

Ice Climbing at Lee Vining Canyon

January 16 - 17, 1999

By: Steve Aho

We met at Nicely's in Lee Vining for breakfast at 7:00 am before heading up Lee Vining Canyon. Pat McKusky, Brad Jensen, Tracy Sulkin, Basia Gorecka, Jack Miller, and I were all who showed up the first day. Once again the crux was the approach, which involved hopping from stone to stone across a small boulder field; only the boulders all had two inches of fresh wet snow on top, making the treacherous traverse more slippery and slow! The weather was not too cold, but we were blasted with spindrift blowing down from the passes throughout the day.

There were already several climbers up when we arrived, but the short ice sections on the far right were vacant, so we moved right in. We set two top ropes and spent the day taking turns belaying and climbing. Most of the ice was thin which added to the challenge. Everyone got a couple good climbs in. It was Jack's, Basia's and Tracy's first time on ice! On the way back to camp (at the Best Western in Lee Vining) we ran into Jane Koski, who climbed with us at June Lake the next day.

The June Lake roadside ice was much thicker and softer than Lee Vining, which made for easy climbing. The day was warm and sunny. The ice was a little slushy, especially later in the afternoon. Again we set up two top ropes, this time the climbing was much easier, and the ice much thicker. And the approach ... well, we could have belayed off our cars' bumpers! A nice day of climbing, Jane even balanced her way up once using only her crampons and hands, no ice axes!

Monday was looking a little stormy so Pat, Brad and Tracy drove to Bishop for some bouldering at the Buttermilks. Jack and Basia went home Sunday. Leaving Jane and me debating whether or not to go out in the weather. We decided to go for it! The Lee Vining approach was much improved with several inches of new snow from the night before. It was snowing fairly heavily by the time we hiked up to the ice. I led up the right side of the middle flow one full pitch and Jane followed. At the top of the climb we were in the middle of blizzard conditions! At the car Jane's friend Will exclaimed we get credit for a climb in FULL conditions! (Jane spelled it F O O L!)

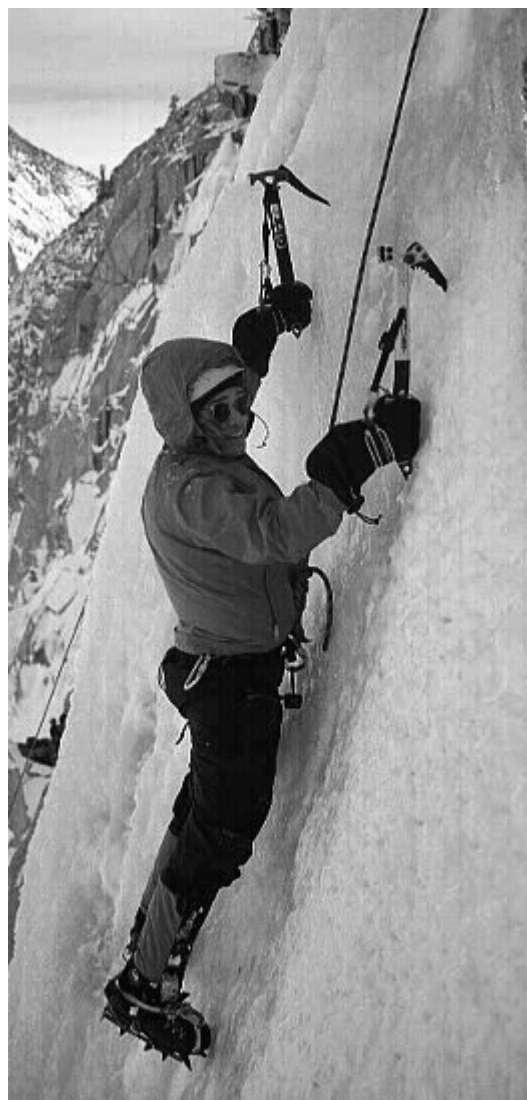
February 13 - 14, 1999

Again we met at Nicely's. This time we were Pat McKusky, Brad Jensen, Tracy Sulkin, Eileen Ricks, Ivan Schatz, Jack Miller and me. Nancy Pallister came by to see what we were up to on her way to visit the Owens River Gorge. The trail was packed snow, making it an easy hike up.

Once again we set two top ropes at the same place as in January. This time I led up to a tree to set up a climb that gave you the choice of a steep staircase like ramp or a 15 foot vertical to overhanging curtain. Meanwhile Brad worked out his first lead to the right of us. Then Pat tried his first lead on the same pitch. Later, while Ivan, Eileen and Tracy were climbing on the top rope, Pat, Brad, and Jack climbed a two pitch route! Before we went back to the motels to camp, everyone took a turn or two climbing the steep curtain. It was a little challenging!

Sunday, Jack left to investigate the beautiful Owens River Gorge. Pat, Brad, Tracy and Eileen drove over to check out June Lake. Basia Gorecka joined Ivan and me for a hike back up Lee Vining Canyon. Ivan helped me set a top rope at the same place as the day before. Then Ivan did a couple climbs before he had to leave to drive home. Basia and I took turns belaying each other the rest of the day. That night Basia and I met up with Nancy Pallister to see Kurt Wedberg's slide show of his recent climb of Ama Dablam.

Monday we had breakfast at the Whiskey Creek in Bishop (which was very good). We drove up to climb in the warm sun at the June Lake roadside ice. Pat and Brad practiced some more lead climbs. While Basia, Tracy, Eileen and I worked on improving our technique and balance by climbing 60 to 70 degree ice with only one or no ice tools. Both trips went smoothly without incidents or accidents! Everyone had fun and even learned a thing or two. We'll have to do this again next year!



Eileen Ricks at Lee vining on February 13th . Photograph by Steve Aho.