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Nuts & Bolts

"Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves" –John Muir

Have you ever driven by one of the Front Range's trailheads on the weekend? If so, you might remember seeing a full lot, perhaps cars overflowing onto the shoulders of the main thoroughfare. At least in this part of the country, the parking lots would suggest that John Muir's secret is out (not that he wanted it to be secret). Increasing numbers of people are heading to the mountains for exercise, photography, modern sporting pursuits, or simply just to take it all in. Not until recent history have mountains been a center of recreation for humans, when compared to the significance mountains had on ancient humans. To ancient humans, the hostile, uninhabitable lands high in the mountains contributed to their stories and mythology. Abraham climbed Mount Sinai for the Ten Commandments; Shiva lived on a Himalayan mountain called Shivling; and Chomolungma (Everest) is "Mother Goddess of the Earth" (Anker). Needless to say, the mountains have a different purpose for present-day humans when compared to the ancients.

The crowds have never really bothered me, although they have perplexed me at times. Whenever passing a fellow hiker on the trail, it's good to see that there are other people enjoying the wilderness for similar reasons. Other times, though, seeing fellow passersby can be frustrating. Take the "Hundred Mile Wilderness," for example. Ironically, it wasn't until the

Wilderness that I ran into throngs of tourists along the Maine section of the Appalachian Trail. If Wilderness is in the title of a place name, it seems to attract more people, perhaps. Mr. Muir, your secret is definitely out.

John Muir was a leading conservationist of his time and one of the key benefactors of the Sierra Club in 1892. He was also a climber, and as it turns out, the only climber to be recognized on legal tender. Scour the cup-holders for a California commemorative quarter, and look on the back for Muir, as he admires the steep walls of Yosemite's Half-Dome.

Even with the publically held sentiment that nature should be treated with reverence and respect, climbers throughout the 20th century relied on styles that used on a non-sustainable ethic, sometimes permanently damaging the lines they chose. Aid climbing was a standard style used by climbers making the first ascent of a route, where the climber would hammer iron pitons into fissures in the rock. Each time a piton is placed or removed, it permanently scars the rock. Pitons were used extensively in rock climbing through the 1970's, and many can still be found left in the cliffs today, serving as reminders of a time. I try to keep that in mind as I climb past them, that they are little snippets of history, once pounded and now rusting examples of the pioneers. Those pioneers like Layton Kor, who has countless first ascents on routes that are still revered as classics. They hammered pitons into the rock, but they also climbed in boots with the rope tied around their waist in a swami, lacking anything similar to a harness by modern standards. The history is important, acknowledging what means were available to a climber at the time of ascent.

One of my favorite writings on the history of climbing is found in my guidebook for Eldorado Canyon, written by Steve Levin. The book is now a water-logged stack of crusty pages,

the result of too many afternoon multi-pitch climbs at Eldorado, an area reputed for its intense afternoon thunderstorms. Jim Erickson, one of Colorado's "clean climbing" pioneers, is the author of one of the book's essays about Eldorado's history. Giving credit to Royal Robbins as being the leader of clean climbing in North America, his essay talks about the movement of climbers to a new, environmental ethic. An ethic where removal protection was used instead of pitons that damage the rock permanently. Many kudos to Mr. Erickson and his early use of nuts and stoppers, when in 1972 it wasn't yet clear that this new-fangled removal protection could actually stop a fall. He compares the perceivable placement qualities of nuts versus pitons, and discusses how easily a lead climber could judge the quality of the protection he is placing. He makes the point that nut placements are more finicky and more could easily be pulled if incorrectly loaded, whereas a good piton placement can be easily ascertained by the sound emitted while hammering it in. The early climbers who joined the clean-climbing movement didn't fully trust these placements, but that didn't prevent Erickson and others from cutting-edge first ascents.

