

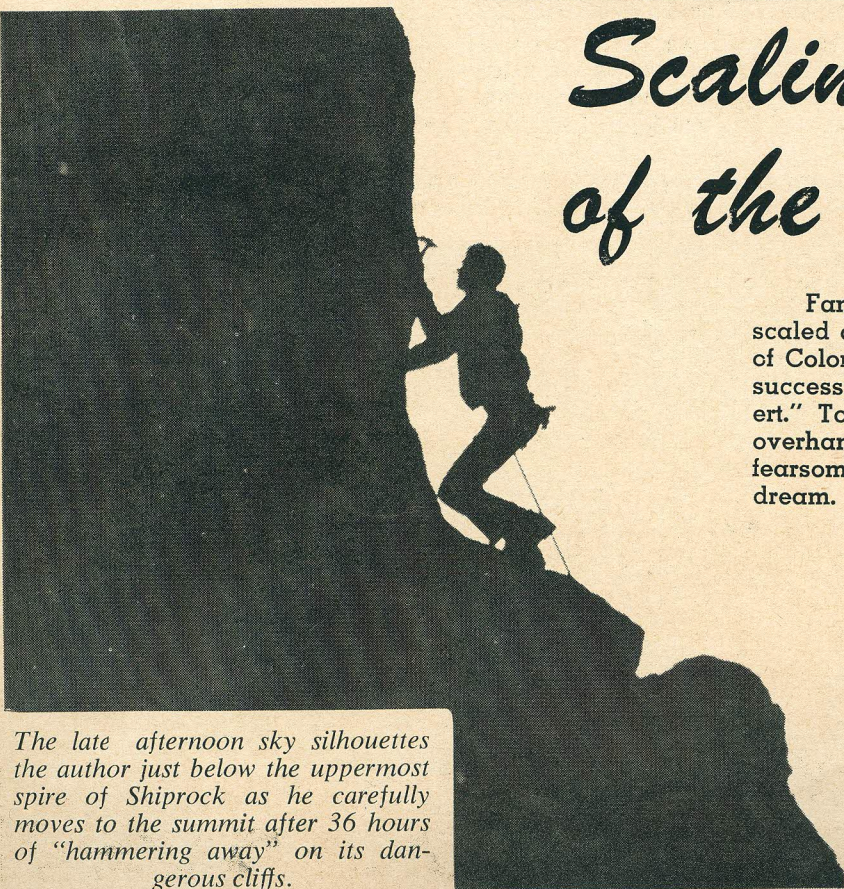


*Shiprock, core of an ancient volcano stands on the New Mexico desert—a challenge to all the fraternity of mountain climbers. Spencer Air Photo.*

## *Scaling the Ship of the Desert . . .*

Famous Shiprock of New Mexico had been scaled only seven times before these four students of Colorado A&M College made their second and successful attempt to master the "ship of the desert." To stand on its summit they battled its double overhang, the "Horn," friction traverses and its fearsome height for 36 hours, fulfilling a year-long dream.

By DOUGLAS E. KELLY  
Photos by Party Members



*The late afternoon sky silhouettes the author just below the uppermost spire of Shiprock as he carefully moves to the summit after 36 hours of "hammering away" on its dangerous cliffs.*

**C**OOL DESERT AIR freshened our cheeks and filled our lungs as we stood at the base of the imposing ship of the desert, the famous Shiprock of New Mexico.

The first fingers of a rosy dawn stretched from the eastern horizon into the hazel black sky above us as we started our ascent of one of the toughest, most challenging rock climbs in the country.





*Equipment used in the climb of Shiprock included 7/16 inch nylon climbing rope, 1/4 inch nylon climbing rope, Bramani soled climbing boots, piton hammer, assorted types of pitons (center), two types of karabiners (upper left center), and an expansion bolt assembly with an expansion bolt drill (upper right center). The group was equipped with seven ropes of over 100 feet each, eight expansion bolts, 50 pitons and 15 karabiners.*

Only seven parties of skilled climbers had conquered it. We were embarking on our second attempt. This time we felt conditions were so near perfect we would succeed.

