

Routes Revival



CLIMBING IN THE FOOTHOLDS OF A LEGEND

B

ack in the day when people listened to music on iPods, I stood at the base of Chapel Pond Slab and spun the click wheel to *Kind of Blue*. Although a novice climber, I had it in mind to free-solo a route called Empress—that is, climb it without a rope—and I thought the modal jazz of Miles Davis would help keep me calm. A classic album for a classic climb.

By modern standards, Empress is an easy climb, but a fall in the wrong place could end badly. Fortunately, I made it to the top without incident, despite inadvertently turning off the iPod while shinnying up a crack on the fifth pitch. I had more trouble on the descent after I lost the path and ended up down-climbing a series of vegetated ledges.

Since that summer's day in 2010, I have soloed Empress more than 40 times. In part, I keep returning because it's a great route, one of only five of its grade in the Adirondack Park awarded the maximum five stars in the guidebook *Adirondack Rock*. Empress is rated 5.5 on the Yosemite Decimal System scale, which ranges from 5.0 (easiest) to 5.15 (hardest). Generally, a harder climb is

BY PHIL BROWN

more apt to get a higher rating.

I keep returning also because Empress is a piece of the region's climbing history. Fritz Wiessner, the celebrated alpinist and rock climber, established the route back in 1933, making Empress one of the earliest technical climbs in the Adirondacks. Coincidentally, John Case, another climbing pioneer, put up an easier route on Chapel Pond Slab the same year.

Wiessner was born in Germany in 1900. As a teenager, he learned to climb on sandstone towers in the Elbe River Valley southeast of Dresden. At the time, the climbers in the Elbsandsteingebirg were putting up routes of unmatched difficulty. Wiessner did many hard routes there and elsewhere in Europe before emigrating to the United States in 1929. In this country, he made dozens of first ascents, from the sea cliffs in Maine to Devils Tower in Wyoming. In the Adirondacks, he put up about 20 routes, many bearing such prosaic names as Wiessner Route or Old Route.