It's a known fact, but I might as well re-iterate that Eldorado Canyon State Park is nearly exclusively a traditional climbing destination, with the only bolt-protected routes categorized as very difficult (5.12s and up). There is a strong local conviction toward maintaining it as such: a traditional climbing area where the difficulties and nature of the climbs are still well-represented as the first ascent parties would have found them. The Action Committee for Eldorado formally represents the desire to avoid molestation of Eldorado's pristine cliffs. *Calypso* is one of Eldorado's classic moderate climbs, the route's perhaps mistakenly relaxed rating makes it attractive to potential inexperienced parties. Thus, *Calypso* has been the setting of several deadly climbing accidents. Many of these accidents could be avoided if the Action Committee for

Eldorado agreed to place a bolt on the unprotected start of *Calypso,* but placing a bolt would ultimately change the nature of the climb.

Another piece of climbing history that has been the focal point of scrutiny is Cesare Maestri's *Compressor Route*, on Patagonia's Cerro Torre. The *Compressor* was initially established during Maestri's second attempt on the mountain in 1970, and shows just how far some are willing to go for the sake of capturing the summit. Maestri used a petroleum-powered air compressor to drill and place some 400 bolts on the mountain's southeast ridge. The *Compressor* has become the standard route up the mountain over the years, and for the some, the goal has been to climb the same route "by fair means," that is, without use of the bolts at all. Everyone wanted to see a party complete the route by fair means, but not everyone agreed on what should be done with the bolts afterward. Many climbers, like Rolando Garibotti, thought that "[t]he bolts do have a historical value, and that is why they should be safe from the elements, inside a museum," while Argentinian climbing guide Diego Padilla says, "I don't agree with Maestri's philosophy to place that many bolts, but at this point it's part of our history as Argentinian climbers and part of the history of this iconic route. You could still skip the bolts… but to remove them now would be to remove the history of the route, even if the history is a blemish" (Dewell, Samet).

Sadly to say, the bolts of the *Compressor Route* were chopped on January 19th, 2012 by American Hayden Kennedy and Canadian Jason Kruk. The team climbed along Maestri's bolts without using them, claiming the mountain's first ascent "by fair means." At the summit, the team came to an agreement that the bolts would be chopped and the years of controversy would be put to an end. So, on their way down, they chopped more than a hundred bolts on Cerro Torre's headwall, appeasing climbers like Garibotti. Heralded Italian alpinist Stephano Lovison

described the actions as a "result of a unilateral decision and of a concept of mountaineering in which there is a lack of respect for the figures of the past as well as the clear lack of the capability to contextualize some performances (or the attempts), relating them to the conditions, to the available equipment and to the isolation of those places at the times of Maestri." Lovison, like many others, saw the problems with Maestri's ethics, but still attributed historic value to the route.

Cesare Maestri's *Compressor Route* was viewed by many as a terrible thing, while at the same time it also became the most popular route on Cerro Torre. Lovison makes the great point that Kennedy & Kruk's actions, if indeed ethically motivated, were flawed on the same ethical grounds. Four bolts have been added to the route since Maestri; Kennedy even added one himself. From an ethical standpoint, Lovison asks what's the difference between placing and using 10 or 100?

At the start of this writing process, I had recently returned from a climbing trip to the San Rafael Swell, about 15 miles west of Green River, Utah. That was my second visit to the "Swell"; my first visit was so memorable I knew I'd return. I had a friend visiting from out of town and really wanted him to see the unusual slab climbing the area had to offer. Devoid of features, the gritty sandstone requires mostly friction techniques for the feet and hands, relying heavily on balance.

My first climb at San Rafael was titled *1000 Feet of Fun*, at the approachable grade of 5.6. Depending on where you've climbed, 5.6 can mean any number of things. *High Exposure* at the Gunks is on one side of the difficulty spectrum, whereas *1000 Feet of Fun* is on the other, and they are both rated 5.6. The two photographs below should make the difference clear about