It was May 15 and the weather was cool and cloudy—perfect for climbing. We had an array of equipment, Bramani soled shoes, hundreds of feet of rope, expansion bolts, pitons and more. It was an expensive supply of climbing paraphernalia that had been accumulated as our year-long dream of climbing Shiprock had grown.

The four members of our climbing party, all students of Colorado A&M College, were welded together by a common, driving ambition to scale Shiprock, from previous expeditions and months of climbing practice on mountains near school, from a previous defeat by Shiprock that crystallized our determination.

Most experienced mountain climber in our group was Dick Stenmark, member of the Colorado Mountain club and the exclusive "52 club," restricted to persons who have scaled all peaks over 14,000 feet in Colorado. Upon completion of school he expects to become a ranger with the U. S. National Park Service.

Then there was Erik Barnes, youngest member of our party and a student of veterinary medicine. He

has traveled extensively, around the world last summer, and hopes for a career in South America where there are also plenty of peaks to be climbed.

Jack Morehead was a member of the group, making the climb on a leg weakened by a fracture two years earlier in a skiing accident. Jack, too,

*Members of the successful climbing expedition were (left to right): Dick Stenmark, Jack Morehead, Erik Barnes and Douglas E. Kelly, the author.*



is a forestry student and hopes to serve with the U. S. National Park Service.

And I was the fourth member. I became interested in mountain climbing in Colorado, though I now live in California where I have just now made a start on the peaks of that region. A zoology student, I plan to do graduate work at Stanford University.

The Shiprock was not a mystery to us as we tackled it. We had studied all available literature on it, discussed it thoroughly with men who had conquered it and examined their photographs.

Shiprock, we learned, has an interesting history. Naturally enough, much of the rock's early story comes as legends from Navajo Indians of that region. They call it *tae-bidahi*, meaning the "winged rock."

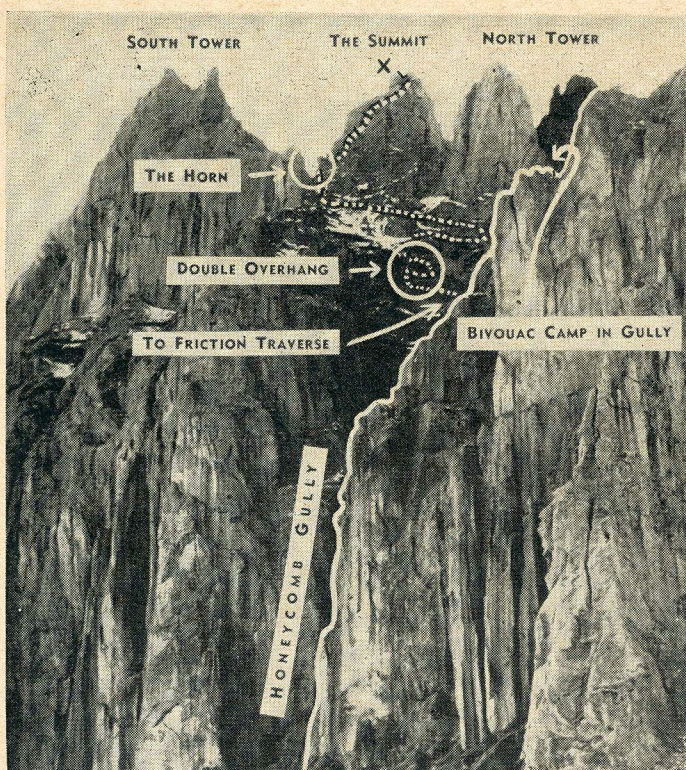
According to one legend the rock was a great ship that carried Navajo forefathers from the north—hence the name Shiprock. Tales that Indians seeking refuge from war climbed the rock, I can testify, are grossly exaggerated.

Actually Shiprock is the plug of a volcano. Outer parts of the ancient cone have eroded away, leaving the beautiful 1,700-foot core of igneous rock towers.

Extending out from its base are several long dikes, formed by the intrusion of molten rock into cracks around the formerly active cone.

