



John Bouchard sorted for ice. "We were doing something on Cannon, and we were doing something like 110 miles an hour," says climbing partner Rick Wilcox, "when the police started chasing us. So, we zipped up the wilderness trail over by Lincoln Woods and hid for a while."

MARK TWIGHT



The Wild Ones

North Conway is a typical New Hampshire town tucked among rolling hardwood hills and set at the foot of imposing granite slabs, but 30 years ago it was the stage on which a small band of climbers led the way in boldness and vision.

BY MICHAEL WEJCHERT

In May, 1989, a month and-a half after the oil tanker the *Exxon Valdez* ran into a reef off Alaska's Prince William Sound and spilled 11 million gallons of crude into the sea, Charlie Townsend and Dave Auble lay bivouacked on Mount Russell's north ridge, battling a smaller disaster of their own making. The pair had just completed the first ascent of Russell's east face.

No strangers to the dread niche of climbing snow in Alaska, Townsend and Auble were terrified by the fluted, corniced ridgelines on Russell. They'd attempted the mountain twice before, but had been too afraid to commit to the upper face without a decent prospect for retreat. Continuing upward into poorly protected terrain felt like a trap. But by 1989, Townsend, a rail-thin, bookish guide for Eastern Mountain Sports in North Conway, New Hampshire, thought he'd brainstormed the perfect solution.

"We found that if we trimmed down the food and fuel and left the tent behind, a small paraglider would just fit into each pack," Townsend would rationalize in the 1990 *American Alpine Journal*. "The paragliders opened up new options, but we still told our pilot to look for us at the foot of the northeast

ridge, in case we couldn't—or wouldn't—jump."

The sport of paragliding was relatively new, and flying what were then primitive wings was finicky under the most ideal circumstances. To save weight, Townsend and Auble had trimmed the stock harnesses and other "unnecessary" impedimenta from their wings. Even for the era, the plan was insane. Paragliders of the era were unpredictable, dangerous tools. Predicting wind patterns in the tumultuous Alaska Range was little more than optimistic garage science.

By the time the pair reached the summit, a day late and already low on supplies, the swirling wind convinced them to retreat down the ridge on foot instead of setting up their wings and jumping the 5,000 feet back to base camp. After a crevasse fall and sketchy rappel in the dwindling light, Townsend and Auble curled into their bivouac sacks for what they assumed would be a single night, hoping to work their way down in the morning.

Instead, they awoke to a gale. The storm pummeled their bivy sacks. For a full day, the wind hammered so fiercely that neither man could communicate, though they screamed

a few inches apart from each other. By their fifth day of sitting (and their tenth on the climb) the pair realized that continuing on the ridge would be too exhausting in their depleted state. A Hail Mary paraglider launch was their only option.

Townsend and Auble plodded down to a spot on the ridge where they could set up the wings.

"Fatigue barely let me lift my feet. Dave was burdened with the dual task of plowing a waist-deep trench and then all but dragging me through it," says Townsend.

The slow gnaw of thirst and exposure at 10,000 feet would probably kill them. The paragliders would probably kill them, too, just faster. Resolved, Townsend and Auble pulled the wings from their rucksacks and got ready to launch into the chilly Alaskan sky.

If you turn onto West Side Road from downtown North Conway, New Hampshire, the twin cliffs of Whitehorse and Cathedral Ledge rise above a pick-your-own strawberry field and a few well-preserved farmhouses. This is New England, after all. The Saco River, clogged in the summertime with beer-



Bouchard, in the driver's seat, at the helm of America's first sponsored climbing team, Jimmy Surette, Scott Franklin, Mark Twight and Randy Rackliff in 1987.

swilling tourists from Boston, meanders through fertile farmland and thickly wooded forests. Harley Davidsons shriek past during New Hampshire's annual bike week. Helmets are not mandatory in the "Live Free or Die" state, and reckless riders relish the opportunity to disturb the peace and expose local ER doctors to brain injuries.

Yankees are trigger-happy with rationalizations about their climbing: Mount Washington is the most rugged mountain in the United States. The climbing rivals that of Colorado. Alpine terrain exists. None of this is true. Locals live here because their families do, or because it's close to a job, or, like me, they grew up in New England and couldn't imagine life without white clapboard houses, suffocating vegetation, real maple syrup, and biblical proportions of black flies.

