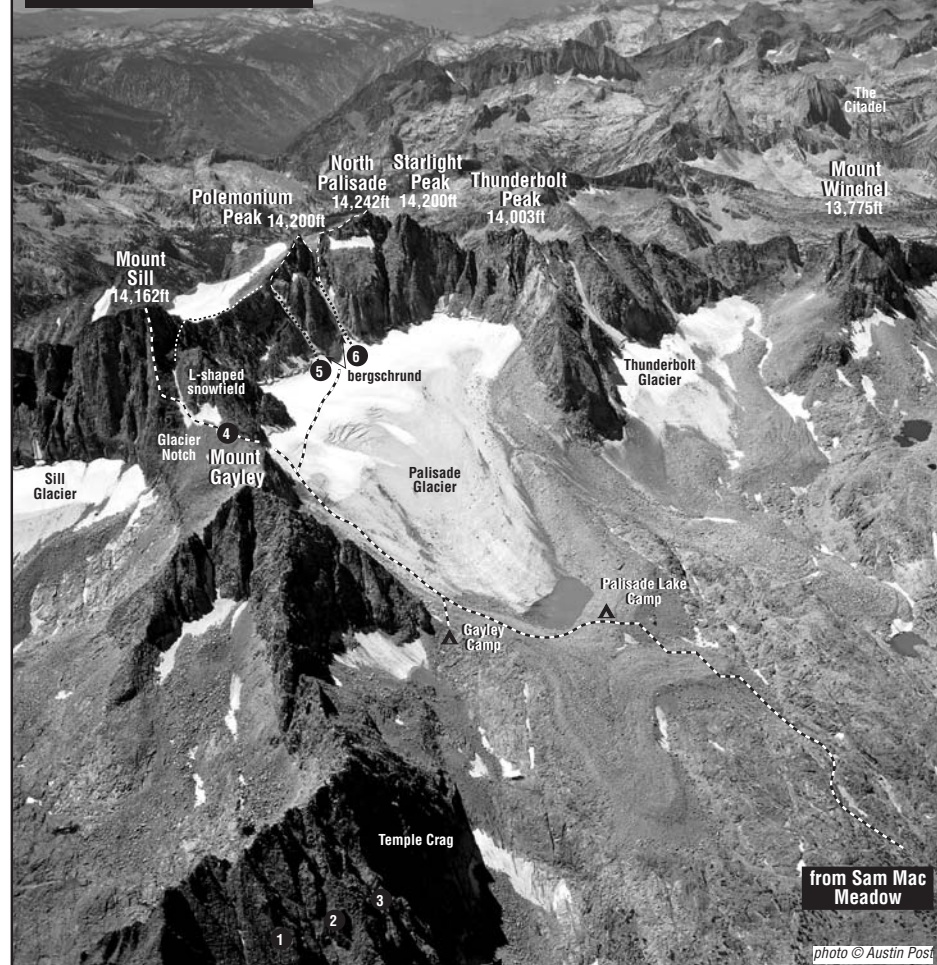
MOUNT SILL

- 4. The Swiss Arete 5.8

POLEMONIUM PEAK

- 5. The V-Notch WI3, 5th Class
- 6. The U-Notch WI3, 5th Class

NORTH PALISADE AREA



The Celestial Aretes of Temple Crag: Venusian Blind Arête 5.7, Moon Goddess Arête 5.8 and Sun Ribbon Arête 5.9... Perfect names for these long routes (20 pitch minimum) that ascend the ridges of the impressive fluted northeast face of Temple Crag. Whilst these routes may have moderate technical ratings don't underestimate the commitment needed. They are often done in a day from the trailhead at Third Lake. All these routes will excite the soul and light the imagination.

The Swiss Arete 5.8 on Mount Sill
A mountaineering route involving a long approach sometimes over snow, lots of scrambling, and a technical arete to this peaks 14,162-foot summit, and then a straightforward but technical descent. Popular to do from a high camp either at the base of the glacier or from Sam Mack Meadow. It is a very long day from the trailhead and only should be attempted from here by the fittest parties.