Hardened and eroded, they remain as long rock-like spokes from the hub of a wheel. Two are especially large, extending almost directly south and west. From certain viewpoints these





*Showing the more difficult upper reaches of the route to the top of Shiprock. Actually, much of the route to the top is invisible from any one direction.*



*The author, Douglas E. Kelly, leads, working slowly around a traverse on the first day of climbing. He is on belay on the last pitch to the top of Basalt Bowl.*

two are similar to a wake behind a boat, giving the rock a resemblance to a stately-masted ship at sea.

Early climbers in the 1920s and '30s attempted ascending Shiprock by a long gully or couloir on the southeast side. It was not until 1939 that five capable rock climbers from California discovered a way around the north tower, which, it had been believed would prevent ascension from that side. After more than a week of exploring and climbing, the party reached the summit.

The rock was not climbed again until 1952 when a group from Colorado University reached the summit. Then five more parties made the climb. Now it was our turn.

Our first attempt, on Thanksgiving, the fall before, was frustrated by cold weather that pushed the mercury down to 29 degrees. The numbing cold held that trip to a scouting expedition.

We were awed by Shiprock's fearsome height, beautiful combination of colors, delicately eroded spires and thrilled by the climbing problem it posed. There was no doubt, we would be back.

The winter passed rapidly and finally we were on our way up Shiprock again.

With Erik in the lead, and the ropes out now, we moved into the bowl reaching the point where we had turned around in our first attempt. A large

gully extended upward on our left. We worked our way up and into it, climbing slowly and easily over the steep rock with our 35-pound loads. Emerging from the gully, we found ourselves at the bottom of a vertical rock amphitheater—the upper bowl. Several hundred feet above was the notch marking our route at the top of the bowl.

Shiprock had surprised us at the outset. As we ascended, we knew we had underestimated the difficulty of the bowl. Jack and Dick attacked the first section, and as they climbed they found it necessary to hammer occasional pitons into cracks as safety belays for their nylon rope.

This was tough climbing—and only the beginning. About half way up, Erik and I took over the lead. The rucksacks took a terrific beating on the rocks as we hauled them up after each pitch of climbing.

Going up nearly vertically, loose rock made movement tedious. Now and then a hunk would tumble down, careening for what seemed hours before disappearing with a final crash below. The top of the bowl wasn't reached until noon. Meanwhile, the sky had clouded up. While three of us hauled up the packs, Erik fixed one end of a 120-foot rope to a piton. Then he tossed the rope down the gully we found leading off on our left to the base of the north tower. Using a rappel, he came to rest on a large chockstone wedged halfway down the long

couloir. There he waited for the packs to be lowered and for us to come down.

Though we didn't know it at the time, this spot was to be our bivouac site for the night.

Though the weather was growing forbidding, we continued to the base of the north tower, hoping to gain more distance on our first day.

Lightning flashed to the desert floor below and a light rain started. Our progress came to a temporary standstill.

A hazardous spot in an electrical storm, we took off all metal equipment and left it some distance away to avoid attracting a bolt of lightning.

The rain dampened the rock and cost us precious time. Finally the wind dried out the slippery breccia and Erik prepared to lead around the base of the north tower on a steep wicked-looking friction traverse.

Without a crack in which to drive a piton, he drilled a small hole in the rock and inserted an expansion bolt. He attached a steel snap ring called a karabiner, through which ran the rope between him and Dick. Dick braced himself, ready to catch Erik in case of a fall. Erik crept out. Below his exposed position the honeycomb gully dropped away for hundreds of feet. Slowly he worked across and then up to a point where another piton was pounded in.

Each step took intricate balance.



We watched tensely as he negotiated the pitch without incident, settled himself on a shelf, and waited to belay the rope as Dick went across. A beautiful job of leading!

After Dick came my turn, and as I started, I felt a buzzing in my ears, indicating the presence of a static electrical charge and the possibility of a lightning strike. I hurried to get across, but before I made it, a couple of small electrical charges danced down the rock next to Jack. It was fair warning of another shower.

"Let's call it quits for today," Jack called over to us as we huddled together on what we had affectionately dubbed "Misery Ledge."

"Where can we bivouac? There's certainly no place here."

"Guess we'll have to go back to the chockstone," was the final answer.