In 2017, when Charlie gave his Mount Russell slideshow at a local brewpub, I'd only heard snippets of the story. Though I'd taken an AMGA exam from him, the closest the guy came to admitting he'd even heard of Alaska was a nod to my own most recent failure. ("Deborah," went the quip: "That thing looks real nice—from a distance.") Most stragglers in the audience seemed more excited about downing craft pints than listening to the bespectacled 50-something guy with the grainy slides. I understood. Charlie would look more at home at a curling match (he plays weekly) than on some Alaskan horror show. But by the time images of flying off Whitehorse Ledge and Crawford Notch flashed across the projector—Footfangs, gaiters, and all—the whole room was riveted. Who the hell were these guys? And how could

a podunk town like North Conway—bad weather, teeny cliffs, long winters—foster such heroic madness?

For a split second there, 30 years ago, New Hampshire was a petri dish for American climbing. Climbers didn't just push standards, they got awards for soloing, for pioneering new paragliding launches, for racing motorcycles. Hugh Herr, the double-amputee now lauded for his prosthetics development at MIT, climbed X-rated 5.12

For a split second there, 30 years ago, New Hampshire was a petri-dish for American climbing.

with artificial limbs. Somehow, sometime in the mid-1980s, this backwater of a town presented its own wild vision of the future of American climbing, even spawning our first brand-sponsored climbing.

John Bouchard is best known as the 19-year-old kid who, in 1971, soloed the first ascent of the ice route the *Black Dike* (WI 4-5 M3). If you've read *anything* about climbing in New Hampshire you know the rest. To recap: In 1971—when ice axes shared more DNA with framing hammers than Nomics—Yvon Chouinard hailed the *Dike* as the "last great problem" on the East Coast. All the top-dog climbers were drooling to get on the thing. When Bouchard's partner bailed, he headed

up anyway. Things got dicey. Upon reaching the second pitch, Bouchard rope-soloed until his rope became stuck and he was forced, in desperation, to cut it, committing fully to the unknown. He dropped a mitten and broke the pick of one of his axes, scratching to the top as darkness fell, most likely feverish with terror.

When locals didn't believe his tale, he made the second ascent with John Bragg, Rick Wilcox and Henry Barber the following year. All three of Bouchard's partners would forge new terrain in the ice revolution of the 1970s. Bragg's and Barber's abilities on both ice and rock soon reverberated in Norway, in Patagonia. Bragg's and Wilcox's ascent of *Repentance*—the WI 5 that spits in a plumb-line down Cathedral Ledge—was perhaps the most elegant line of the decade. Still, Bouchard's solo was the granite state's version of pulling a sword out of a stone. To be fair, busy news cycles here still involve families of black bears and stuck tractors. It's a small pond.

On the one hand, it's tempting to rush to judgement when a college kid does something reckless and barely gets away with it. On the other hand, Bouchard's deed *was* impressive. When I first climbed the route a decade ago, also alone, too young to know better, and hemmed in by darkness, the thought of doing so with Chouinard's old hardware spooked me as much as the yawning, yellow void I'd tumble down if I fell. With modern gear, the climb is easy—the crux is getting to the base before half of Boston does—and most of the *Black Dike's* allure lies not in the climbing itself but in reimagining a young kid venturing into the unknown at a time when Nixon was still in office and winter climbing was being made up as everyone went along. No one remembers Sam Scoville and Julian Whittlesey, the two college kids who plucked another New England plum, *Pinnacle Gully* (WI 3), in 1930, because they never climbed again. Bouchard's ascent became legendary because of what came next.

"To make a breakthrough," Bouchard wrote in an insert for Mark Twight's *Extreme Alpinism*, "you have to do something different."

Bouchard routinely summered in Chamonix, France, where he fell in with a group of international alpinists then at the cutting edge of the sport: Voytek Kurtyka, Alex McIntyre, the Burgess brothers, Al and Adrian. While many of Bouchard's climbing partners were New Englanders—Mark Richey, Steve Arsenaault and Rick Wilcox, to name a few—he trended toward the Euros' lightweight style.

By all accounts, Bouchard was singular



Dave Auble high on Mount Russell. He and Charlie Townsend would summit, only to be trapped in a storm on the descent. By the fifth day at their bivy, they were too weak to descend. Middle: Joe Lentini, former manager of Eastern Mountain Sports and early proponent of parasailing, on *Ethereal Crack* (5.10d), South Buttress of Whitehorse, in 1995. Right: Bouchard in state-of-the-art gear for 1985, on Cannon Cliff.



and obsessive. He garnered a reputation for intensity that bordered on manic. Personalities like this excel at climbing until they usually die or quit.