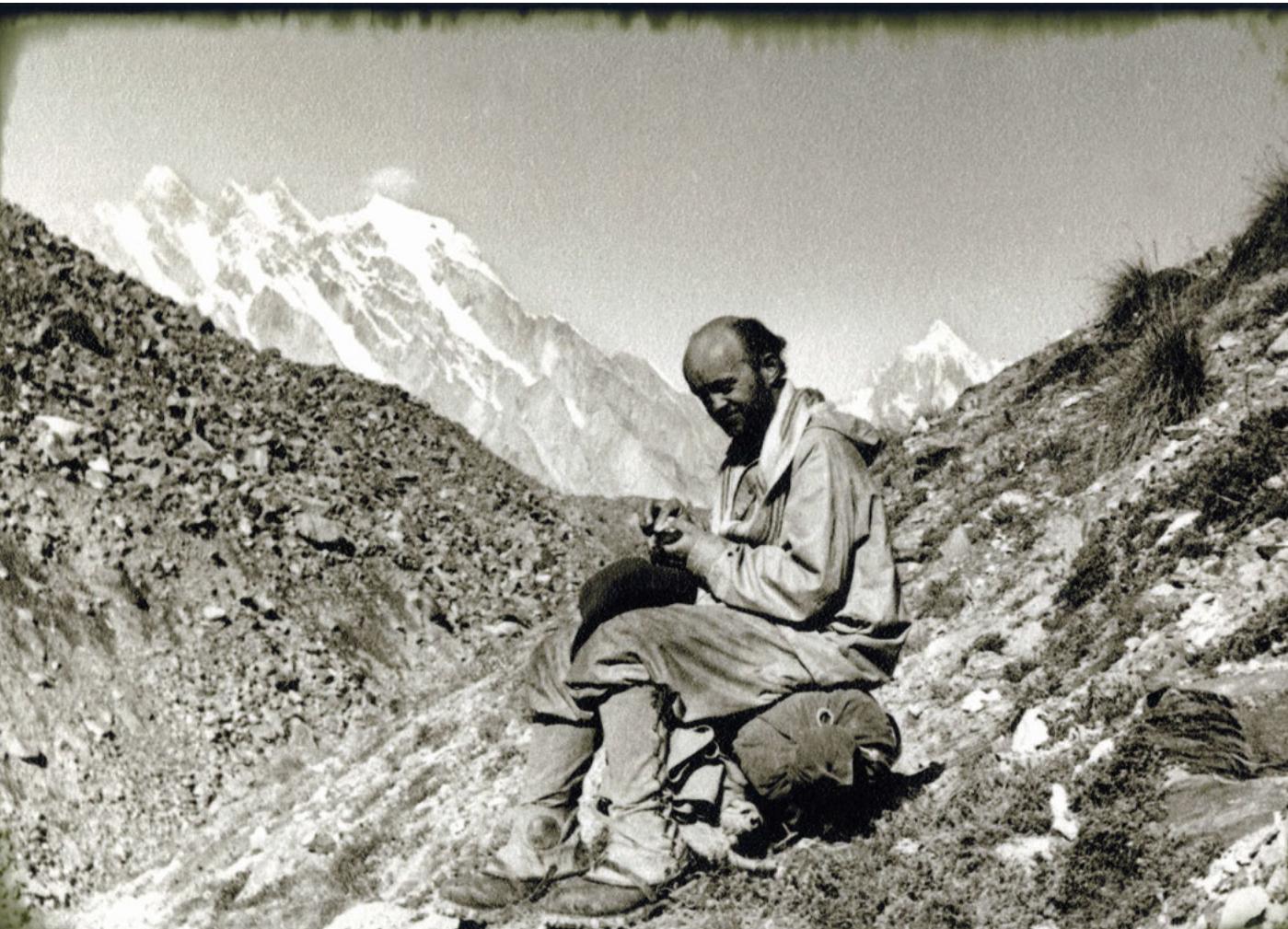
Wiessner made contact with American climbers a few years after settling in New York City, where he ran a ski-wax business. They took him to cliffs in the Hudson Highlands north of the city, where he impressed them by doing routes they had not dared try. In *Yankee Rock and Ice*, a history of northeastern climbing, Laura and Guy Waterman write that Wiessner was so far advanced that he had little impact on American climbing standards. Others just couldn't repeat his harder leads.

Out West, Wiessner's ascent of Devils Tower in 1937 made headlines. This gigantic plug of igneous rock, featured in Native American lore and the movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, rises nearly 870 feet above the Wyoming plain, its sides marked by fluted columns. During the five-hour ascent, Wiessner hammered in only a single piton for protection, and he later regretted that one. His partners, Lawrence Coveney and Bill House, watched in awe as he inched higher up one of the tower cracks.

"He was now climbing rhythmically with his characteristic flawless technique," Coveney later wrote in *Appalachia*, the journal of the Appalachian Mountain Club. "Only two regular gasps of breath which sounded like the panting of a locomotive interrupted the steady cycle of upward movement. ... We knew that we were watching an exhibition of leading such as few climbers ever see."

In the Northeast, Wiessner made his biggest marks on Ragged Mountain and other trap-rock crags in Connecticut and on the conglomerate cliffs in downstate New York's Shawangunks—known by climbers as the Gunks. At Ragged, he did a route called Vector in 1935 that may have been the first 5.8 in the country. The crux, or hardest section, is a wide crack in a bulge. "Fritz went up twice to try it but each time turned back, reluctant to commit himself to such a strenuous and unprotected sequence of moves," the Watermans write. "On the third occasion, he made the commitment and completed what | Continued on page II2

Phil Brown on Empress and the Wiessner Route (pages 58-59) photographs by Kevin Mackenzie. Fritz Wiessner photograph courtesy of Henry S. Hall, Jr., American Alpine Club Library



FROM K2 TO KEENE VALLEY

On July 19, 1939, Fritz Wiessner came close to attaining one of the greatest feats in mountaineering history. He stood just 750 feet below the summit of K2, the second-highest mountain in the world, with nothing but easy climbing ahead. At the time, no 8,000-meter peak had ever been climbed.

