

*Appalachia*  
*Dec 1937*

## Ascent of Devil's Tower

By LAWRENCE G. COVENEY

**M**OTORING on the Wyoming plains is not conducive to ambition or curiosity, especially when the ultimate objective is New York City within a time limit that allows only a short stopover in the Black Hills. When Fritz Wiessner brought up the question of our proximity to Devil's Tower he was answered with yawns from the two occupants of the back seat and a relatively polite expression of ignorance from the driver. Never easily daunted by such indifference he began an intensive study of the road maps and finally announced that we could visit the Tower with only a very short detour. The ordinary courtesies then made necessary considerable expostulation in order to show that while he might be the first to find a route up Waddington his perspective with a road map was very deficient. However, the discussion served to awaken everyone thoroughly and although the rest of us were not enthusiastic it seemed easiest to humor Fritz, especially as in any event we could not reach the Black Hills that day in time for climbing.

I wonder just what impression Devil's Tower makes on those who are not students of geology or interested in climbing technique. To this party it became an object of growing fascination from the moment we first viewed it. Even when leaving we could not keep from craning our necks at every turn in the road. The history of the Tower has been well related by Mr. Newell F. Joyner,<sup>1</sup> but no written description can stimulate the imagination as does actual presence before this massive structure. Were it situated among mountains it would still excite curiosity and wonder, but it rises boldly and alone from the rolling high plains like a memorial to some immortal. One is inclined to regard as not altogether ridiculous the inquiry of a New York visitor who asked for the name of the architect. It is hoped, however, that he was told the Indian legend which will be repeated briefly to the best of the writer's memory.

Many years ago a gigantic bear roamed this part of the plains. He was friendly with the local tribes but, when a cub, he had

<sup>1</sup>See *Appalachia* for December, 1934.

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been pursued and tantalized by thoughtless Indian children who threw sand in his eyes. Years later, when full grown, as he ambled along the banks of the Belle Fourche River he saw children playing in the sand, and the memory of his long past torment returned. He advanced in rage toward the terrified children who, seemingly confronted with certain death, prayed to the Great Spirit. Their supplication was heard; the Great Spirit raised a huge rock out of the ground on which the children stood, until they found themselves on a plateau 1200 feet above the river. Infuriated by the thought of thwarted vengeance, the bear clawed at the vertical sides of the tower and thus were created those characteristic symmetrical columns on all four walls.

(Although the legend stops here we may suppose that the Great Spirit also provided a supply of *rappel* rope.)

As we stood at the base of the Tower, Marguerite Schnellbacher, Percy T. Olton, Jr., and I indulged in speculation as to what parts provided a possibility of ascent by usual climbing methods. We agreed that such a possibility was remote. Meanwhile Fritz was picking his way up the steeply sloping base. At a suitable observation point he stopped and remained with head upturned for about half an hour. On rejoining the party he announced his belief that the ascent could be made by legitimate means and without waiting for a reply said we ought to begin the attempt at once. We pointed out that the National Park leaflet clearly stated that permission to climb had been revoked some years before and, although this regulation applied specifically to the forty-year-old stake ladder, it technically made no distinction, inasmuch as a legitimate ascent had never been contemplated. After some argument Fritz and I appointed ourselves a committee and went to the office of the Park Service. The Custodian, Mr. Newell F. Joyner, heard us courteously, but smiled quizzically as he arose and walked toward the shelves. Taking down the copy of *APPALACHIA* for December, 1934, he pointed to Mr. Underhill's editorial footnote on page 218 which begins: "It seems out of the question that the Tower should be climbed by other than artificial means. . . ."

"Yes," said Fritz, "I know Bob; he is a marvelous climber and maybe he is right, but we would like to try."

Mr. Joyner's interest increased; he asked for identification

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and evidence of our qualifications. It was finally agreed that a message asking official permission should be phoned over the local line to Deadwood and there relayed to Washington. The message stated that we proposed to attempt the climb without artificial means and Mr. Joyner added his personal recommendation that approval be given.

