Foreword

The sport of mountain climbing was invented in the Alps over two hundred years ago, and more histories of alpinism have been written than anyone can remember. Chris Jones, however, has written the *first* complete history of mountaineering in North America. It is a remarkable saga of exploration, discovery and high adventure—the evolution of a new sport to fit the mountains of a new continent. It is equally remarkable for a book on mountaineering to be at once popular, authentic, serious and entertaining. You are about to read such a book.

For all its intrinsic excitement, mountaineering is a subtle and difficult subject. The wild inaccuracies and antic confusions of popular books and films are legendary among climbers. The climber's reality is so different (and so much more fascinating) than the false heroics that have been sold for mass consumption that we would be suspicious indeed if a non-climbing author were to attempt to write such a history. But Chris Jones is himself a climber of great accomplishment, and so has been able to approach his task with an insider's awareness of what climbing is really about.

An authentic history of American mountaineering must deal sensitively not only with an evolutionary past but with a revolutionary present. Like so many other microcosmic activities, mountaineering today is suffering from its own form of future shock, or accelerated change. Techniques, standards, values and codes of ethics of five years back are adamantly rejected by many modern mountaineers: clean climbing with nuts and artificial chockstones has replaced pitons and hammers, just as nylon ropes replaced hemp after World War II. But unlike earlier technical (and technological) advances, recent changes are largely the product of esthetic and environmental concerns, ushered in with intense debate among the climbing community. In a time like this, of changing values and strongly voiced opinions, it has become harder than ever to evaluate objectively the past and present of climbing on this continent.

Yet few are so well qualified as Chris Jones to undertake the task. For Chris is a foreigner, an expatriate English climber, and, as such, seems to have the detachment and perspective needed to

form a broad, objective view of the American climbing scene—even though today Chris is very much a part of that scene, in the front rank of those doing alpine-style ascents of major North (and South) American walls.

Chris found that, unlike the story of the Alps and alpinism, North American mountaineering had not yet received much interpretive, integrative study. True, records of most significant ascents did exist, and the periodical literature is substantial. But considerably more history has never been written down. Much of this survives today only in the memories of pioneer climbers, and in the twice-told tales that climbers still trade around campfires.

The job of source gathering for this book was monumental but a long convalescence from a ski accident gave Chris the free time to begin the research for his book. Later he drove back and forth across the country several times to interview many of those who made the climbing history of this century.

What emerges is a singularly fascinating story of the independent development of American climbing. For with some notable exceptions, American

climbers have often been isolated from their European counterparts, forcing them to “re-invent” techniques they were unaware of, and leading at times to the development of truly native climbing styles, which today have been adopted throughout the alpine world.

People climb mountains, and this history is ultimately a story of people, as well as their deeds. Chris has included the folklore, the mythology and the actual social history of American climbing and of many regional climbing areas. It’s all here—the campfire pranks, the ribald stories, the occasional tragedy, the petty jealousies and the struggle for meaning, as well as the great peaks, the great routes, the great adventures.

The American climber has always been a maverick, often an eccentric, at times virtually a social outcast. Perhaps it is the ultimate merit of Jones’ history that these characters don’t merely pass through the pages in chronological sequence. They are understood and known, we meet them and won’t soon forget them; they come alive.

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