"John was very gruff with people sometimes," Rick Wilcox says from his office in North Conway's International Mountain Equipment, where he's held court since the early 1980s. "He was very competitive."

In 1974, Bouchard and Wilcox climbed a new ice route, *Icarus* (5.8 A4), on Cannon Cliff's big-wall section. On their second day, Bouchard was leading near the top when an aid placement blew out and he fell. Undaunted, he roped up then fell again, this time cracking his ankle. Wilcox finished the lead and dragged his friend hundreds of feet back down through the thick puckerbrush to the parking lot. To this day, the climb's only been freed once in the winter, by Kevin Mahoney and Elliot Gaddy, and at the grade of M7, NEI 5.

In 1977, the French soloist Nicolas Jaeger headed to Peru with a French team and invited the young Bouchard, then considered one of the finest alpinists in the United States.

On the trip, Bouchard met a young Frenchwoman, Marie "Titoune" Meunier, a Chamoniarde of the highest alpine pedigree (as a child she played with Gaston Rebuffat's kid) and a superb climber herself.

On a trip to Chamonix, Bouchard "snatched these coveted first ascents away

from the heaviest hitters in the Alps, and then stole the heart of the most desirable girl in town," Mark Twight told Jon Krakauer, then an *Outside* correspondent.

By all accounts, Bouchard was singular and obsessive. He garnered a reputation for intensity that bordered on manic. Personalities like this excel at climbing until they usually die or quit.

In Peru, Bouchard and Meunier made the first ascent of the South Face Direct of Chaclaraju and noticed how clunky and outmoded much of their equipment was.

"On that expedition," Titoune later wrote in *Alpinist*, "all of us ... had the same gear. Though top-of-the-line, it was heavy and cumbersome. Something had to change."

"Wild Things just kind of happened," Titoune told me this year of their business. The couple had moved up to North Conway, where being an entrepreneur went hand-in-hand with survival. Locals guide, run side businesses. It's not rare to juggle two or three

ejobs in town.

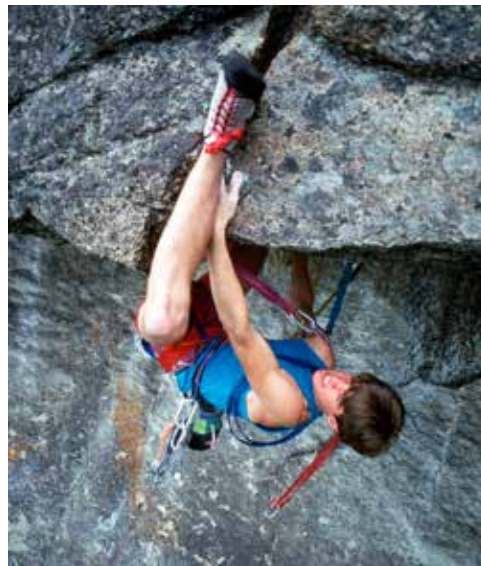
Wild Things was similar to another alpine start-up—Patagonia—in many ways. Buying a product meant buying into an idea. Their packs were simple, light and flexible—just like climbers. The catalogs had manifestos. Most alpinists worth their salt owned a Wild Things product. The company didn't care about mass marketability. Bivy sacks had sewn webbing so alpinists could clip in. Their packs featured removable hip belts and lids, a foldable bivouac pad to sleep on, and spindrift collars.

"John almost single-handedly brought the 'Light is Right' ethos to the United States," recalls Jim Surette, one of Wild Things' ambassadors from the mid 1980s.

When I moved to town in 2009, Wild Things was enduring a midlife crisis. Today, they sell equipment to special forces soldiers—a more lucrative business model than catering to elite alpinists. Bouchard and Meunier divorced in the late 1990s, and Bouchard moved to Bend, Oregon, to pursue a career in education. The single-minded passion he'd applied to climbing and paragliding has apparently served him well. At 60, Bouchard received a doctorate in the field, on top of an MBA he'd gotten at the Tuck School of Business in the 1970s. He works with at-risk youth (perhaps not a far cry from housing itinerant teenage climbers). This year, he received Oregon's GED Teacher of the Year Award. He declined (politely) to be interviewed for this article.



Mark Twight during an alpine bid on Nuptse East (7,804 meters), in 1986 with Jeff Lowe. The two reached 6,700 meters in fast-and-light style; the peak wouldn't be successfully climbed for another 29 years. Right: Jimmy Surette and *Mordor Roof* (5.11d), Cathedral Ledge.