U and V - Notch
Follow in the footsteps of Norman Clyde, Yvon Choignard and Doug Robinson up these narrow gullies of ice to the Palisade Crest. The V-notch is the more classic and harder. Be prepared for a glacial approach, be able to overcome the bergschund, then delightful steep ice or hard snow climbing to a choice of summits and a descent either the way you came up or over by Mount Sill.

LONG PINE BISHOP OWENS RIVER GORGE SHERWIN ROCK CREEK MAMMOTH ALPINE ICE

There is no better introduction to the Sierra Nevada alpine climbing than Temple Crag: the approach is easy to follow, overnight permits are relatively easy to get, and the climbing and the rock is beautiful. The most popular routes here are the Celestial Aretes: Moon Goddess, Sun Ribbon and Venusian Blind. Venusian Blind is the easiest of the three aretes. The next step up from Venusian is the adjacent Moon Goddess Arete (they also share the same approach and initial pitches). Moon Goddess is more involved, longer in length and the route finding is trickier than its easier neighbor. The Big daddy is Sun Ribbon

Most camp below Temple Crag before their assault. But if you are experienced, relatively fit, and can move fast it is very do-able in a day from the trailhead.,

WHERE

Temple Crag is situated near the Palisade Glacier and is approached via the north fork of Big Pine creek from Glacier Lodge trailhead, 11 miles west of Big Pine which is 15 miles south of Bishop. From Glacier Lodge it is 6 miles hike to Temple Crag.

WHEN

The trail to Temple Crag is usually free of snow from early June onwards to the first winter snows in October. The snow bank at the base of the cliff usually persists throughout the season, although the later in the season you go the less snow approach you will have to endure or enjoy.

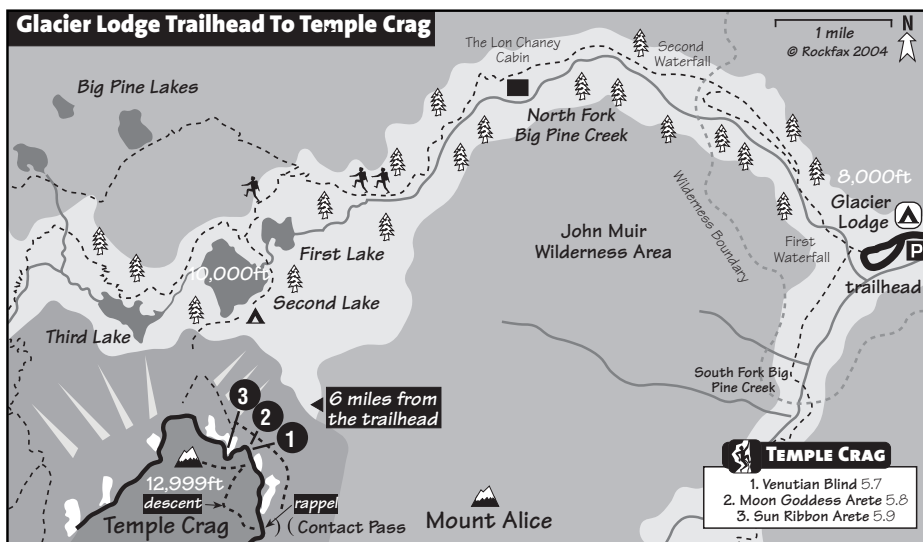
STRATEGY

With an early start fast and competent parties can climb any of these routes in a day from the Glacier Lodge trailhead. Most, however, especially if coming from low elevations, prefer to spread the adventure of two or three days. One day to approach, set up a camp, acclimatize and reconnoiter the route, then one day to climb the route and return to the trailhead.

PERMITS AND REGULATIONS:

NORTH FORK OF BIG PINE CREEK

Overnight stays require a free WILDERNESS PERMIT. See page 261 for how to get one.