Then began an interminable wait. At the end of an hour the right of free speech was duly exercised; the government, its works, and especially its delays were unanimously denounced. Fritz was kept busy quelling revolt in the party for we saw the sun well advanced toward the west and realized that the attempt was becoming more precarious as the hours of daylight became less. At last Fritz reluctantly yielded to compromise. If Washington did not reply by 2:30 P.M. it was agreed by all that we would set out for the Black Hills, where there were numerous needles that were just aching to be climbed. This territory, we understood, was still the land of the free.

Two-thirty arrived without an answer and we left for Deadwood. Mr. Joyner, who thoroughly sympathized with our desire, promised to telegraph us at Deadwood in case of any message. On arrival we received the promised telegram, which informed us that permission had been refused.

We still had hope that, after further consideration, the Park Service might approve the recommendation of their Custodian and in May of this year formal application was made. This application was granted. William P. House agreed to join Fritz and me in the attempt and we arranged to meet in the Black Hills for two days of conditioning. Here we tried to select problems that might be similar to those of the Tower, such as cracks and double *courte-échelles*. Two needles of the Cathedral Spires, about 250 and 350 feet in height, were climbed. Neither of them showed any evidence of previous ascent.

At noon on Sunday, June 27, we left the Black Hills and on arrival at the Tower found that several hours of daylight remained. We climbed up the sloping base to the vertical wall. At this point the full extent of the difficulty was apparent. The only reasonable possibility of a legitimate ascent is on the east wall near the south corner. A good part of 200 feet would have to be climbed in a series of narrow cracks and, so far as we could see, almost entirely by jamming holds, pressure and

friction. The upper part of the wall could not be accurately appraised but seemed to present just as bad, possibly worse problems. We first thought that we might be able to proceed in relatively easy stages from one broken column to the top of another, but found no way to reach that part of the wall where the shortest column was.

Fritz worked his way up a narrow crack until stopped by a gooseberry bush. He was holding his position by pressure holds and could release one hand only momentarily, in vain attempts to find something beyond the bush that would give support. Repeated efforts failed and Fritz finally decided that the contest between his face and the bush was a one-sided affair. The retreat left all honors with the gooseberries but Fritz promised vengeance on the morrow with a sickle that we would borrow from the Park Service. We descended in the fading light, all much subdued in spirits. We knew these cracks would be difficult, even when clean. In view of the added obstacles such as dirt and vegetation Fritz, for the first time, admitted that failure was probable.

Mr. Joyner and his assistant, Mr. Upton, consulted with us after the descent and urged us to secure specimens of plant and animal life, as well as rock, should we reach the summit. Preparation of rope-slings and gear occupied the evening; discussion of ways and means seemed futile at a distance.

At 6:30 A.M., June 28, we began the climb. The first 300 feet presented no unusual difficulty. We roped at the point we had reached the previous evening and from the top of a double *courte-échelle* Fritz went up the first crack. The gooseberry bush was overwhelmed with leather gloves. Two short and easy pitches led to a niche between two columns. From this point upward the climbable cracks were formed by fissures between the wall and columns that lean against it. The columns on this part of the wall are about 7 feet in diameter at the base. From a distance they appear to be cylindrical in shape but they are flattened on the side that touches the wall. An irregular ledge supports the base of the columns. Erosion has deposited rock dust in sufficient amount to produce some vegetation on the ledge, but above it the rock wall and the cracks are practically clean.

Fritz turned the base of the column to the south and ascended

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<sup>2</sup>See No.

the crack on that side. This column was about 30 feet high. The top was flat and provided ample standing room for all three of us when we had assembled there. The tallest column stood 7 feet to the north of our platform and extended 80 feet above us. Directly over our heads there was only the smooth and nearly vertical wall. We could find no way of traversing to the other side of the tall column where we thought there might be a possibility of climbing in cracks of reasonable length. After a careful examination of all possibilities Fritz said that he would try to climb the 80-foot crack between the highest column and the wall. Those familiar with the crack on Ragged Mountain in Connecticut will have a good approximate idea of this 80-foot crack if they will multiply the Ragged Mountain crack by four. It was within a few degrees of vertical and we could see no safe place in it for pause or rest.

There was no feeling of optimism with the other two members of the rope. I mentally rehearsed the rope handling which would work best in case of a fall. Bill put himself in position to anchor me. Fritz decided to climb with a double rope. He was determined but very tense.

