

TRAVELS NOW AND THEN

© Christopher Earls Brennen

EICHORN PINNACLE

Perhaps the most beautiful landscape in the world is found in the high country of the Sierra Nevada mountains in California. One of the jewels in this wonderland is Tuolumne Meadows in the heart of Yosemite National Park. John Muir happened upon this high sunlit meadow during his first summer in the Sierras and his lyrical descriptions of it began a chain of events that led to the nation and eventually the world's recognition of this and so many other special natural treasures. Tuolumne Meadows is surrounded by an array of majestic granite peaks; perhaps the most awesome of these peaks lies along the south rim of the Meadows. Muir called it Cathedral Peak and it moved him to some of his most spiritual words:

"...the wonderful mountain called Cathedral Peak is in sight. From every point of view it shows marked individuality. It is a majestic temple of one stone, hewn from living rock, and adorned with spires and pinnacles in regular cathedral style. The dwarf pines on the roof look like mosses. I hope some time to climb it to say my prayers and hear the stone sermons."

Later in his narrative he writes

"I never weary gazing at the wonderful Cathedral. It has more individual character than any other rock or mountain I ever saw, excepting perhaps the Yosemite South Dome."

As his first summer in Tuolumne Meadows was growing to a close, the urge to climb Cathedral Peak became irresistible and so on September 7, 1869, John Muir left his Tuolumne Meadows camp at daybreak determined to get to the top. Approaching the peak by the route we describe below, he got near the summit though whether he actually ascended the technically demanding last 15 feet of the summit block is uncertain. There is no doubt however that the experience affected him deeply for he wrote:

"No feature, however, of all the noble landscape as seen from here seems more wonderful than the Cathedral itself, a temple displaying Nature's best masonry and sermons in stones. How often have I gazed at it from the tops of hills and ridges, and through openings in the forests on my many short excursions, devoutly wondering, admiring, longing! This I may say is the first time I have been at church in California, led here at last, every door graciously opened for the poor lonely worshiper."

One day in August of the year 2000, Clancy Rowley, Don Caldwell and I drove over the Tioga Pass and down to Tuolumne Meadows with the intention of climbing this storied peak. We parked at the Cathedral Lakes trailhead on the south side of the Meadows and set off up the unmarked use-trail that climbs beside Budd Creek. Hiking about 1.7 miles due south we reached a grassy meadow with a spectacular view of Cathedral Peak looming above us to the west. Here we left the stream and began the uphill climb toward a scree slope that allows steep but ready access to a shoulder saddle on the north side of the mountain. Clambering over the huge boulders that line this saddle ridge at an elevation of *10700 feet*, an awesome view to the west of the peak opened up before us. In the distance lay range after range of Sierra Nevada peaks reaching to the horizon and beyond. Below us the beautiful Cathedral Lakes and their green, luxurious meadows. And over to our left, protruding starkly from the side of Cathedral was the spire, the vertical column of rock known as the Eichorn Pinnacle.

We had come this day to attempt the achievable objective of ascending the summit of Cathedral Peak, not to climb this awesome spire for we thought it beyond our climbing ability. From where we now stood on this northern saddle, we could see that our evaluation was correct. Yet it was hard to get the Eichorn Pinnacle out of our minds.

But on this day, having absorbed the view, we climbed down over massive boulders on the far side of the ridge saddle and traversed across the steep rock slabs to the saddle between the Peak and the Pinnacle where another great view, this one to the south, opened up before us. Upper Cathedral Lake lay below us and, off to the southwest, stood Half Dome and the other monuments of Yosemite National Park. The sheer south face of Cathedral Peak drops down vertically below this second saddle, a drop of about *300ft* before the ground flattens out. Some years later we rappelled down this face.