APPROACH: TO THIRD LAKE FROM GLACIER LODGE

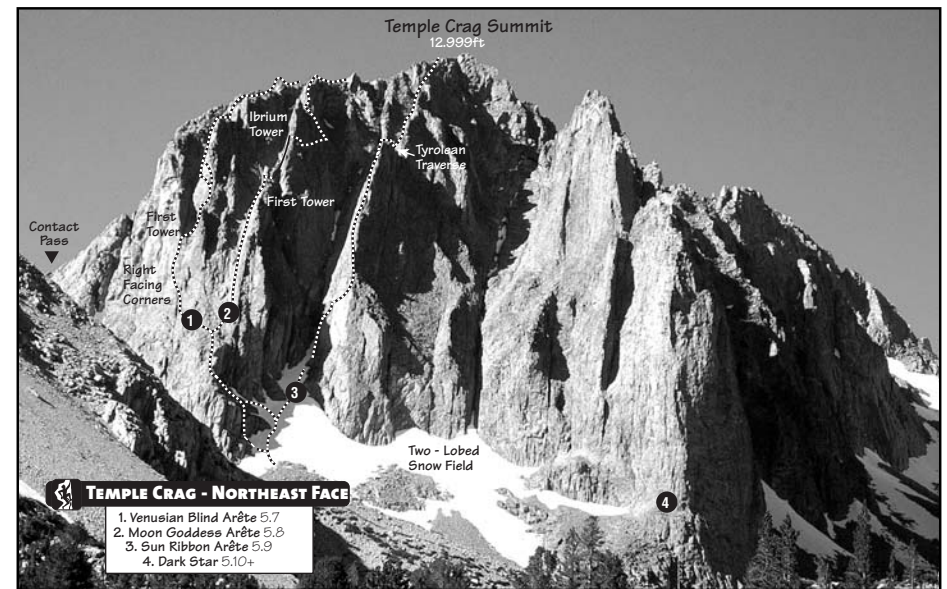
The trail up the North Fork of Lone Pine Creek is a beautiful hike in its own right and very simple to follow (see map). For the most part the trail follows the creek, although there are two alternatives in the initial part of the hike (take the high road to avoid steeper switch-backs) and always stay left at any forks. You will pass an old stone house that used to belong to the Hollywood star Lon Chaney, it is now a Ranger Refuge. You are deposited after about 5 miles at First and Second Lakes and a fine view of Temple Crag.

CAMPING

Good sites can be found near the outlet to Second Lake. There are several spots that are less good on the southern side of the lake. Some very nice spots are located immediately below the Dark Star Buttress feature of Temple Crag. These spots have the advantage of being quite close to the climbs and away from the main trail. Later season these spots usually require a ten minute walk for water (bring a bag). These sites necessitate carrying your overnight pack over the small moraines that project from the crag towards Third and Second Lake, an arduous task. If you intend to attempt other objectives in the canyon you will probably want to camp somewhere over by Third Lake (but avoid the ghetto camp near the main trail on the north east side of the lake).

OVERVIEW OF TEMPLE CRAG

A great overview of Temple can be had from near Second Lake, where the main trail intersects the lake. From this spot one can easily see the giant north buttress known as Dark Star (though it contains other routes as well) which drops down to form the lowest point of Temple Crag. From the toe of Dark Star Buttress to Contact Pass the face of Temple Crag is more or less evenly divided into thirds by two deep gullies, usually snow filled. The right hand gully is the Mendenhall Couloir and the left gully (unnamed) divides the Moon Goddess Arete (left of the gully) from Sunribbon Arete. Each gully feeds a permanent snow field which usually coalesces into one large snow field, locally known as the Two Lobed Snow Field, but in dry years can form two separate icy slopes. The Celestial Arete routes are accessed via these snow slopes.



BE AWARE: The top of the cliff is very foreshortened in this photograph. The top half of the routes shown are much longer than they appear. photo by Robert 'SP' Parker/ Todd Vogel

Mount Sill is an impressive mountain, its cuboid mass looks large even from Highway 395. The original inhabitants of the Eastern Sierra called it "Ninamishi" or Guardian Of The Valley and it is clear why once you have viewed it from the Owens Valley. Even close up, although its summit is lower than some of the neighboring 14,000ft peaks, it still looks the tallest. The first technical climb up Mount Sill was the "Starr Route" climbed by ?????? in (first actual ascent), this the descent route if you are doing any of the "modern" routes on Mount Sill.