The short traverse across the wall to the crack was exposed and delicate. In the crack<sup>2</sup> Fritz climbed at first with effort, but after some 15 feet all seemed well. A shoulder and elbow, thrust into the crack, provided the friction hold which enabled him to raise a knee. By a turn of the ankle sufficient pressure was maintained with heel, toe and knee to straighten his body upward and again jam shoulder and arm in the crack a few inches higher. He was now climbing rhythmically with his characteristic flawless technique. Only two regular gasps of breath which sounded like the panting of a locomotive interrupted the steady cycle of upward movement. A bulge in the edge of the column forced his shoulders back but did not delay him more than a minute. At this point the intensity of preparedness on the part of Bill and myself gave way to spontaneous and complete but soft-spoken admiration. We knew that we were watching an exhibition of leading such as few climbers ever see. A one-inch ledge gave Fritz a chance to pause and a quick survey disclosed a small crack on the wall. A piton (the only one used

<sup>2</sup>See No. 2 photo opposite page 482.

in the ascent) was driven in and we felt much better with the thought that a fall would be broken above instead of 40 to 80 feet below the belay men. Fritz looked at what was ahead of him and said, "I think I will take it." To within a few feet of the top the remainder of the crack was of the same general character. It was now a question of endurance, to within a few feet of the top the remainder of the crack was of the same general character. Fritz climbed more slowly but showed no sign of exhaustion. A short time after his heels had disappeared over the top of the column a weird howl broke the silence. "I heard that yell on Waddington," said Bill. "It means we are going to the top."

However, there was considerable doubt in my mind when I came to grips with the crack.<sup>3</sup> It was by far the most difficult climbing problem I had ever encountered. Both Bill and I were saved by the rope at the bulge. A short distance higher I was obliged to call for aid a second time. When I reached the top of the column it was plain that I would be in no condition to belay Bill for several minutes and Fritz shouldered the duty of second man rather than lose time.

So far as we could see, the hardest climbing was behind us. An irregular 100-foot chimney<sup>4</sup> led to a sloping shelf, from which only a steep slab separated us from the sloping shoulder that extends nearly the entire width of the east wall. On the shoulder we unroped, rested a few minutes, and sought the easiest route up the remaining 200 feet. We climbed close together but remained unroped, and at 11:18 stood on the edge of the summit.

Bill paced the top of the Tower at 200 by 400 feet. The eroded rock has formed a top soil which is washed or blown away near the edge and which rises mound-like to the center. Indigenous vegetation such as sage brush and cactus was sparse but sufficient to protect the surprising amount of top soil. As a forester, Bill was interested in possible examples of isolated plant life. He arrived at the conclusion that strong winds would

<sup>3</sup>A considered appraisal of the difficulties encountered on Devil's Tower impressed the three of us that no ordinary climbing technique, however well developed, suffices for leading this climb. The crack which was found to be the key to the ascent demands an extremely specialized technique which so far has had relatively little attention in American mountaineering. It is our opinion that since protection even with a double rope is rather dubious high in the crack, only a climber highly experienced in handling such problems would be justified in leading it.—William P. House

<sup>4</sup>See No. 3 photo opposite page 483.