On climb to saddle
(Photo by Clancy Rowley)



Eichorn Pinnacle from summit

With a brief glance back at the Pinnacle, we then began the ascent to the summit of Cathedral Peak. The obvious route was just to the left of a sharp ridgeline and involved class 3 climbing over large boulders and rockslabs that had good friction and lots of handholds. As we approached the summit we veered left onto a series of broad ledges that lay below the summit. The summit block itself was the left-most of three towering pinnacles that loomed high overhead but was not visible until near the end of the ascent up the ridge. However, when we clambered up onto the left end of the topmost ledge, the summit block was readily identified. An easily-ascended slot just to the right of the summit block led to the last, and most difficult phase of the ascent. We paused here in the safety of the slot to prepare for this last short technical pitch to the top of the summit block. We buckled on our climbing harnesses and planned the *15ft* class 4 climb to the top. At the end of the slot there were several large boulders and we wrapped one of these to anchor Clancy who would lead the climb. Thus secured Clancy then stepped out onto a narrow slot-ledge with huge exposure beneath him. Using two horizontal cracks, one for hands and the other for feet, he shuffled his way laterally for about *15ft* to the relative security of a recess at the base of two vertical cracks leading directly up to the summit. These two cracks provided good holds for the class 4 climb to the top. Within a few minutes Clancy had wedged his way up these cracks and, out of our sight, was sitting on the flat rock platform, *4ft* by *6ft*, that is the summit of Cathedral Peak. Two solid bolts installed in this platform could be used as anchors so it was only a few minutes before Clancy had belayed both Don and I up to this airy perch. We filled all the available space on the top of the summit block.



Clancy on summit
(Photo by Don Caldwell)



Cathedral Peak from meadow

The *10911 foot* summit of Cathedral Peak (*37°50.87'N 119°24.35'W*) provided a truly breathtaking view in every direction. It took many minutes to absorb and savor the experience of sitting on top on this awesome mountain. Every way we looked the grandeur of the High Sierra landscape was laid out before us. One cannot help but to be humbled by the magnificence of creation.

But all too soon we had to descend. Using the summit platform bolts, we set up a simple *30ft* rappel down the northwest face to the broad ledge below the summit block. Simple, but it was still an awesome moment when I edged off the summit platform to begin the descent. It felt like stepping off the edge of the world. Once down we traversed the broad ledge below the summit block, and in the process decided on a different route for our descent. Rather than downclimbing the ridge to the saddle between the peak and the pinnacle we descended a short way to a ledge with a stout tree. From there we recognized that there was a series of modest ledges with small, stout trees (they look like bushes) and that several rappels straight down the northwest face or rock slab would take us to a point between the two saddles from which we could readily traverse over to the talus slope on the right. Three rappels totalling about *160ft* accomplished this descent and soon we had traversed over to the talus slope. From there we descended northwest and then west, down the steep, rocky slope heading for an intersection with the Cathedral Lakes Trail that was visible below us. From the bottom of the talus slope it was just a short distance through the forest to the Cathedral Lakes trail and the route home. However, before returning to the trailhead we made our way along to the shimmering Lower Cathedral Lake and paused on its shore to look back and admire our accomplishment. The water of the lake reflected the shining white rock of Cathedral Peak soaring above the lake, contrasting with dark green of the pine forest and the light green of the meadows surrounding the lake. And glittering here and there were the bright colors of the mountain flowers, sparkling in the California sun. After the rugged grandeur and excitement of the Peak, this was a very special moment indeed. It had been a wondrous day on John Muir's magnificent Peak and we savoured our conquest of it for many months thereafter.

In the years that followed, Eichorn Pinnacle was a frequent topic of among our group of rock climbers when the talk turned to possible future adventures. Vague plans for an attempt were often broached. We searched the literature and the internet for descriptions of the climbing route and tried to relate the grainy photographs in classics like R.J.Secor's "High Sierra Peaks, Passes and Trails" to our memories of the Pinnacle. We learnt of the need to traverse around the side of the Pinnacle to the ridge on its western side where the route to the summit could be accessed. Trouble was that this traverse or horizontal pitch involved some tricky moves and enormous, increasing exposure of the order of thousands of feet. This was the route that Glen Dawson and Jules Eichorn took in July 24, 1931, when they made the first ascent of the Pinnacle. The route is now rated at just 5.4 but the fright factor is much greater due to the nature of the first horizontal traverse and its huge exposure. R.J.Secor describes the route as follows: "*From the saddle between Eichorn Pinnacle and Cathedral Peak, climb down and to the right over cracks and ledges on the north side of the pinnacle. This leads to a chimney on the north side. Climb the chimney to a ledge just below the west side of the summit. A single 165-foot rope suffices for the rappel.*" He makes it seem easy but this is one scary adventure!