In North Conway, he's a kind of ghost people chase, or roll their eyes at, depending on who's talking. Tales of his apparent craziness—say, road biking with a pistol tucked into his spandex to shoo after aggressive motorists—almost seem like a local defense mechanism, a way for the current generation to justify not completing girdle traverses of Cannon Cliff or crazy link-ups or bold solos of rock climbs. My first few years in town, I made a point of soloing as many of his climbs as I could, often without a harness or rope to retreat because doing so was a “logical progression” in commitment and difficulty—or so my adrenaline addled, 21-year-old brain told me.

Where Wild Things was concerned, “John did most of the product testing,” Wilcox remembers, “and Titoune did a lot of the work.” By the mid 1980s, Americans like Mugs Stump, Michael Kennedy and Mark Richey all took Wild Things gear on the most cutting-edge climbs. An ever-growing web of employees and mentees cropped up in North Conway. Bouchard's partners recall how warm he could be at times. Overly generous. “He was kinda hot and cold,” Surette recalls. One day, Bouchard showed up to IME with a brand-new BMW 800. It was a gift for Wilcox, though it came with some strings attached.

“He was into motorcycles. He had a Moto Guzzi. I used to race motorcycles; I had street bikes. And he said, ‘Rick, you have to ride motorcycles with me because we're gonna set records. We're gonna leave the store, race over to Cannon, race back,’” says Wilcox.

“We were doing something on Cannon, and we were doing something like 110 miles an hour when the police started chasing us. So, we zipped up the wilderness trail over by Lincoln Woods and hid for a while.”

Joe Lentini, a good friend and paragliding buddy, remembers an excited Bouchard whipping into his driveway on West Side Road on his motorcycle.

“You gotta try this thing! Here, put on my jacket!” Bouchard began handing him his riding clothes. Lentini nearly got on the bike, until he heard sirens whirring down west side road and realized the grift.

Regardless of what locals say about him, he changed the fabric of the town. “In the background of all this [development] was Bouchard,” muses Townsend.

“He couldn't be a mentor, because he wasn't really: it was more self-focused.”

Wild Things was the first American climbing company to sponsor athletes. Scott Franklin, the first American to climb 5.14 and solo 5.13, was a Wild Things athlete. Mark Twight and Randy Rackcliff, two of America's best alpinists in the 1980s, completed *The Reality Bath*—a serac-laden horror show of an ice climb in the Canadian Rockies—on the Wild Things dime. The informal mentoring of young climbers—an aspect of climbing otherwise lacking in America, then and now—was perhaps the most lasting influence of the company. Dean Potter was essentially adopted by the Bouchards before moving to Yosemite in the 1990s. The living space allowed time for

training. “I still have his painting stuff in the basement,” says Titoune.

“In John's defense, he was a mad scientist,” recounts Dave Karl, one of North America's earliest paragliders and the co-owner of Sky Ambitions. “He still is, probably. He was brilliant. He was winging it: the same way you would on an alpine climb. He was taking the same approach in his business. These guys were so out there. They were doing the hardest climbs in North America.”

One of the kids welcomed into the fold was a Pennsylvanian named Hugh Herr, who had lost both of his lower legs to frostbite during an accident on Mount Washington in 1982. His return to North Conway was not without controversy. During the search for Herr and his partner, Jeff Batzer, a local guide and Mountain Rescue Service (MRS) volunteer named Albert Dow was killed in an avalanche. North Conway's finest guides and climbers comprised MRS, and many were incensed that two teenagers' foolhardiness resulted in the death of one of their own.

Bouchard and Meunier gave the young Herr a place to stay. “People were really upset with us in the valley. If [the accident] hadn't happened, Wild Things would have taken off a lot faster,” Titoune says. She remembers John literally carrying Herr between the house and the shop so he could work.

Herr's guilt for the tragedy went beyond remorse; it molded the remainder of his life. Dow's death kick-started a mental reformation which, by necessity, grew stronger than his physical disability. Refusing to accept a future without climbing, Herr hacked together a few artificial limbs in his parents' garage and began to teach himself how to move on rock again. By the time he moved back to North Conway, he had adjusted to the warp and weft of his handicap. Even climbs such as *Stage Fright* (5.12c X), on the notoriously foot-intensive, technical climbing of Cathedral Ledge, were within his purview. The staid members of MRS, Dow's death firmly in their minds, eventually came around. Joe Lentini, who was the manager of the Eastern Mountain Sports guiding school at the time, remembers meeting Herr for the first time in a TED Talk.