Reluctantly, we began our retreat back across the pitch and up the gully. As Erik returned, he left a fixed rope

across the difficult pitch to aid us the next day.

Then came a fascinating night. Camped on a small platform miles away from anything civilized, we opened our pack and unloaded a hearty dinner in cans and plastic sacks. Thrilled with our first day's climb, we laughed and joked as we scraped out a level place for all four of us to sleep. Jack absorbed a round of good-natured ribbing for the fine beef stew he was preparing. Ever-cautious Erik drove a piton in above his sleeping spot to which to tie himself during the night. We thoroughly enjoyed our little home and stuffed ourselves like gluttons before rolling into our sleeping bags.

"Goodnight you guys. Don't roll off," was Erik's last somber remark.

This was adventure for me. This weird surrounding was a place of inspiration and pure enjoyment. Half of our climb was below us, a lot of

hard work was still above us and within each of us was the drive to go on.

Soon the sky was bright again, the primus stove was humming and breakfast was served.

To save time on our second day we decided to take only one pack and one quart of water. Soon we were back down the gully with Erik in the lead followed by Jack, Dick, carrying the light pack, and then myself. Our fixed rope hastened our movement as we turned the corner out to the open face marking the friction traverse.

With amazing speed, we were safely across the pitch that had given us so much trouble the day before, and were resting on Misery Ledge.

We moved with maximum speed, but with utmost safety, for the time was short and the hardest, most hazardous part of the climb was still ahead.

Dick led the way quickly over two short ledges and up a small overhang. Then, suddenly, our movement was stopped completely. The four of us stood on a wide platform staring up at what is probably the most difficult 40 feet on Shiprock. Over our heads was a vertical wall guarded by two sharp overhangs—one about half-way up, the other just below the top. The rock seemed nearly faultless and smooth.

"So this is the double overhang," I said, "but it doesn't look quite as bad as I expected."

A thin crack pierced its flank, running diagonally to the left, reaching the top of the lower overhang. Twenty feet to the right, a similar seam rose vertically to mount the upper overhang.

Out came our ropes and pitons, hammers and expansion bolts. From this point, our climbing technique was to be much different from that we would ordinarily use. We would have to depend upon our ropes and pitons for support, not just for the safety they offered. We were about to begin tension climbing.

Taking a rather hasty evaluation of the first overhang, I decided to give it a try. Dick and Erik prepared to belay me while Jack stood below the lower crack to give me a boost. Around my waist was an array of rope and metal. I tied into two ropes—one to Dick, the other to Erik. Reaching up, I pounded in the first piton, tested it and attached a rope and karabiner.

"Ready, Jack. Shove!"

Up I went. Dick pulled hard on the rope to hold me in position at the first piton while I strained to drive in another a little higher and loop Erik's rope through it. In this manner, I worked up to the brink of the over-

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

**BELAY:** *verb*, to safeguard a fellow climber from a fall on a rope.  
*noun*, a solid position from which to effect a safeguard.

**BRAMANI:** *adjective*, a European type of hard rubber cleated sole for climbing boots, used exclusively on our climb.

**BRECCIA:** *noun*, a loose, coarse, granular type of igneous rock, composing the outer layer of the rock on Shiprock.

**CHIMNEY:** *noun*, a crack in the rock large enough to permit the climber to insert part or all of his body and effect an ascent using pressure on the walls of the crack.

**COULOIR:** *noun*, a definite gully or furrow, usually slanting upward on the side of a rock or a mountain.

**EXPANSION BOLT:** *noun*, a steel pin used much like a piton except that it is inserted into the rock itself by means of a hole driven into the rock by a special drill.

**FRICTION:** *adjective*, pertaining to a rock surface slanted at an angle and smooth so that the only support it offers is gained by the weight of the body on surface of the feet of person negotiating it.

**KARABINER:** *noun*, a large oblong snap-ring, operating much like a safety pin, and used as a link between pitons and ropes as well as many other uses.