Cathedral Peak and Eichorn Pinnacle



Southern aspect of Cathedral Peak

Before we could return to Tuolumne Meadows, my friend and climbing partner, Clancy Rowley, left California to pursue his academic career at Princeton but there were other young adventurers with whom I teamed up and who caught the Eichorn Pinnacle fever. So it was that one day in September, 2004, Mark Duttweiler, Derek Jackson and I set off for Yosemite National Park with copies of all the descriptions of the Eichorn Pinnacle climb that we could get our hands on. As we rose with the sun over the Tioga Pass, we caught our first glimpse of Cathedral Peak and our excitement grew at the thought of that first horizontal traverse on the Eichorn Pinnacle. Soon we were hiking up the trail beside Budd Creek, warmed by the rising heat of a beautiful, high Sierra summer day. Climbing the scree slope we watched several teams of climbers on the Southeast Buttress, seemingly just a stone's throw away. Then, reaching the north ridge we caught our first glimpse of the Eichorn Pinnacle and swallowed hard. We tried to compare the written descriptions with what we now saw before us but it was not easy to be sure of the right climbing route. With some trepidation we traversed the rock slabs to the base of the pinnacle and began to investigate the routes around the north side of the pinnacle. I now realize that at first we probed too low, perhaps because the written descriptions we had heavily emphasized the need to start low. But it seemed clear that this simply led to steeper and less negotiable rock with dramatically increasing exposure. Derek was suffering from altitude sickness, the wind was rising and storm clouds were looming in the distance and so we began to think of abandoning our primary objective. As a final exploration, we tried a slightly higher route. Mark led to a ledge that seemed to me very much like the one of the written descriptions. It was a sloping ledge with a crack at the back next the wall. A piton with a runner had been installed in this crack about halfway along the ledge. But the ledge narrowed to nothing at the far end and there were just a few footholds there. Mark edged his way to that point and just around the corner, looking for the vertical chute that would lead up to the ridge above. But the exposure at this point is huge, the wind was blowing and there seemed to be some difficult moves that would be needed to climb the chute. Mark felt he could not install adequate protection at this point and so retreated. We then decided that we would have to come back another day. What we did not realize was that the route lay just a few feet below where Mark had stood and that it led to large rock horns that provided very reassuring protection for the next vertical section.

Back at the saddle between the Peak and the Pinnacle we felt we still had time to ascend the Peak and so Mark and I set off on that route up the ridge. Our ascent essentially repeated the climb I had completed several years before and we were soon sitting on the summit block admiring the view. In the intervening years someone had removed the bolts on the summit platform that we had previously used for the descent. So this time the anchor was a little more clumsy but it was still a spectacular feeling to rappel off the summit block into that huge landscape.

Once back at the saddle between the Peak and the Pinnacle we resolved to end the day on a positive note by rappelling down the *300 foot* south face of Cathedral Peak. From above it was clear that this would require a two-stage rappel. From a webbing wrap around one of the large boulders at the saddle (in the shadow of the Eichorn Pinnacle) we could rappel down about *60ft* to a large shelf with two small trees that appeared to provide a solid anchor for further descent. The subsequent rappel looked much higher and might or might not be descended in a *200 foot* rappel. But we could also see a number of other trees, lower down on small ledges that could serve as intermediate belay stations if needed. I rappelled down first to the upper ledge to check out the second rappel. It transpired that the tree there would provide a solid anchor and that a *180 foot* rappel would take us down to the bottom. Thus we all descended safely to the top of a scree slope and, after sliding down this, we hiked around the base of the Southeast Buttress to rejoin the trail back to Tuolumne Meadows. Though we had failed in this, our first attempt at the Eichorn Pinnacle, we had at least had an enjoyable climb to the summit of Cathedral Peak and a great rappel descent of the South Face. But we also resolved not to be defeated by the Pinnacle.

