Bonnie Prudden

Bonnie's Roof

AN INTRODUCTION to the Shawangunks should be made on a glittering October morning, after a northeaster has blown itself out of New England and the valley's orchards have been stripped of their autumnal brilliance, leaving a bright carpet on the carriage road and wet leaves plastered to the rocks like spent confetti. Such, after all, were the conditions of their first discovery, when Fritz Wiessner chanced upon them in the mid-1930s. Having grown up rock climbing in Bavaria, Germany, Fritz had been looking for a practice area close to New York City. From a distance, he'd seen the mysterious ridge of lofty crags, cracks and smooth faces 200 to 300 feet tall. They glowed in the red sunset, at the foot of the Catskills. The following weekend, Fritz headed out to explore them.

With him was Dr. Hans Kraus, a climbing friend who had newly arrived from Austria and who was Fritz's equal in mountaineering. Wandering through the area, the two young men felt as though they had come home. The same smells of moss, lichen and stone, the jagged faults and shadowed ravines, the feeling of bearable loneliness and expectant welcome characterized these stone ramparts, which today are called, somewhat endearingly, "the Gunks."

In 1936 my husband of three months, Dick Hirschland, and I were likewise looking for local climbing places. We had just returned to New York from a honeymoon in Switzerland with the satisfaction of having accomplished the Matterhorn. It was my very first climb on a real mountain, and as I now know, it was a kind of marriage test. Mountaineers, like Dick, risk a lot when they marry because, for them, climbing is a way of life. If only one partner likes it, the couple will be in for a lot of separation. Fortunately for us, I passed the test. As a professional dancer since age ten, as well as a gymnast, competitive swimmer, diver and rider, I had been eager and well prepared to climb.

Dick searched for information on climbing areas via the Dartmouth Outing Club and the Boston chapter of the Appalachian Mountain Club. His research led him to Fritz Wiessner. When Dick called him, Fritz immediately invited us to his great discovery.

Our first glimpse of the Gunks was tattered by howling winds and waves of rain. As the bus from New York City stopped to let us off in Gardiner, Fritz and Hans were waiting in a small, half-drowned car. They jumped out, grabbed our rucksacks and pushed us into the car's backseat. We set out for a small hotel used by the nine climbers then active in the Gunks.

A complete outsider, I was totally unaware that the dripping, ponchoed lumps in the front seat were two of the world's greatest climbers. Both displayed a European charm, but the only conversation I still remember came from Hans. "It will be fine tomorrow," he intoned over his shoulder. I didn't believe him just then, but I soon learned to trust him entirely. The next morning was indeed fine. Fritz took Dick and me to begin our first lessons in rope technique. At the end of the day, Fritz said to Hans, "Bonnie's another Maria Millar." Maria was the greatest female climber in the Gunks; those four words would change my life.

That winter, however, I smashed my pelvis in a skiing accident. This calamity was

[Above] **Bonnie Prudden in the Gunks, ca. 1945. Her longtime climbing partnership with Hans Kraus paid off in, among other things, the first ascent of Bonnie's Roof.** Bonnie Prudden collection

[Facing Page] **Julie Seyfert-Lillis on the crux moves of Pitch 1 of Bonnie's Roof. This section stymied Kraus on the first ascent in 1952, but Prudden managed to find a way up it.** Peter Hovling

followed by three months in traction and the doctor's predictions: "You'll always limp; no more skiing, climbing, dancing. And no children." Two children and seven years later, we returned to the Gunks and to many changes. Fritz had moved to Vermont, and the number of Gunks regulars had doubled. Fortunately, the number of leaders had also increased.

Hans greeted me upon our return with the words, "I'm tired of sticking to the 'easy' climbs. If you'll climb with me every weekend, I'll make you into a top climber." From that time on, I climbed exclusively with him.

Hans had an eccentric sense of humor, a deep chuckle and a way of deprecating difficulties that made climbing with him always fun. He was also a mystic. The first thing he taught me was that people do not conquer climbs or mountains. The rocks let them pass. He showed me how he would lean into the rock's base and silently ask, "May I climb today?" He would then feel for the answer. You can bet that I did the same thing. If the feeling was wrong, we went to another route.