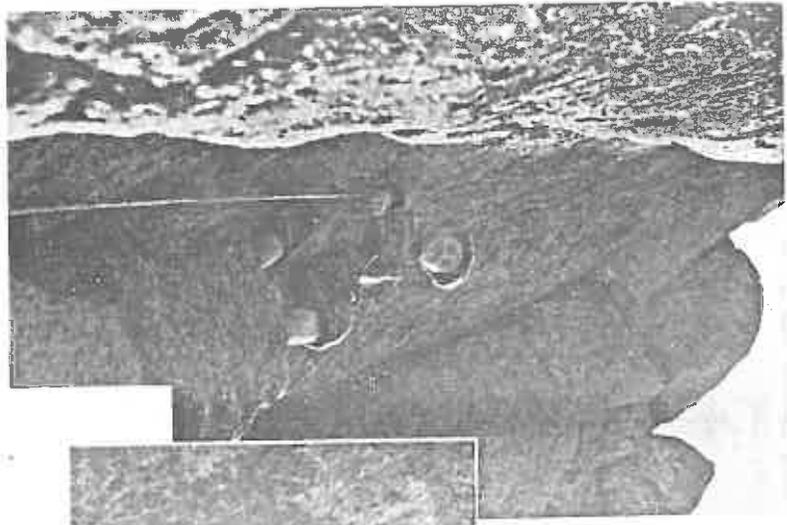
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FRITZ H. WIESSNER  
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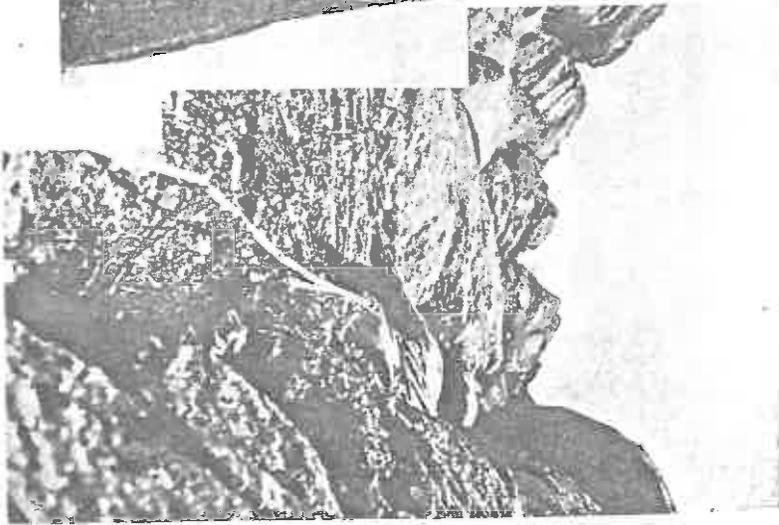
Photos by  
 Lawrence G. Coveney