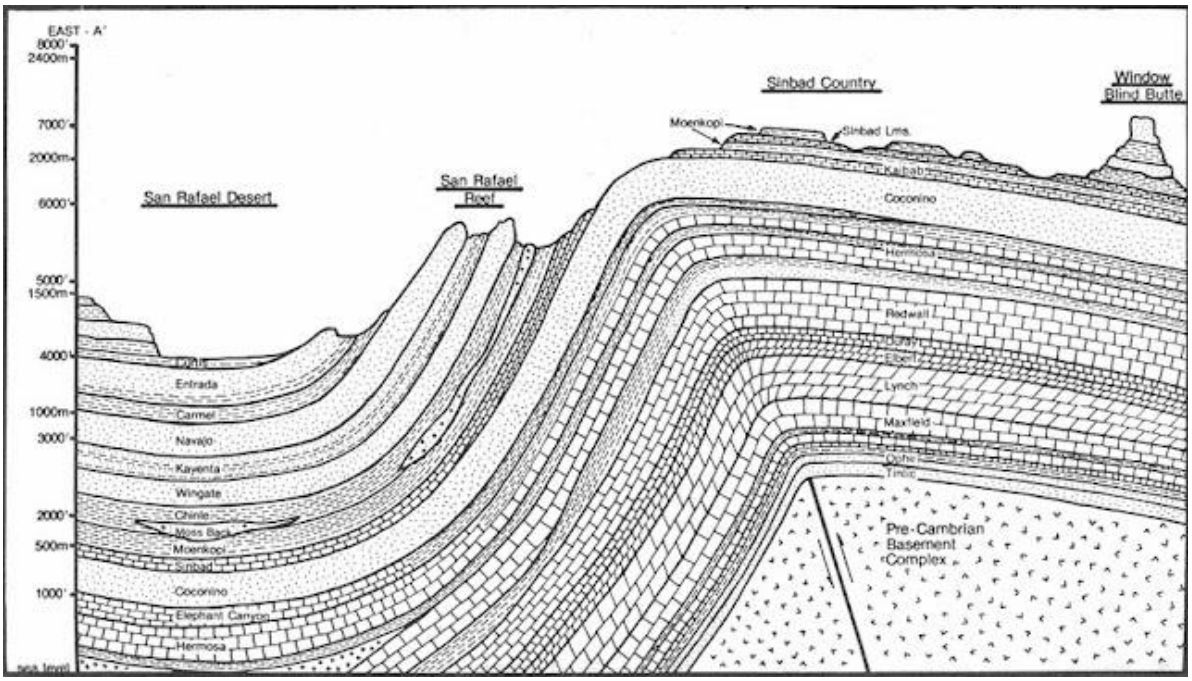
the varying difficulties of the climb, based mostly on the steepness of the climb.

Pete on *High Exposure*

Tom on *1000 Feet of Fun*

Note that *High Exposure* is overhanging and very steep, where *1000 Feet of Fun* is a low angle slab. I've found the grade of 5.6 to be a good starting point at climbing areas that I'm unfamiliar with, as places like the Gunks in New York, or Eldorado Canyon are notoriously "sand-bagged," meaning the climbing is more difficult than the rating suggests. Long story short, *1000 Feet of Fun* turned out to be a really easy 5.6, and true to the name, a LOT of fun.

The Eastern Reef of the San Rafael Swell is an amazing geological formation similar to Boulder's Flatirons (see below). For any sort of outdoor enthusiast, the little-known San Rafael Swell offers a lifetime of exploration options for climbing, caving, hiking, and so on. With the walls covered in petroglyphs, narrow slot canyons perforate massive slabs of Navajo and Wingate sandstone that have been lifted skyward, exposing the beautiful subterranean layers. There's something to be seen by everyone there, but my particular interest is climbing the massive slabs.



(Kelsey 202)

As with slab climbing nearly anywhere, the slabs on the Eastern Reef are run-out, meaning a lead climber has few possibilities for placing protection as the rock may be lacking features for placement of such protection. A climber by the name of Paul Ross has been establishing hundreds of new routes in the Swell in a very respectable style. He climbs with a light rack of modern camming units and a Bosch drill, for placing bolts where protection is nil. It fascinated me that this 73 year-old man is putting up so many new routes, ranging from 100 to 2,000 feet, while drilling on lead. When Mr. Ross climbs, he uses whatever features are naturally available for protection, but will place bolts on a run-out section that is more difficult than 5.7. Even then, he places bolts at a distance to facilitate his lead, thus keeping them more spread out. Consider how fast someone would have to travel to climb a 2,000 foot route in a day, and then factor in how long drilling and placing bolts would take. Also with slab climbing, forward momentum is what helps carry a leading climber over the tenuous holds. In other words, to stop

is to complicate. It makes sense to me that on the routes he has added bolts, he hasn't added many.