We climbed everything we saw and kept looking for more challenges. It was Hans who first spotted the Roof. To me on that cloudy, fall afternoon in 1952, it looked like the bottom of a boat jutting out from the cliff. It didn't seem to have much in the way of standing support.

Hans and I soon started out for this "Roof-to-be." Although we had carabiners, we were still using hemp ropes, sneakers and pitons. Dick had invented a double piton, stronger than others, and a tiny, two-step rope ladder. Thus equipped, we set off to climb the Roof… maybe.

It's been fifty-three years since we so joyously made that climb, and the particulars escape me. As usual there were lots of hilarity, insults and complaints. I don't remember who took what pitch since by then we were swinging leads. But I do remember quite well reaching the Roof's nose. This airy feature was the reason for the climb. Getting to it had been one thing; getting over it would be something else.

The key to the struggle depended on whether we could place a piton in the blind spot just over the edge. Hans, the aerial master, wanted to lead, so he nailed me to the Roof's underbelly and started to knit himself out to the ceiling. He had two ropes, which I used alternately to pull in slack or hold his upper body as he leaned out to the end. The last piton, still under the roof, held one of his ropes and the tiny ladder. He got one foot onto the rung, but without a wall to press against, the other foot flew free. Naturally, in this position, he had some difficulty stabilizing himself so he could hunt for a crack or a "Thank God" hold. Nothing!

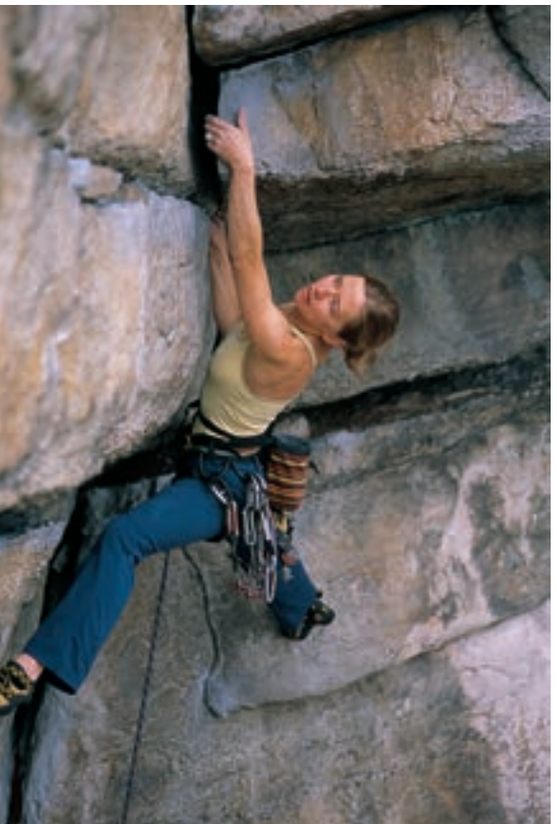
Hans was stubborn: he knew there had to be something, somewhere up there. His waist rope was cutting him, the foot in the rung was weakening, and he was frustrated. Hours seemed to pass. I knew no advice would be welcome. "There's nothing here," he finally yelled down to me. "I'm coming back." Barely able to contain myself, I yelled up, "Lemme try!"

"Don't wear yourself out," Hans said as we re-roped. "There's nothing there."

When I reached the ladder, I got one foot onto the rung and pulled myself up to the edge. I raised an arm, and though I couldn't see, my hand went right into a hole. I could hardly believe it! Without my saying anything, one of the ropes went slack. I had a Dick piton ready and shoved it into the hole, hammering it home with a ting… ting… ting on a rising scale that said, "Got it! EUREKA!"

I hauled my five-foot-three-inch, 120-pound self over the nose, clipped a carabiner into the piton and slid the rope in with a feeling of ridiculous relief. When Hans came up to me, he was grinning. "Humpf!" he said. "That hole wasn't there earlier." Then we practically sailed to the top.

Rock climbing is more than a sport. The best climbers know at all times what their partners are thinking, encountering, feeling, even when they are eighty or more feet away and all sound is muffled. Intuition and love can make the rope stretched between two people more communicative than a telephone, especially in times of uncertainty. Perhaps that is why so many climbing couples marry each other or form such close friendships. In moments of peril, the best climbers become one. ▮



Topo: Jeremy Collins