Yet it was late in the day, and his sherpa, Pasang Lama, refused to continue. Pasang believed evil spirits lurked on the summit at night. "No, Sahib, tomorrow," he insisted.

Wiessner gave in, thinking they would easily reach the summit on the next attempt. He and Pasang spent a day at their previous campsite (Camp IX) and the next day descended to the next-highest campsite (Camp VIII), where another member of the expedition, Dudley Wolfe, was waiting.

They intended to prepare for another summit bid, but other expedition members had failed to bring up supplies. Over two horrific days, Wiessner and Pasang continued to descend the mountain, finding each campsite deserted and the sleeping bags gone. At Camp II, they found two empty tents. Exhausted, they crept into one tent and wrapped the other around them for warmth. The next day they struggled into base camp, barely able to stand up.

Evidently, those in base camp believed Wiessner, Wolfe and Pasang had perished in an avalanche. In the days that followed, three sherpas climbed back up the mountain to rescue Wolfe, who had stayed behind. Neither they nor Wolfe were seen again. In 2002, Wolfe's bones were found on a glacier at K2's base.

Soon after Wiessner's K2 expedition, the American Alpine Club wrote a report that largely blamed Wiessner for the disaster. In response, Wiessner quit the club. The club's president was John Case, who summered in Keene Valley. Like Wiessner, Case was one of the early rock climbers in the Adirondacks.

In his memoir, *And Gladly Guide: Reflections on a Life in the Mountains*, Jim Goodwin tells of a chance meeting of Fritz Wiessner and Case in the Adirondacks in the 1960s on Indian Head near Lower Ausable Lake. Both men were leading others up the same climbing route, and they argued over how to do it. Wiessner favored a lieback maneuver; Case favored stemming. In the end, each climbed it his own way. Afterward, Goodwin invited Wiessner and Case back to his cottage for a beer—"during which time Fritz and John further warmed to each other, relating accounts of their past climbs."

A few years later, Wiessner not only rejoined the American Alpine Club, but the club made him an honorary member. His near-ascent of K2, reaching 27,500 feet, leading the whole way, was far ahead of his time. The first 8,000-meter peak (Annapurna) would not be climbed until 1950. Everest was not climbed until 1953. K2 fell the following year—15 years after Wiessner's attempt. Today many regard Wiessner as the greatest alpinist of the 20th century.

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ROUTES REVIVAL

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probably remained the hardest single lead in the country for almost twenty years." Vector remains a challenge even with today's sticky-soled slippers.

Also in 1935, Wiessner discovered the climbing potential of the Gunks after he spied the gleaming cliffs in the distance from Breakneck Ridge in the Hudson Highlands. He put up the Gunks' first line, known today simply as Old Route. Over the next 15 years, he would establish 25 other new routes in the Gunks. One of them was Minnie Belle, the first 5.8 at the cliffs, which he climbed in 1946 with William Shockley, the Nobel Prize-winning physicist who later became notorious for his views on race and eugenics.

Throughout the 1930s and '40s, Wiessner also climbed in the Adirondacks, but his routes here have not received as much attention. There are probably two reasons for this. First, the Adirondacks of that era was off the map for most climbers. Poke-O-Moonshine, now the park's premier cliff, had no routes on it until 1957. (Wiessner supposedly looked at Poke-O and declared it unclimbable.) Second, the routes Wiessner established in the Adirondacks did not advance standards. That is not to say they weren't good climbs or that they were all easy. Indeed, one of his routes on Noonmark Mountain is rated 5.8+, in theory making it harder than Vector.

On most of his Adirondack visits, Wiessner climbed virgin rock and therefore had his pick of routes. He had a knack for finding the climbable features on a cliff, such as a wide crack, chimney or big corner. "He had an eye for a good line," remarked Jim Lawyer, one of the authors of Adirondack Rock.

The first Adirondack climbing guidebook—A Climber's Guide to the Adirondacks, by Trudy Healy—is dedicated to Wiessner and Jim Goodwin, another early climber. Both men helped Healy research and edit the book, which was published in 1967. Wiessner is credited with the first ascent (usually as the leader) for 16 of the 55 routes listed in the book. His last route was on Big Slide in 1953.