First ascent details...

The Swiss Arete up the north face of Mount Sill is a classic mountaineering challenge. You will enjoy a beautiful hike, a glacial experience, will have to cope with high-altitude and then you will be one with the rocky ridge of the Palisades that contain seven of the fifteen 14,000ft peaks in California. Good rock and an exceptional summit experience with great views are the icing on the cake.

The approach from the trailhead is 10 miles (a round trip of 20 miles) with a total elevation gain of 6,353-feet, of which 1,000-foot is 4th and easy 5th class rock climbing with a obligatory moves of 5.6 and 5.7 at the distinct crux. The ability to climb long sections of 4th and 5th class and being able to move over sometimes loose 3rd class terrain solo is required. Wherever you start your summit attempt from be prepared for a big day out.

WHERE

Mount Sill is a 14,162-foot peak that splits the Palisade Crest, located west of Big Pine and approached from the Glacier Lodge trailhead via the north fork of Big Pine creek. The base of the Swiss Arete route is 10 miles stiff hike from the trailhead.

WHEN

The north fork of Big Pine Creek is usually free of snow from early June onwards to the first winter snows in October. Depending on the year there may still be much snow around the Palisade Glacier and on the descent down the L-shaped snow field of the Starr Route of Mount Sill. It is wise to bring instep crampons and an axe at any time of year.

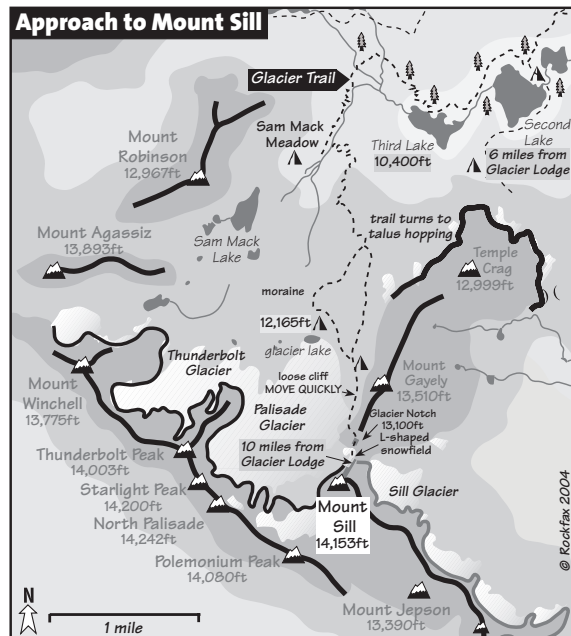
STRATEGY

With an early start fast and competent parties can climb the Swiss Arete in a day from the Glacier Lodge trailhead. Most, however, especially if coming from low elevations, prefer to spread the adventure over two or three days. One day to approach, set up a camp, acclimatize and reconnoiter the route, then one day to climb the route and return to the trailhead. The best places to camp for the Swiss Arete are at Sam Mack meadow or at several bivvy spots near the Palisade Glacier, especially near Mount Gayley.

PERMITS AND REGULATIONS:

NORTH FORK OF BIG PINE CREEK

Overnight stays require a free WILDERNESS PERMIT. See page 261 for how to get one.



CAMPING - SAM MACK MEADOW

Sam Mack Meadow is the camping spot of choice for the Swiss arete being only three miles and 3,000-feet of elevation from the summit of Mount Sill. To get there continue on the Big Pine Lakes trail until past Third Lake where a sharp left turn up through talus leads to this sheltered canyon. Please pack your poop and any other waste out with you, sanitation is a serious issue here. Bear cannisters are obligatory.