Climbing is still in its infancy at the San Rafael Swell and I'm sure many routes there have not seen a single repeat since Ross climbed them first. Some parties have replaced bolt anchors, but to my knowledge, no routes have been retro-bolted. There have been a decent number of climbers who have decided to embark on an adventure climb at the Swell, and many of their comments are recorded at www.mountainproject.com. Mountain Project is really the only source for gathering route beta for the Swell, as Mr. Ross uploads his ascents directly onto the online database. I think it is important to note that the Eastern Reef climbing area of the San Rafael Swell is easily accessible from Interstate-70 near Green River, and the ease of accessibility may attract more climbers than if it were slightly more remote. Think about where ski bums go in the summer: climbing! As stated before, slab climbing is unique and requires different technique than other styles of climbing, and is typically run-out (read: dangerous). Climbing parties inexperienced with slab climbing may be in for a rude awakening if they decide to visit the Swell for their introduction course. The objective dangers of climbing at the Swell are much higher than at other climbing locations due to the quality of the rock (or lack thereof), the lack of protection, and the lack of traffic that the routes get. The more people climb a given route, the more loose holds get pulled off, thus, leaving a cleaner route. While climbing *1000 Feet of Fun*, I had a big hand hold pop off while leading. Not to worry, the new hand hold is better now than it was.

Given the proximity of the Eastern Reef to Interstate-70, and the increasing publicity distributed through Mountain Project, controversy over the dangers was sure to follow. Some of

the forum posts even made it into magazines, like this quote taken from an issue of *UK Climbing* (Ryan):

"No shit, the first pitch is an X rating all the way, not R!!! It may be moderate climbing but the sandstone here is far from bomber. I have to be honest, I was a little pissed after this climb. I understand that this is a run-out area and came here for some adventure but I had avoided the X rated climbs on purpose and still found myself in a situation where a broken hold (very likely in this friable sandstone) would mean a 90 foot ground fall onto rock."

I can sympathize with this poster's comment to some degree about *Runout Ridge* (5.9R). He is talking about the rating of the climb, and how sometimes climbs are assigned a supplemental rating indicating their danger. Jim Erickson created the supplemental rating system, basing it off of the American movie rating scheme, where a fall on a climb rated R would result in serious injury, and a fall on an X-rated climb would be fatal. The commenter thinks the route should be rated X because of the lack of protection, when the route is rated R instead. To me, the commenter may have overlooked that the climbing is generally more dangerous at the Swell, and he is climbing a route called *Runout Ridge*. My suggestion: if runout is in the name of a route at a climbing area that is reputed for its danger, don't climb it! Unless, that is, you are very comfortable with free-soloing (the act of climbing rope-less, without any safety system). However, his comment should be read carefully by all climbers who aspire to climb at the Swell. The rock is friable, as he says, and very-questionable. While climbing *1200 Feet of More Fun* (5.7R), I, too, "was a little pissed" when confronted with a very long run-out and weak rock. One of the upper pitches was made of cemented sheets of mud, hardly what I thought could be called "rock." I literally kicked a step higher up, trying to find solid rock to support my weight. Adventure climbing at its finest.

At this time I had my ideas about climbing ethics. I knew the following: Don't place bolts near cracks that would otherwise accept removable protection, don't add bolts to someone's route, and don't remove bolts from someone else's route. I understood that Paul Ross didn't place a lot of bolts on lead, because frankly, drilling would be a lot harder than simply climbing higher, and that he may not be returning to his previous routes to make them accessible to us mortals. There are some who are pleased with the lack of bolts, like this Mountain Project user commenting on *1200 Feet of More Fun*: "thanks for all the bolts you could have placed but didn't." I would have liked more bolts, that is for sure. I was really scared while climbing that route, with several 200 foot pitches without a single *solid* piece of protection. I probably won't do that route again, ever, but was still able to extract some reward from it. Now when I go sport climbing, I just think about that time at the Swell when I was basically soloing and how I was able to relax and climb freely.