According to Lentini, Herr braced himself for confrontation. “He had been faceless to me; he had just been the object of my hatred ... but, I saw a young man who had made a mistake.”

Throughout the 1980s, Herr's rock climbing continued to develop, and his trajectory



Hugh Herr, with prosthetic feet, working his way up *Stage Fright* (5.12+ R), Cathedral Ledge, in 1985. Herr made the first free ascent of the poorly protected line. Right: Bouchard, around 1985, on *Heather* (5.12), a tenuous and thin line on Cathedral Ledge. Right: Rick Wilcox made numerous hard first ascents around North Conway including that of *Repentance* (WI 5 M4/5) on Cathedral Ledge with John Bragg in 1973.



hasn't slowed. He now leads the field of Biomechanics at MIT, creating limbs for victims of climbing accidents and terrorist attacks including the Boston bombing.

But in 1985, the brightest rock-climbing talent was an impossibly skinny kid with a mop of brown hair named Jimmy Surette. Surette had grown up in town; Cathedral and Whitehorse were framed in his bedroom window. Surette climbed many of the existing hard routes on Cathedral and Whitehorse. When he ran out of climbs, he began adding his own. His masterpiece was *Liquid Sky*, a 5.13b that was the most difficult route on Cathedral at the time. Unlike the tactics used on Surette's previous new routes, *Liquid Sky* called for the pre-placing and handdogging techniques Surette had seen in Europe, a realization that, in order to push standards, North Conway—where ethics wars are still solved at town meetings—would have to get out of the doldrums.

In February 1987, desperate to get out, Surette headed to Whitehorse Ledge. While the right side of Whitehorse—a wedge-shaped sweep of granite that's been many a beginner's first time touching real rock—has been skied (also by Jim Surette), a section around the corner hosts a steep, technical south face with the longest section of decent, steep granite in

the White Mountains. The *Eliminate*, a 5.11c test-piece renowned for scary gear, decrepit fixed pitons and sustained difficulty, is spooky enough *with* a rope. Surette tackled it alone, no rope.

On the second pitch, Surette dispatched the tricky 5.11c crux and manteled onto a

“Boldness was a huge part of it back then. You had to be willing to get hurt—or worse,” Surette told me this year.

butt-sized ledge. But the snowmelt from the top of the cliff streaked over the 5.10 finger crack above. With horror, he noticed the .11c had become wet as well. He considered calling for help, but no one would have heard; at the time, the hotel, golf course and sub-development at the base of the cliff didn't exist. “I spied a line of holds up and right,” he told me this year, “and kinda soloed a new route to get out.” The desperate bid for safety included a horrifying iron cross move to escape. As with Bouchard and the *Dike*, it's tricky to draw the line between teenage angst

and brilliance.

“Boldness was a huge part of it back then. You had to be willing to get hurt—or worse,” Surette told me this year. Wilcox even remembers a specific prize for acts of daring: the lightning-bolt award. “The lightning bolt was a little ‘Z’ earring. John would give those to people who showed bravery and courage. Not necessarily in climbing, but mostly climbing. You got one if you soloed *Recompense* [a slippery, sandbagged 5.9: a Cathedral classic], for instance. I got one because I could ride a motorcycle better than he could. And that pissed him off,” says Wilcox.

Paragliding's origin story is new, or timeless, depending on how you look at it. Folks have dreamed of flying under their own power forever. Da Vinci never got anything off the drawing board and into the air, but Otto Lilienthal did, building a series of gliders in the 1890s and hurtling himself into the air above Germany until it killed him. Americans could argue that David Barish, a NASA engineer, made the first paraglider flights as part of tests for the Apollo missions. (NASA, short on time, decided to employ a simple parachute to land the lunar module instead). Barish, who died in 2009, called flying with his simple, foldable glider “Slope Soaring.”



Cathedral Ledge, above North Conway, New Hampshire. The granite massif is some 1,400 feet wide and 400 feet high at its tallest point, and the walls hold about 265 routes, according to the latest guidebook by Jerry Handren. Over the decades, Cathedral and nearby Whitehorse Ledge have been the scene for many antics and attracted climbers from all over the world. Right: Louise Shepherd, visiting from Australia, on the first all-women's free ascent of *The Prow* (5.11d), with Alison Osius in 1985. Lower right: Osius BITD, attempting *The Creation* (5.12b), like many others freed in 1985 by Jim Surette; Russ Clune on belay.