APPROACH TO THE START OF THE ROUTE FROM SAM MACK MEADOW

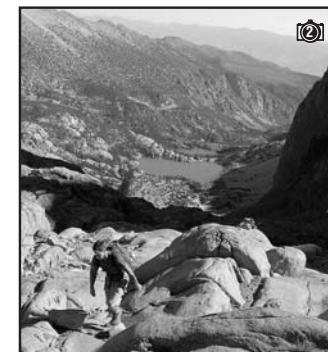
From Sam Mack Meadow take a sharp left across the stream and head up a winding trail (the Glacier trail) through stunted pines and small cliffs. The trail starts to traverse left and eventually hits a loose boulder moraine. There are several lines of cairns leading through the boulders all of which emerge onto superb glaciated slabs. Follow the slabs upwards following numerous cairns to a point overlooking the glacier and below the north face of Mount Gayley. This point is marked by numerous bivvy sites.

The next section traverses boulders and loose scree to Glacier Notch (not a good place to eat your lunch!). Cross large boulders and then loose scree for a few 100 yards before heading diagonally up left towards an obvious weakening in the ridge on the left. There are several different routes up to Glacier Notch. Start by ascending some right to left ramps and then traverse back left over loose 4th class terrain and eventually up to the Notch. Care is need on this section and some people may want to make a short rap on the return trip (no fixed anchors).

You get a superb view of the whole route from Glacier Notch. If you are feeling confident leave you gear here and ascend diagonally across scree to the base of the route.



1. On the glacier trail beyond Sam Mack Meadow en route to Mount Sill.



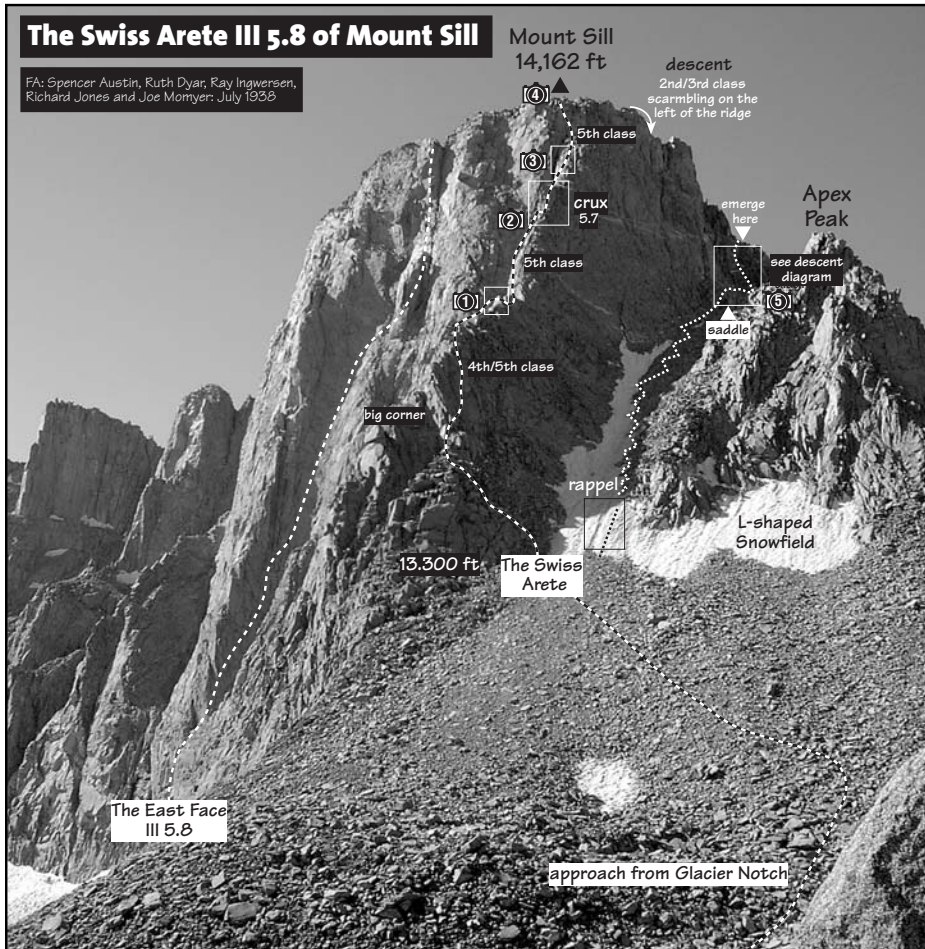
2. The glaciated slabs before you start the traverse along the base of Mount Gayley and the traverse up ledges to Glacier Notch.