**PITCH:** *noun*, a section, usually short, over which the route runs, usually with distinct difficulty.

**PITON:** *noun*, a spike, usually flattened, which is driven with a special hammer into a thick crack in rock and used as a support point for the rope attached to it with a karabiner snapped into the outer ringed head of the piton. Once driven, a piton may be tested either by pull or by the sound it gives when tapped with a hammer.

**PRUSSICK:** *verb*, to utilize a fixed rope as an elevator by means of special knots which permit slippage in an upward direction only.

**RAPPEL:** *verb*, to utilize a fixed rope as a means of descent, usually accomplished by sliding down the rope and applying body friction to slow the descent.

**REGISTER:** *noun*, a piece of paper left on the summits of mountains and other climbs for the purpose of recording names of climbers successfully reaching the top. Registers are usually encased by a metal container and donated by climbing clubs.

**TENSION:** *adjective*, pertaining to climbing in which the climber uses his rope as a definite aid or support rather than only for safety. This is usually done with the belay of another climber.

**TRAVERSE:** *verb*, to move in a horizontal direction across a face of rock or across a whole mountainside.

*noun*, an exposed portion of a climb requiring a horizontal movement by the climbers.





*Erik Barnes and Jack Morehead leading up a steep couloir at the base of the black bowl near the start of the climb.*



*Erik Barnes descending by means of a rappel.*



*The author snapping a karabiner into a piton at the base of the Double Overhang. He has a supporting rope from below.*

hang. My legs were tiring under the strain and I felt like I was being cut in two. I boosted myself up and reached one hand over. It touched a piton driven by a previous party. Squirming into a better position, I tested it with my hammer. I thought it might hold.

Quickly one rope was fixed and I pulled hard on it. A shower of small stones danced down into the honeycomb gully far below as the piton pulled loose and flew into the air. Dick's rope held me tightly as I looked for a spot for another piton. I strained, groped and caught my breath for a

minute — then groped some more. There was no place to be found. An expansion bolt was the only alternative. My star drill bit into the rock as I started a hole at the critical point, but my legs were rubbery and shaking badly. I decided to go down.

At the bottom I transferred my equipment to Erik and rested while Jack and Dick belayed him up. Erik finished boring the hole, and secured the expansion bolt. Then he descended to give Jack a try. This was success. Fighting for balance, Jack used the expansion bolt and pulled himself over the overhang to stand on its faint,

slanting upper surface. He quickly tied himself in and I worked my way up to him using the same technique, this time with Jack belaying me from his position. We met and untangled our ropes. Now for the upper overhang.

After a brief rest, I fixed my ropes and donned the mass of jangling pitons and karabiners. Well belayed from below, I moved slowly along the scanty foot-hold to the right and then stretched out every inch I could to reach the vertical crack where a piton had been driven. I tested it at arm's length with my hammer. Sounded

*Belayed from behind through an expansion bolt and karabiner, Erik Barnes leads the tricky friction traverse. Note the balance of his body in a vertical position to afford maximum friction for his feet.*

*Looking straight up at the author working on double ropes to surmount the lower lip of the Double Overhang. Pitons have been driven in the cracks and the climber has two supporting ropes from belayers below.*







*Dick Stenmark corrects an out-dated sign along the highway near Shiprock.*

okay. Just a couple more inches—I stretched hard. My rope and karabiner clanked into the piton and I was ready to assault the crack. Working from piton to piton, grunting and puffing, I scratched my way up to the brink of the overhang. There was an awful moment of unequilibrium, and then, struggling to maintain balance and pulling up slack in the ropes, I moved on over.

"Congratulations, Doug," Dick shouted a bit prematurely. I still had to go up a short friction pitch to reach a safe place to rest. At the top was a small, level cave. My legs felt like a couple of limp rags as I flopped down and started disentangling my ropes.

For a moment I caught the feeling of great joy in having overcome something held in store for me the past year. Then it was gone. There was work to do.

I firmly fixed a rope at the top and threw it down. On this rope the rest of the fellows ascended using a prussick while I belayed them from above on another rope around my waist. I had carefully tied myself into my position so I could not be pulled off.

Soon we were all standing together by the cave coiling our ropes and reading notes left in the cave by previous parties.