Another couple of years passed, during which my friend Bob Grubbs and I frequently climbed and hiked together. With similar interests and dispositions Bob and I became close friends and the talk of climbs naturally turned to the High Sierra and most particularly to the challenge of the Pinnacle. Bob's large research group in the chemistry department at Caltech had a tradition of spending a long weekend each summer in the High Sierra and some of his former students joined in the fun. In August 2006, the group met at one of the campgrounds in Yosemite and Bob and I decided that an attempt at the Pinnacle was clearly needed. One of those former students present at the camp was a young and able climber by the name of Bob Waymouth who was now at Stanford University. Bob and I agreed that Waymouth would make an excellent companion for our Eichorn outing and might even be able to lead us to the top. So early one day we drove to Tuolumne Meadows, parked at the Cathedral Lakes trailhead and hiked up beside Budd Creek. We were a little later than we would have liked but it was another spectacular High Sierra day and, with Waymouth along to lead, Bob and I were confident that we could conquer the Pinnacle in fairly short order. The scree slope was hot and we labored our way up it but arrived at the north saddle ready for our first view of the Pinnacle. It now seemed almost routine for me to traverse across to the saddle between the Peak and the Pinnacle and there don my climbing gear for yet another attempt at Eichorn's challenge.

As before we were convinced by the written reports to start low and, setting off in the lead, Waymouth initially made good horizontal progress across what appeared to me to be a sketchy and increasingly difficult horizontal route. Out of sight he found a place to anchor and

belay and so called for Grubbs to follow him. Using another rope, I gave Grubbs an additional belay from behind and this seemed clearly needed as he struggled to traverse this difficult rock wall to where Waymouth had anchored. But he made it and the two of them then called on me to follow and clean the route. This I started to do but without the belay from behind that had protected Grubbs from a nasty pendulum in the event of a fall. I had proceeded about *50 feet* before I began to feel excessively uncomfortable. The footholds were thin, the exposure was enormous and a pendulum fall began to be a strong possibility. For one of the few times in my climbing experience I realized that I was in real danger. I paused to try to get my equilibrium and to assess the situation. I think both Waymouth and Grubbs who were now within sight, recognized the criticality of the situation and desisted from their normal encouragement. And so it was that I turned back, seriously frightened and sure that Eichorn's Pinnacle had defeated me. Thus it was that we all returned to the saddle and paused to try to recover from our efforts.

Now able to reflect on what had happened we began to recognize that we had not taken the correct route. But there was nothing below that route that looked at all possible. So the standard route must be higher; I described Mark's exploration of several years before and Grubbs resolved to have another look at it even though the hours of daylight were now dwindling and we needed to get down before dusk. Deciding on action, he edged his way along the narrowing ledge but, like Mark, was discouraged by the exposure and the lack of an obvious way forward or upward. Though he then retreated we were now convinced that the route lay in this direction even though we still had to find the way to progress.

But it was time to get off the mountain and we had to conclude that we had been thwarted in our effort to climb the Pinnacle, myself for the second time. It only remained for me to set up the rappel of the South Face and to descend to the now well-travelled trail to Tuolumne Meadows.



Rappelling down the south face



Starting point for the technical climb

It was not until several years later that Bob Grubbs and Bob Waymouth and I were able to arrange yet another attempt on the Eichorn Pinnacle. Now that we were fairly certain of the correct starting point for the horizontal traverse we had confidence that we could finally succeed in reaching the summit. So it was that early on the morning of Saturday, Aug. 2, 2008, we again parked at the Cathedral Lakes Trailhead and approached Cathedral Peak along what was now a very familiar trail. It promised to be another spectacular High Sierra day and the sun was already blazing down as we trudged our way up the scree slope below the northern ridge saddle. Grubbs and I took our time, knowing that at our age, we needed to conserve our strength for the efforts ahead. We now knew that the easiest way up the scree slope was toward the south, just north of the steep rock slab known as the Southeast Buttress of Cathedral Peak. Already on this morning several groups of climbers were ascending this popular rock-climbing route. Watching them provided a good excuse to pause and get our breath. Nearing the saddle, as the boulders got huge, we veered to the right to get to the ridge top itself. As always we were taken aback by the spectacular view to the west that opened up as we breached the ridge top and humbled by our first sight of the dramatic Eichorn Pinnacle rising almost surreally above the High Sierra vista.