Since the Swell, I have visited a few other climbing areas new to me, but I'll talk about Vedauwoo first. Vedauwoo is about two hours north of Denver and is considered by many to be the best place near the Front Range for learning how to climb wide cracks. After my first day climbing, I decided I should head into Laramie to find a guidebook for the area, as I knew I would be back. I bought a guidebook based on the salesman's recommendation, written by Robert Kelman. After the typical precautionary statements about climbing's inherent danger, the book's introduction led to a subtitle of "First Ascents." History, in my opinion, is always something that should be considered, and even more so when it comes to climbing. Unfortunately, my first impression of the author was shaped by the first two quotations he used: "History is fiction agreed upon" and "History is more or less bunk." I understand that the two individuals who made these claims (Napoleon and Henry Ford) may have had considerable

power and fame to strengthen their statements, but their fame doesn't make their statements correct. The importance of history may be a matter of opinion, but either way I hadn't even read a single page before I was disagreeing with the author.

Kelman quickly redeemed himself in the first chapter, where guidebook authors usually address climbing specific questions like: which season is best to climb, where to get the best free camping, what the ethics of the area are, what geological forces were at work, and so on… When he gets to the part of the chapter about Ethics (pg. 7), he quickly refers to the North American Standard Ethic, something I had not yet seen in my research, or learned otherwise. These are the points he makes about the area's ethics:

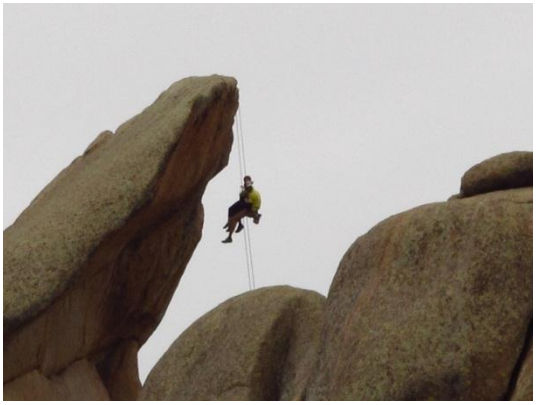
- Don't bolt when natural protection is available
- Don't bolt anywhere near a crack
- Be modest in the use of bolts, and make them camouflaged
- Don't leave slings on the cliffs
- Never chip holds

Kelman also differentiates between two important terms: retro-bolting and re-bolting: Retro-bolting is adding additional bolts to an already established climb, whereas re-bolting means a singular replacement with like items of protection (a new bolt replacing an old bolt).

On page 122, the author gives the description for a low-angle slab climb that reaches one of the more picturesque rappels I've seen (see below). Part of the description states how the route has no protection, and that the bolts that used to be there were chopped by a purist. The bolts complied with the above listed ethical considerations; why would someone have chopped them? I would imagine that a bolt-chopping fanatic would be driven by egotism and the disdain of seeing his climbing playground crawling with newbies. And after all, the bolts on that easy slab

reaching the rappel would really only be used by a newbie, so what better way to scare people off than to chop the only protection?

At the end of my last day in Vedauwoo, I met one of the area's early climbing pioneers, Bob Scarpelli. I met him in the parking lot, noticing that he had just returned from the Nautilus wall with tape gloves and no harness. Kelman's guidebook features old photos of Scarpelli scattered through the pages, making him still easy to recognize 30 years later. I asked him to share his knowledge about ethics with me, a topic he was pleased to discuss. I concluded that he definitely isn't against bolts, as he has put up some bolt-protected routes (on lead), but he thinks their use should be kept to an absolute minimum. Seems pretty standard to me, and he certainly isn't one of the fanatics out chopping bolts. It turns out that one of Mr. Scarpelli's bolted routes was chopped by someone thinking it had either been placed from the top down, or by someone lacking sound ethical judgment. Scarpelli returned to the route, re-threaded the bolts and established the line again. Word of mouth travels quickly in the climbing community, and everyone learned that the route was put up by Scarpelli himself. At the end of our conversation, he admitted that it was really odd that the route hasn't been chopped since, as if it gained public acceptance just because it was "his" route.