These days, many of Wiessner's routes are climbed infrequently. Some, such as Indian Head and Mount Jo, are on private land, where the public is no longer welcome to rock climb. Other routes are considered too overgrown or too chossy to bother with. For example, few people make the trek to Wallface to climb the Wiessner Route (5.4) when there are many better climbs in the vicinity. That said, several of Wiessner's Adirondack routes remain excellent adventures. What's more, they are considered easy or moderate by today's standards and therefore suitable for novices (assuming they follow a competent leader). When I started climbing in my mid-50s, my friend Josh took me up a few Wiessner routes. It was a great introduction to the sport and its history.

Whatever your skill level, if you want to follow in the footholds of a legend, read on for recommendations (with ratings from Adirondack Rock). Before climbing any of these routes, you should consult Adirondack Rock or its predecessor, Climbing in the Adirondacks, by Don Mellor, for additional information. On many of these routes you will come across old pitons. It's unlikely that any date to the Wiessner era, but they should be left in place as historical artifacts. Relying on them for protection against a fall is not suggested.

WIESSNER ROUTE

Upper Washbowl Cliff
4 pitches, 5.6

This is one of three routes Wiessner climbed on Memorial Day weekend in 1938 with two partners, M. Beckett Howorth and Bob Notman. The others were Lakeside on Indian Head and the Wallface route. This Wiessner Route (one of four with that name in the Adirondack Park) remains a popular climb with guides, as it provides clients the right amount of challenge along with scenic views of Chapel Pond Pass

ROUTES REVIVAL

and the High Peaks.

"It's an aesthetic line up a big cliff," said Will Roth, who guides for Adirondack Rock & River and EMS.

The route poses a tough challenge early on the first pitch: the climber must surmount a refrigerator-size block protruding from the face. Some people jam their fists in a crack on the left side of the block; others scramble up and right to a sloping ledge and then make an awkward, airy step back to the top of the block. Both techniques were used in the first ascent. Howorth wrote in Appalachia that Wiessner tackled the crack "and with considerable difficulty wriggled onto the block. ... Having observed his labors in circumventing the block, and being naturally lazy, I found a way to traverse from the sloping slab to the top of the block, thereby avoiding the crack, much to Fritz's disgust."

The rest of the route is more straightforward. The second pitch ascends a long corner with lots of good holds—"jugs," as they say—and ends at a long, broad ledge. Climbers walk 150 feet to the far end of the ledge and then scale a short, steep wall on the right. Upper Washbowl Cliff and the big ledge on pitch three are clearly visible from Route 73 in the Chapel Pond area.

OLD ROUTE ★★

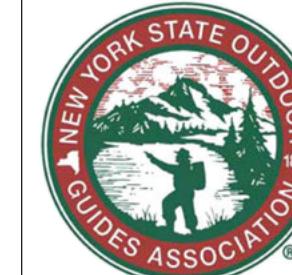
Rooster Comb
4 pitches, 5.4

Wiessner put up this route in 1949 with Jim Goodwin, who years later remembered it as "a honey of a climb." It resembles the Upper Washbowl route in that it takes a wandering line up the cliff, features a variety of climbing, and even traverses a broad ledge on the third pitch.

Old Route has another thing going for it: the climb begins more than two miles from the nearest road in Keene Valley. For a little effort, you get a taste of wilderness climbing. Most of the approach is on a hiking trail, but there is a short bushwhack to the base of the cliff.

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I've found getting off the ground to be one of the toughest moves on this climb. It entails starting up a crack and stepping onto a steep slab. Once that's out of the way, traverse right, beneath a roof, to reach a narrow ramp that is ascended to a roomy terrace. On the second pitch, climb a narrow chimney, ending on a ledge where views of Giant Mountain and the High Peaks Wilderness really begin to open up. Next, follow the broad ledge to a corner beneath a huge wall. The last, easy pitch follows the corner and ends on the Rooster Comb summit, where you enjoy more fabulous views. The peak is popular, so you'll likely have some company if it's a nice summer day.