3. Approaching Glacier Notch from the traverse along Mount Gayley The ledges up to the notch can be loose and route finding tricky. Some may want to rope up.



4. From Glacier Notch approaching the base of the route



EQUIPMENT

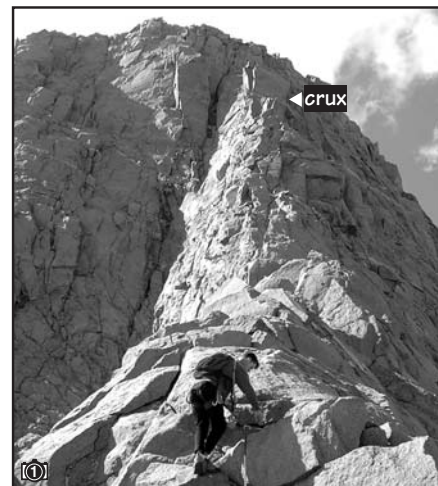
Rack: Standard alpine rack: one set of stoppers (Rocks 1 to 8), Cams #1 to #3, long slings (if it is a big snow year or early in the season take an ice axe/instep crampons for the descent)

THE ROUTE

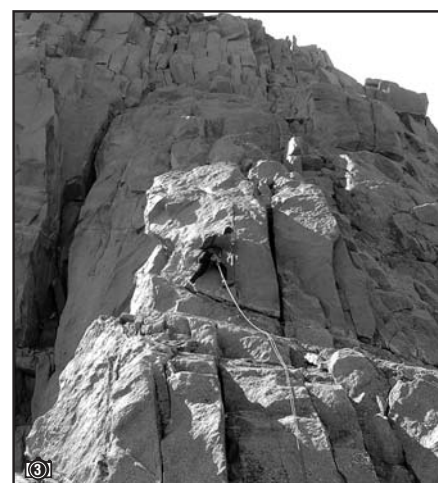
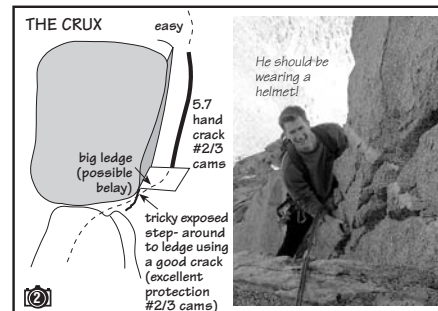
There is around 800ft of climbing to the summit from the start of the route. Much of the climbing is 4th and 5th class on generally excellent rock. There are many ledges for belays. You can run a rope length out and belay, as there are many belay opportunities. Some may prefer to move roped together on the easier ground and belay for the steeper technical sections. The route starts up slabs to join the arete/ridge proper. There are several alternatives here. One option is marked on the photo-topo and is described here.

Easy 3rd class slabs lead up left for 200' to a point overlooking a big corner (marked above). Head up steeper 4th and 5th class ground following cracks to emerge on the ridge crest at a flat area. Easy climbing along the ridge leads to a point at which it steepens. Now follow beautifully solid 5th class cracks and flakes up the crest for a couple of pitches until the way is blocked by a steep smooth wall.