(Mike Sheridan and partner rappelling off of Vedauwoo's Parabolic Slab)

Another place I've been climbing recently is Clear Creek Canyon, just outside Golden. Clear Creek is the complete anti-thesis to the above listed ethics: There are bolts next to cracks, there are routes that have been extensively retro-bolted (*Mineral Museum* 5.9*),* and there are climbs with manufactured, drilled holds. Darren Mabe's guidebook for Clear Creek tries to give an even-handed appraisal of the climbs, as he adjusts the difficulty ratings to better reflect the grading elsewhere. A friend of mine jokingly mentioned that Clear Creek is where a 5.9 climber can go to climb 5.11.

The climbing at Clear Creek is a little different than at Eldorado, or San Rafael Swell. Clear Creek has bolts, and lots of bolts. The guidebook acknowledges this, and briefly addresses the ethics involved. There is no mention about the North American Standard Ethic, as in Kelman's guidebook for Vedauwoo. How standard is the Standard Ethic then?

A summary is given of Jefferson County's Open Space Climbing Management guidelines, where it states that fixed protection should be kept to a minimum. A minimum, like the retro-bolting of *Stone Cold Moderate,* or a minimum as in the 4 newly added bolts to *Mineral Museum?* To me, it seems out of control in Clear Creek. The rock is being defaced by bolts, where removable protection could be placed. All things said, I love climbing at Clear Creek because I always feel safe! There are amazing geological features that only climbers get to enjoy there. I don't mind the bolts, but maybe I should.

Clear Creek is popular though, I mean *really* popular. The buses full of retirees on their way to Blackhawk's casinos must think that the circus is visiting the canyon for practice, with hoards of people dangling from ropes above Tunnel 2 on any given day. The High Wire crag is one of the most popular in the Canyon, as it has a dense collection of well-bolted, moderate

routes. It makes a lot of sense to me, actually. Many of the record-breaking ascents that have happened in recent decades have been extensively documented and financed by corporate sponsors. Stories of risk and reward, heroism, and against-the-odds achievement have been published to the extent that there are people who are proud to call themselves *armchair mountaineers.* How many times can someone hear stories about climbing and mountaineering without giving in and actually trying it? The point is, there **are** more people participating, and those people all have to start somewhere. Many start at the High Wire crag; after all, there are a lot of easy and over-bolted routes there.

I visited High Wire the other day with the intent of leading *Stone Cold Moderate*, a route that is described in Mabe's guidebook as originally being protected by traditional gear. It's been retro-bolted over the years and now has close to ten bolts. I wanted to do it without clipping any bolts, just to see how it was and if there was justification for the bolts. I concluded that the route is actually better protected with traditional gear, and that if someone has a rack of cams and stoppers, they certainly wouldn't need to use the bolts.

But there are more participants now then there were twenty years ago. I'm one of them! I can't say with any good conscience that beginners shouldn't have somewhere to start and that they shouldn't have well-protected routes. Not all of us are Layton Kor, or Royal Robbins, or Jim Erickson, or Paul Ross. Those gentlemen are true visionaries, and they possess different capabilities than most of us. I am fairly certain that no matter what I do, I'll never reach the limits that they were pushing. I don't have the necessary grit, or wit, to develop routes in a ground-up, clean ethic like the previously mentioned. I clip bolts, and I place gear. I am one of the new school, a modern climber with all of the technology and access to databases loaded with route information. I take less chances, certainly, when compared to the men and women who

established the routes I climb now. I, like many, am perfectly content sticking with the trade routes, and don't mind clipping bolts if it means I'll be safe!

There is no foreseeable end to the controversy about bolting. Anyone can go to the hardware store, buy a hammer drill, and go on a bolting spree. I think the only certainty is that the ethics are going to be bent, as more climbers are heading to the walls every day. It is the responsibility of senior climbers to educate the beginners about the ethical issues surrounding climbing, that is, if they care about the future. Think what the beautiful Redgarden Wall of Eldorado Canyon would look like in thirty years if ethics and history were completely forgotten. By then, I might be tired of climbing, but could never get tired of looking at that wall during sunset. Imagine a couple hundred shiny stainless steel bolts refracting a setting sun's fleeting rays. Unfortunately, that is what could happen if organizations like the Action Committee for Eldorado don't step up to be the ethical authority for the area.

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