Incidentally, Betty Woolsey put up a harder route next to Old Route the same year—the first Adirondack route pioneered by a female leader. Several years earlier, Woolsey had also established the first Gunks route led by a woman. On that one, the follower was Fritz Wiessner.

OLD ROUTE ★

Hurricane Crag
3 pitches, 5.3

Wiessner climbed this Old Route with George Austin at an unknown date. Although given only one star, the route is worth doing for the first pitch alone, which ascends one of the longest and deepest chimneys in the park. "Here Wiessner once again plucked the plum feature," Adirondack Rock notes.

The 100-foot chimney has plenty of good holds on its interior walls, making it fairly easy to climb. The second pitch involves a scramble over slab and up a corner crack to a tree-lined ledge. From here, Healy's guidebook says, Wiessner went straight up for 15 feet, then angled up and left, and then went straight up again "over very rotten, steep rock to the top."

When I did this route with a friend years ago, the start of this pitch appeared covered in dusty lichen, as if it

ROUTES REVIVAL

hadn't been climbed in a long time. We chose to traverse straight left to a belay station on the nearby route Quadropenia. We finished the route from there.

If you want to do just the first pitch, you can rappel from a fixed anchor after climbing the chimney. After exiting the chimney, walk left along a ledge to find it. Hurricane Crag lies off the north side of Route 9N between Keene and Elizabethtown.

WIESSNER ★★★★ ROUTE

Noonmark Mountain
1 pitch, 5.8+

Noonmark boasts one of the finest views in the Adirondacks and so sees lots of hikers on summer weekends. Less frequently, climbers tote their gear up the mountain to climb the short cliff on the west side of the summit. Sometime in the 1930s and/or 1940s, Wiessner and his partners established four routes here, ranging in difficulty from 5.3 to 5.8+.

All of the routes are one pitch and can be top roped. The plum line is Wiessner Route (again), which follows a steep crack for 90 feet. Jim Lawyer, of Adirondack Rock, said it was Wiessner's hardest route in the Adirondacks. In fact, the route probably was as technically demanding as anything that had then been done in the country, though it never garnered the fame of Vector. It lay too far off the beaten track.

Even this route was not nearly as tough as those Wiessner had done decades earlier in Germany. Lawyer climbed one on a visit to the Elbe Valley. "It was a nasty off-width, at least 5.10, and completely unprotectable," he recalled. "It always puzzled me that, once Wiessner arrived here, he climbed at a way more modest level."

Odd fact: a lag bolt (not a climber's bolt) has been pounded into the crack at the start of Wiessner Route. Adirondack Rock speculates that it was used as a step. "Being the purist, it is unlikely that

Wiessner placed such an aid," according to the book.

EMPRESS ★★★★

Chapel Pond Slab
7 pitches, 5.5

And then there's Empress, Wiessner's first Adirondack climb and arguably his best. Empress is not as popular as Regular Route, the other five-star climb on Chapel Pond Slab, because sections are dangerously exposed and impossible to protect against a fall.

If done as originally climbed, Empress provides an interesting tour of the slab. It starts up the slab's left side, then cuts right to the base of a curving wall, where it shares a belay spot with Regular Route. On the next pitch, it heads back left, passing over a large flake and around two large rock hummocks. The real business begins with the fourth pitch. From atop another hummock, climb unbroken slab straight up for 90 feet, relying on friction and thin edges to stay on the rock. There are no cracks to insert a chock or cam for protection. Essentially, the leader is free soloing.

On the next pitch, ascend the off-width crack to a good ledge. You then step onto a small foothold and climb more unprotected slab. By now, you are hundreds of feet off the ground, so some people regard this as the psychological crux even though the slab climbing is easier than on the previous pitch. The last two pitches are also unprotected but even easier.

For those who don't mind the exposure, Empress is hard to beat. The more I climb it, the more I appreciate little things: a green frog basking in a puddle on the first pitch; bluets swaying on slender stalks in grassy cracks; sipping fresh rainwater from a tiny pool on the hummock before starting up the money pitch. These private moments may have nothing to do with climbing. Or perhaps everything. Yep, Wiessner really knew how to pick a line. ▲

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