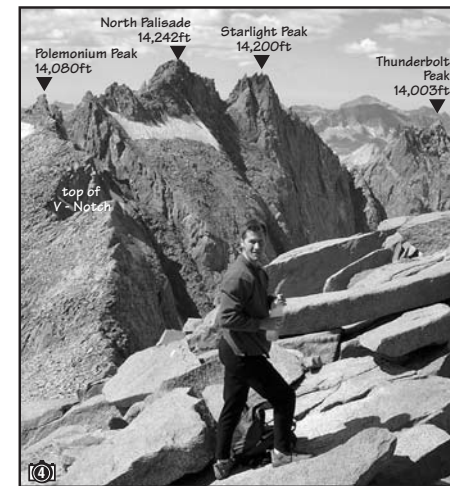
The next section is the crux (see topo). Make an airy step right into a corner (good crack) and up to a sloping ledge, possible belay. Climb a steep crack in the corner or on the right wall to easier ground. This whole section is about 70'. After the crux, romp up fantastic 4th/5th class ground (many ways to go) to emerge at the summit!



Fourth class ridge climbing, low down on the route. The crux can be seen high above near a large smooth block.



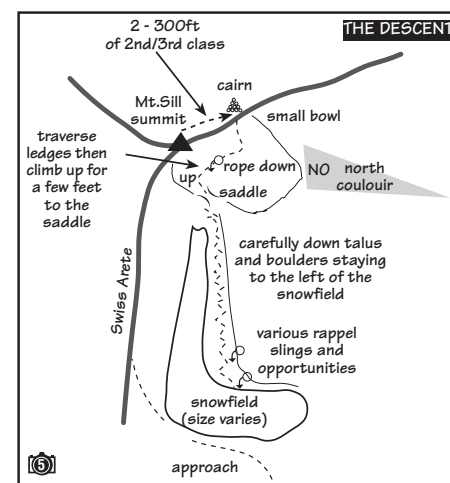
Climbing after the crux: good rock, good gear, easy 5th class to the summit. There are several ways to go.



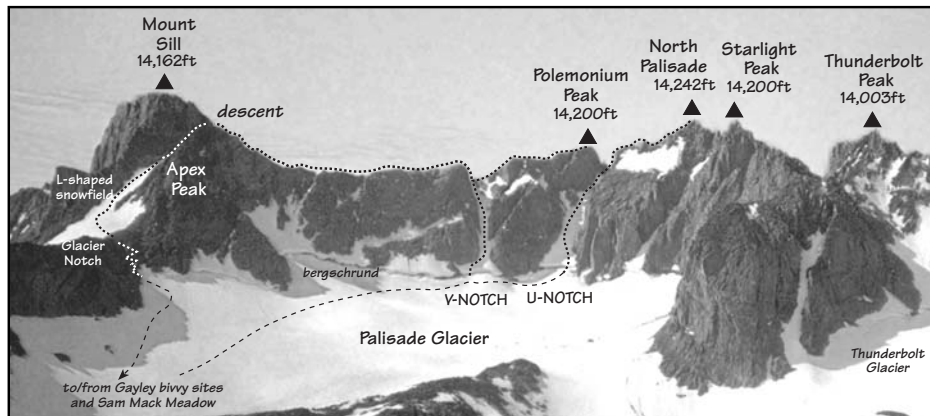
Boulderer Bob Banks on top of his world, the summit of Mount Sill after climbing the Swiss Arete.

THE DESCENT

Descend 3rd class ground down the SW ridge for 200 - 300' to a point where it starts to ease in angle and there is a small notch marked by a substantial cairn. From the cairn down climb steep 4th class ground for 70' then start to trend right across ledges. There is a fixed rap point here that might be needed early in the season or if you are feeling a bit gripped. There seems to be a line of descent down left but this is NOT the way to go. Climb up a few feet to a saddle between Apex Peak and Sill and you will see an easier angled chute leading down to the base of the route. Keep to the left of the snow and zigzag down through loose boulders. At the bottom of the chute you will probably need to make one rap depending on snow conditions. There are at least 2 rap points. Head back across scree to Glacier Notch



LONG PINE BISHOP OWENS RIVER GORGE SHERWIN ROCK CREEK MAMMOTH ALPINE ICE



"Even in California we can have weather. Even in August a climber can freeze to death. It's no joke. We need to be prepared."

Craig Harris (Dingus Milktoast) reflecting on an epic summer ascent of V-Notch that included a snow storm and freezing winds.