The next few hundred feet were merely a steep hike up the relatively shallow south honeycomb gully. We had now moved completely around the north tower and were standing a few scant, inaccessible feet from the point where we emerged from the basalt bowl the day before.

Two chimneys now confronted us. Erik had already started up one and was making rapid progress. The rest of us squirmed up behind. As I reached the top I could see the walls on either side of me drop to the desert 1500 feet below.

The shadows on the great floor produced a feeling of solitude. We were getting close now.

Directly over our heads was the next great obstacle, the last hard pitch before the summit. Jutting out horizontally from the rock wall above was a huge knob which other climbers had called the "Horn." It resembled a giant thorn on a rosebush, presenting an overhanging climb of about 40 feet to its upper surface.

Dick was light-hearted as he discussed a plan to get over it. "It's your baby," Erik told him.

After one sip of our precious water we took our positions. Erik and I were to belay, as Dick climbed as far up towards the horn as possible then threw two ropes over it, one he could climb and the other for belaying purposes.

Dick set himself at the notch, Erik and I were ready to belay him.

"On belay?"

"Climb!"

Up he went, his Bramani-soled boots clawing for footing. Erik pulled tight. Inch by inch, piton after piton, Dick worked up. Fine rocks sprayed down on us. Then about 20 feet over our heads, he stopped.

He posed himself and hurled the rope. It fell short. The second time his aim was better. Soon both ropes were tied and Dick was up and over.

We went through a familiar process as Dick dropped a rope down to us and we prussicked up to meet him. Half way up I glanced down between my legs and caught my breath as I saw the desert far below.

We quickly traversed a small friction pitch and mastered two small overhangs and there above were two small chimneys, all that was left between us and the summit.

We could feel the thrill as we neared victory over Shiprock. Everything was below us except the chimneys we were working through. Only one of them necessitated a rope and upon emerging from it, I heard a shout from above. Erik was up! Shiprock had been climbed for the eighth time.

A narrow path led out on a short exposed pitch. Above it Jack and Erik were balanced on a sharp point of rock—Shiprock's crow's nest.

Dick and I deposited a Colorado Mountain Club register, encased in an old tennis ball, on a ledge just below the summit.

We shook hands as we had many times before on summits. But this time it was very special. Soon it was our turn to straddle the summit and the wind blew wildly as we clamped ourselves firmly to our precarious position. After 36 hours of hammering away at the old rock we were finally on top. We could go no farther.

It was there I knew Shiprock had won my heart. It was no longer a cold, ruthless piece of stone to be conquered but a personality to be admired and respected.

The sun was dropping into the west and we were hungry and thirsty so we wasted little time in starting down.

Tricky pitches, which required hours to surmount, disappeared into memories as we slid over them. The Horn, the south honeycomb gully, the double overhang, the north tower and finally, in the darkness, the friction traverse, all vanished one by one from our view as we left our mountain.

We found our little platform and enjoyed plenty of water. Then we settled back to relax and enjoy a good dinner of beef stew, carrots, cheese and oranges.

As we sat around our primus stove laughing and joking we noticed we had visitors. Tiny brown and white deer mice were scampering here and there and, not the least bashful, came right up to our laps to take bits of food. They ran off and made fools of us as they raced straight up the rock walls. Now and then they stopped for an inquisitive look back.

Drowsiness soon overtook us and we rolled into our sleeping bags to drop quickly to sleep. The only disturbance all night long came when Jack chased a surprised deer mouse out of his boot.

Next morning my eyes opened to a glorious sight. Above me, and all around, the rock was bathed in mellow red-orange light of sunrise. Shiprock seemed molten. Perhaps our efforts of the previous day were being rewarded by this fiery glow. As it faded so did my drowsiness and, with the others, I began assembling our gear. I'll not forget that sight soon.

Breakfast was hasty, but complete. Then, one by one the little camping place lost its tenants and equipment as we began the last half of the descent.

Up we went, out of the gully, then down again in a last long drop to the desert over the difficult pitches of the bowl. Time after time we had to rappel and then haul our rucksacks down. Slowly the desert moved up to meet us. Finally, just after noon, we dropped off the last overhang, the last piece of rock and set foot once again on solid earth.