



The Godfathers of American climbing literature: Steve Roper and Allen Steck. (Terry Gifford)

### Lunch With Steck and Roper

‘We don’t climb outdoors anymore,’ Roper had emailed me. But when I was arranging a visit for lunch at Steck’s house with my host and their friend Larry Giacomino I had to avoid Tuesdays and Thursdays because on those days they went to the Berkeley climbing gym. Steve Roper (73), wrote the first guidebook to Yosemite and the history of climbing in the Valley, **Camp Four**, and Allen Steck (88), is co-author of the famous *Steck-Salathé* route on Yosemite’s Sentinel Rock in 1950 and of the still-unrepeated *Hummingbird Ridge* on Mount Logan, Alaska, in 1965 which Roper and Steck included in their 1979 book *Fifty Classic Climbs of North America*.

Steck came to door, slightly stooped, but still with the wild silver hair and sparkling eyes. ‘Allen Steck, you’re still alive! And held together with duct-tape!’ I pointed down to the silver taped toe of his left slipper. ‘Come on in and I’ll get you a glass. I’ve already started.’ Steck picked up his wine glass from the mantelpiece above the open fire on which he’d cooked salmon last time I was here. We wandered through to the kitchen. From this kitchen Steck and Roper edited 14 editions of the best climbing writing in the English-speaking world for 32 years until they ran out of steam in 1999 and the glossy magazines were paying writers more than they could.

‘Do you still have your own wine with the *Ascent* label for those long editorial lunches with Roper?’

‘Here’s the last unopened bottle, probably undrinkable now.’

Incubus Hills, the label says, with the famous image of bodies falling in the Matterhorn disaster. The name celebrates the title of an article first published in *Ascent* written by Ed Ward-Drummond.

‘Drummond used to mix three metaphors in one sentence, the Sierra

Allen Steck with the *Hummingbird Ridge* secret weapon. (Terry Gifford)



Club publishing editor used to complain. We liked them and kept them in. One of the best writers we ever published. *Rock and Ice* magazine bought the title of *Ascent* from us and paid us \$2000 each to agree not to publish another issue. We were never going to edit another issue anyway. Here’s Roper with the comestibles.’

Roper came bustling through the door with the lunch, saying, ‘You know it’s 18 years since we stayed at Larry’s cabin and climbed together in the Valley on *Overhang Bypass*. Then we went back to Steck’s 70th birthday party here in this house.’

What a day that had been. I was amazed that a two-star route of only 5.7 could be found winding up to the rim of the Valley left of Bridalveil Falls, with a distinctive pitch called the ‘Hog Trough’ – ‘clean and exposed’ – giving it a memorable character. The steep descent down Gunsight Gully to the sound of a peregrine was equally memorable. Then there was the party in the garden at Steck’s house with the golden age of Yosemite climbing in attendance. I remember Steck’s older brother George, who pioneered long hiking routes in the Grand Canyon and wrote the guidebooks to them, being concerned that I was helping the champagne disappear a little too swiftly.

Steck was still musing on Drummond. ‘He once said to me, “Allen, will you be my father?” He knew he needed someone to look after him and that was before the onset of his Parkinson’s.’

Talk turned to the *Hummingbird Ridge* and I asked if they included it in their book *Fifty Classic Climbs of North America* as the equivalent of *The Scoop* on Sron Ulladale in Wilson’s *Hard Rock* – the stopper route that would prevent people from ticking the complete list too easily. Roper was animated.

‘Not at all. We definitely didn’t do that. We included it because it was a classic route, an elegant ridge. We expected that it would be repeated within the next five years.’

Steck said that it would be repeated this summer. Not one, but two teams had contacted him about it.

‘Did you remind them to take a shovel?’

‘Of course. That granulated snow was taking forever to cut steps in it with an axe. I had insisted on taking a garden shovel along and that solved

the problem. Do you want to see it?’

Steck shuffled off to his basement and came back with the biggest, heaviest agricultural implement Uncle Sam had ever produced. But its blade was cunningly full of holes.

‘What were the hardest routes in Yosemite when you started climbing there?’

‘*Lost Arrow Chimney*’, said Roper, ‘was probably the hardest climb in the world in its day.’

‘*Higher Spire*,’ chipped in Steck, the elder and earlier pioneer.

‘Allen, what’s the story I’ve heard about you getting benighted on your own route?’

‘It was the fiftieth anniversary ascent, when I was 73. All went well until at the Narrows I ran out of steam. I simply could not climb it. This has only ever happened to me twice before in my life. So we were benighted. There was nowhere to lie down and my head kept falling off my arms folded over the rock. It was a horrible night. In the morning my partner rigged a pulley system and hauled me up. It was the end of my annual anniversary ascents of that route.’

The last time I had seen Steck was at Stanage a decade ago when he’d arranged to meet Ken Wilson and Dick Turnbull for an ascent of *Right Unconquerable*, an old favourite of his. It was raining heavily and Steck approached the crag with an umbrella and street shoes. It was clear that climbing was not on for a Californian in his 70s, although Dick did actually lead the route in the rain. But Roper remembered their first visit to Stanage when Steck was leading the route.

‘He was close to the top when suddenly there was an almighty scream. He’d taken a fall onto a number four Friend. And I was only using a hip belay. Californians of a certain generation, like us, were slow to adopt the Sticht plate from Europe.’

Steck was grinning at the memory of this story told against himself. It was time to leave.

‘End of an era,’ mumbled Steck as we walked out the door.

A few days later Larry took me into the Valley again to climb a three pitch 5.6 called *Munginella* to the left of Yosemite Falls. There was snow on the top of Half Dome and the Falls gave their famous display of rainbows in the sun as we gained height above the trees. There was no-one above or below us on the route. We took time to linger and chat on the stances. The rock offered its bright granular friction and perfect jams. This, I was forcefully reminded, is what I like doing. And 67 is no age at all these days. I decided to give up alcohol for a month again, stick to Larry’s high fat/low carb diet and get fit for a long classic route in Scotland this spring with my son.

‘Rock!’ shouted Larry on the lead. A rock the size of a haggis fell at speed between us. A raven flew away above us with a stick for its nest. I know, I know. I should have been wearing more than a Californian bandana.

*Et in Arcadia Ego.* It could have been the end of an era.