Two of the most sought after technical couloirs in the Sierra, U-Notch and V-Notch lie above the Palisade galcier. The U - Notch is perhaps the North Palisade's most popular route as it climbs up to the attractive notch on the ridge dividing Polemonium Peak and the tallest route in the range, North Palisade which was first climbed by Norman Clyde in 1928. The U-Notch Couloir is a 700-foot, 40 degree slope and although moderate does require competent ice climbing skills including overcoming a bergschrund which is regarded as the crux of the climb. The neighbouring V-Notch couloir involves around 900' of ice climbing of 40 to 60 degrees and is usually about 90% ice offering more technical and sustained difficulties than its easier angled neighbor. V - Notch was first ascended in ice conditions by Yvon Chouinard and Doug Robinson in October of 1970. Both routes require rock protection as well as a handful of ice screws.

WHEN

U and V - Notch are usually climbed in late summer and fall when there is a good chance of neve and ice, rather than post-holing through early season snow.

STRATEGY

Most parties make a base camp at either Sam Mack Meadow or bivvy near the glacier below Mount Gayley and get an early start, to hopefully avoid any stone fall, and return to camp the same day.

SPECIAL EQUIPMENT

As always come prepared for inclement weather. It can snow in August. Bring crampons and two axes, your standard alpine rack to 3" (bring some extra slings) and four or five ice screws. Don't forget glacier goggles and sun block. You can get away with one axe on U - Notch early in the season, but later when this chute is mainly ice bring two.

PERMITS AND REGULATIONS:

NORTH FORK OF BIG PINE CREEK

Overnight stays require a free WILDERNESS PERMIT. See page 261 .



Caption Caption Caption Caption. photo by Robert 'SP' Parker/ Todd Vogel



Caption Caption Caption Caption. photo by Robert 'SP' Parker/ Todd Vogel

APPROACH

See the approaches to Sam Mack Meadow and the Palisade Glacier on page 267. Most parties contour around south toward Mount Gayley and then right (northwest) across the glacier to U and V - Notch. Beware of crevasses and wear glacier goggles.

U - NOTCH TO NORTH PALISADE

The bergschrund at the base of the U - Notch is often the crux of the climb, especially during drought years. If the bergschrund is open, climb the easy class 5 rock to the right of it. Once in the couloir climb several pitches, keeping left at the rocks to the notch at the top of this chute. Protection can be rigged in the gully walls as well as on the snow slope. Once you reach the top of the chute there is a chimney/dihedral on your right, rated 5.4. Climb the chimney to the summit ridge, dropping into a small bowl briefly and then up boulders to the exposed summit of North Palisade. The traverse to the summit can be tricky especially early season if there are patches of snow around, and it is surprisingly longer than most expect.

DESCENT

Descend the summit ridge back to the top of the chimney where there should be rappel slings. Rap down the chimney, two rappels back to the top of U - Notch. You can either down climb the U - Notch or rappel. Many prefer to downclimb if the snow in the gully is good as it is relatively straightforward and a lot quicker (and warmer) than rappelling. If you do rappel there are plenty of rappel slings at intervals down the chute, but beware of getting your rope stuck.

V - NOTCH TO POLEMONIUM PEAK

Again the bergschrund is thought to be the crux of the climb and most take it slightly left of center. It can be steep. Look for snow bridges and be prepared to climb several feet of near vertical neve or ice. Follow the left side of couloir for first 4 pitches, then cross to the right side to the top. Pitches 3-5 are definitely exposed to rock fall. There are around 8 pitches in total. Protection and belays are ice screws supplemented by rock gear where you can. Scramble up the ridge to the summit of Polemonium Peak.

DESCENT

Unless you are forced to by bad weather or an emergency it is not recommended that you descend the way you came as the anchors are poor. The descent from the V - Notch involves traversing the crest of Polemonium Peak toward Mount Sill. Once near Mount Sill descend to the notch behind Apex Peak and the L-Shaped snowfield next to Mt. Sill which can either be mostly rock or snow depending on the year. There are rappel opportunities if needed. See the Sill descent on page 277.