We almost held our breath as we traversed across the steep rock slabs to the saddle between the peak and the pinnacle. Climbing up some boulders to this second saddle we again welcomed the sight of the distant Half Dome and the other monuments of Yosemite that seemed to stand mute witness to our pny human endeavors.

Then it was time to prepare ourselves yet again for the technical challenge. Once helmeted and harnessed and having left our belongings at the saddle, we contoured downwards from the saddle along a sloping ledge that starts about *15ft* below the apex of the saddle and leads to a recess with a comfortable stance that is the starting point for the technical climb. Though other descriptions of the climb suggest two pitches (and some even suggest just one), we estimated that it might be best for us to use three short pitches. As we already knew only too well, the first and hardest on the nerves is almost horizontal. Bob Waymouth would lead. Using an anchor around a large horn beside the starting point. He climbed easily upwards to a tricky sloping ledge that has a fixed piton in the crack at the back of the ledge. Here he deployed a runner on the piton and, using fingerholds in the crack, eased his way down to the end of the narrowing ledge. Once there he reached down for the footholds below the level of the ledge. This is a nervy move but the footholds are large and solid; the major difficulty is the huge exposure at this point. He then stepped down again onto a short, small downward sloping ledge that led to a comfortable stance and a belay station in a small recess.



Almost at the top of Eichorn Pinnacle



On top of Eichorn Pinnacle

The rock horns just above this recess provide solid anchors for this belay station and there was room for all three of us as Grubbs and I in our turns completed this first pitch. Then it was time for the second, vertical pitch which has one slightly tricky move but was otherwise straightforward. There are several bolts that have been installed to protect that move. From the belay station we climbed above the rock horns and then up to the right to an increasingly easy chute that leads to a large ledge. The ledge has boulders that provide a good anchor for the next belay station. The last pitch proceeds up a large sloping crack that obviously leads to the summit. The easiest ascent route is along the sharp ridge to the left of the crack and this brought us out onto the spectacular summit of the Eichorn Pinnacle, first Bob Waymouth, then Bob Grubbs and finally myself. It was a truly magnificent feeling to emerge on the summit after all the years of attempts on the Pinnacle. I paused before the last step to drink in the elation and the photograph of that moment tells its own tale as I stand perched on the edge of an abyss. The three of us knew this was a very special moment - but especially Grubbs and I whose declining physical abilities might mean that this was the apex of our climbing achievements. If so I felt I could live with that for this was an almost indescribable place on a magnificent day.

It was now time for a photographic record of this special moment, time for what we called the "hero shot". Bob Waymouth had very kindly volunteered to take the "hero shot", a photograph from below of Grubbs and I standing on top of the Eichorn Pinnacle. The summit was equipped with several solid bolts so we set up the *60 foot* rappel down the north face to the point where we began the technical climb. Bob then rappelled down and took many "hero shots" of Grubbs and I from various points on the ridge between the Pinnacle and the Peak.

The euphoria was rampant as we pulled our rope down from the Pinnacle summit rap rings and sorted our belongings at the saddle. As we had done before we rappelled down the steep south face of Cathedral Peak to the short scree slope, loped down that and hiked around to the approach trail. It seemed like we floated down to the Cathedral Lakes trailhead, silently reveling in the triumph of our long-sought goal. As is often the case the difficulties and the failures made the final success all the sweeter. And, back at camp, Grubbs and I sat under the trees with a beer. It wasn't necessary to say anything. Indeed it seemed inappropriate to even try. We were two old men who knew this moment was very special and might not come again in our lifetimes.

*Last updated 8/15/08.
Christopher E. Brennen*