1. ON TOP OF THE FIRST COLUMN  
 AT RIGHT SEE PART OF THE "LONG CRACK"



2. START OF THE "LONG CRACK"



3. THE CHIMNEY AS VIEWED  
 FROM THE TOP OF THE "HIGH COLUMN"

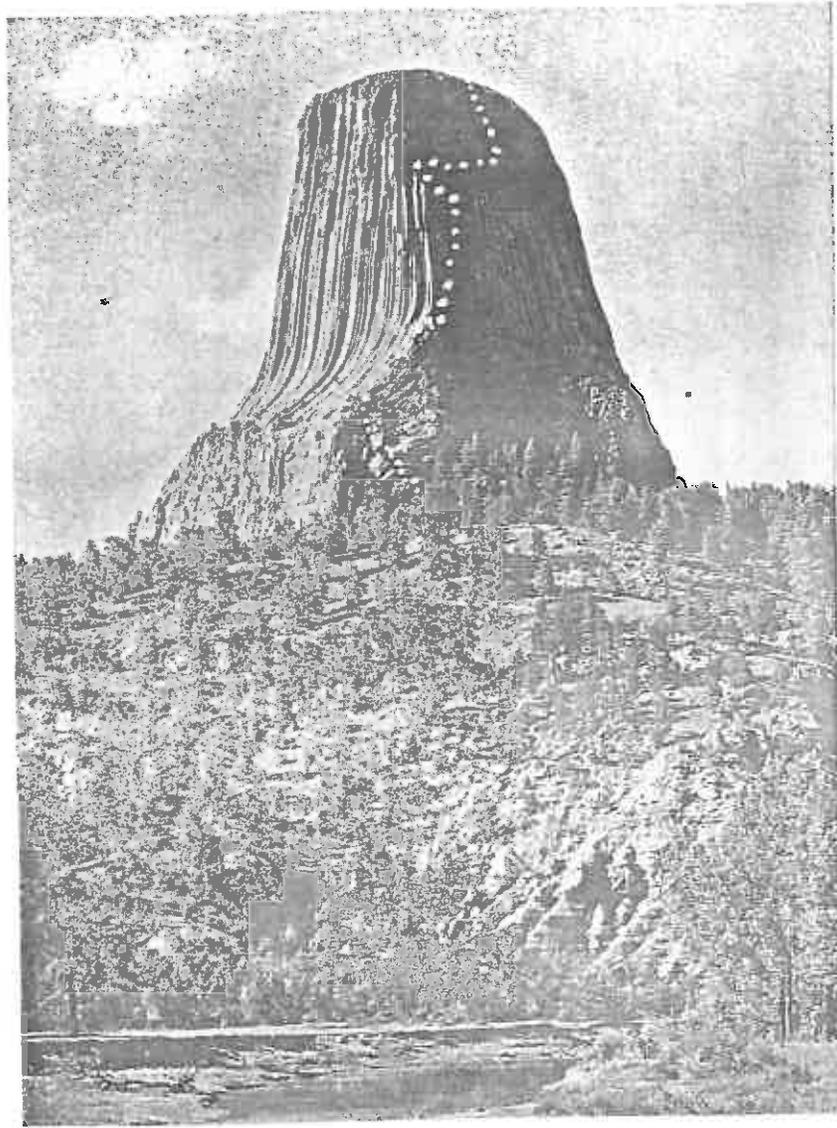


Photo Courtesy of the United States Department of the Interior  
DEVIL'S TOWER FROM THE SOUTHEAST  
SHOWING WIESSNER ROUTE

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be capable of carrying to the summit seeds of most of the species found. Satisfactory identification could not be made in all cases, and specimens of plant and rock were collected for further study below. The only animal life observed on the summit was a single mormon cricket; however, we had seen a chipmunk in one of the cracks about 400 feet above the base, and it is reasonable to assume that chipmunks can climb and descend the Tower. None of us were able to eat our sandwiches and the canned fruit juice and single orange apiece were quite inadequate to appease our thirst. The direct rays of the sun soon became unbearable and we all decided at the same time that we had best get down. A large cairn was hastily built. We took a last view of the panorama and twenty minutes after our arrival began the descent by the same route. From the top of the steep slab, where we had unroped, we began a series of six *rappels* almost in a straight line to the bottom. When projecting rocks or chockstones made it possible we used rope-slings through which to pass the rope. In other places a piton was driven in and we took precautions against a fouled rope by sacrificing a carabiner on each piton.

A definite reaction had set in with all of us, brought on by nervous tension, muscular strain, and the full force of the midday sun. We felt the need of haste in order to take the best advantage of our remaining endurance, but repeatedly cautioned each other lest the element of safety be ignored. It may have been excess caution that caused Bill and me a very bad moment. We were standing on the top of the high column while Fritz *rappeled* and watched the piton intently when it began to bend under the strain. Suddenly it moved perceptibly. Bill shouted a warning and seized the rope. I clutched Bill around the waist to give him support and after assurance from us Fritz continued his descent. He insisted, however, that the piton would hold and later observation showed that probably he was right. Nonetheless Bill and I decided to drive in another piton and double the safety factor.

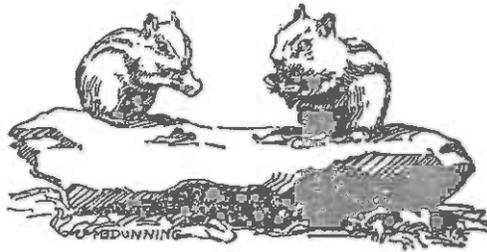
Spectators who had gradually assembled during the climb gave Fritz an enthusiastic reception at the foot of his last *rappel*. Our interest, however, was concentrated on the water canteens so considerably made ready for our arrival, which took place at 1:30 P.M. Mr. Joyner and his associates in the Park Service



Department of the Interior

had been most cooperative and we tried to show our appreciation by answering freely the questions asked by the Park officers and others. One question from the gallery imposed on us the duty that comes at least once to all rock climbers, i.e., to explain that the rope is not used to lasso points over one's head and thus permit hand-over-hand ascent.

Prior to the climb we had expressed ourselves as unfavorable toward the encouragement of spectators. However, we did begin to feel a bit guilty when confronted by disappointed late arrivals who could not understand why the climb had not been advertised. The local people are very friendly and we felt hard pressed to give some explanation after they pointed out that a big crowd would certainly have gathered, to the decided benefit of local business. One of us finally suggested that advance notice might have brought bad luck. This remark seemed to be accepted as a statement of sufficient reason, for the subject was dropped entirely. However, I have since had a suspicion that our audience regarded superstition only as one of the lesser peculiarities of mountain climbers.



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<sup>1</sup>See Appalac