The French, of course, present a separate mythology: In 1979, a man named Jean-Claude Betemps ran off a hill near Mieussy, France, flying aloft with a normal parachute (as opposed to the specialized ones Barish had employed) entirely under his own power. “Everybody told me that it should be possible,” Betemps told the writer Paige McClanahan in 2019, “but they all said, ‘Better you than me.’”

By the mid 1980s, alpinists in Chamonix realized launching off a mountain with a *parapente* was far sexier than rappelling. Most climbers wanted a faster way down alpine faces, and the wings offered just such an alternative. Paragliding may have been its own discipline to some, but, especially in its first few years, it was viewed as an extension of alpinism.

“John would spend the summer at my parents’ house [in Chamonix]. I mean, it was a beautiful place, and my mom did laundry,” Titoune remembers. “One day he called me up and asked if our American Express card was still good.” That was that. That fall, Bouchard returned with a glider, and soon began making his own.

John and Titoune created a separate company, which they called Feral, to bring paragliding to the United States. “You definitely need to see if you can find one of the old Feral logos. It was a skull with a bullet hole,” laughs Dave Karl, one of the early “Scare Force” pilots: the small group of Bouchard acolytes who took to the sky in the early days of American paragliding.

Today, American fliers must undergo a rigorous apprenticeship, testing and certification program. Rightly so: The margins of flight are far slimmer than those of rock climbing. “There’s no way to explain what they were doing back then,” says Jeff Longcor, a modern New England pilot and climber. “They were on the absolute cutting edge of a sport that didn’t exist, in a country that no

one was doing it in.” Glide ratios were crudely drawn out, or surmised, at best. The wings themselves were built with untested materials. To make matters worse, almost nothing about North Conway—save its inhabitants—was conducive to paragliding. Ski resorts quickly banned the activity, and the remaining terrain was thickly wooded and subject to battering, fierce changes in wind.

“The very first time I flew, I broke both my ankles,” Karl remembers. He’d flared—braking the paraglider, essentially, for landing—early to avoid gliding into a set of high-tension wires, and a headwind slammed him into

The air was so heavy with lycra-clad paragliders that Echo Lake’s lifeguard, herself a climber, begged them to stop soloing up and jumping off: She simply couldn’t rescue the pilots as quickly as they were plunking into the deep side of the lake.

the hill. His instructor, crony of Bouchard’s named Andy Tibbits, asked if Karl could get himself to the hospital before grabbing the wing and heading up the hill to try and clear the lines himself.

Karl says that “You didn’t have the chance to be a pioneer in rock climbing, and you didn’t have the chance to be a pioneer in ice climbing. But if you were paragliding in that day, you were it. You were on the very forefront of when shit was happening: the first people to fly off things.”

Because of the single-lane scenic highway



slicing through its valley, Franconia Notch was off-limits for flying—State Park authorities worried that gobsmacked motorists would careen into the metal barriers, their eyes trained on the neon-clad paragliders above them instead of the road. That left Crawford Notch, which “always felt pretty sketchy,” according to Townsend, and Whitehorse Ledge, which was close to town.

“The take-off on Whitehorse Ledge was pretty fucking terrifying,” Karl says. “You needed to be comfortable in rock-climbing terrain. You were running down as people were still roped up, passing them as they finished their last pitch.”

On Sunday mornings, the Scare Force would assemble, hoping to get a few jumps off Whitehorse before guiding or slinging carabiners at IME. Bouchard had cleared a small plot of his land—the “Scareport,” but



Titoune Bouchard's nephew, visiting from France, gets a lesson in flying from Dave Walters and Rick Wilcox. Andy Tibbets in background. Paragliding in its infancy was unregulated. Anyone could do it. Crashes and injuries were common.

it was nearly impossible to get to once a flier was in the air. Instead, most flights ended at Echo Lake, the small tourist swimming hole southeast of the cliff. Ideally, you'd land on the beach, but ditching into the water or becoming tangled up in the white pines rimming the lake was a likely scenario. Pilots awaiting their turns would watch as their unlucky friends wrapped around trees or splashed down in the lake.

"How no one got killed is just unbelievable," says Karl. "We had no idea about flying. All we knew was that you had to run like crazy. Commitment kept you alive, more than technique or knowledge. If you were really committed and ran super hard and fast, then you had about two or three minutes of 'I hope I live, I hope I live. I hope I make it to the lake.'"

On one occasion, Bouchard crashed in the middle of Whitehorse's granite slab. Tethered to his wing in a sea of 5.5 friction and with a broken arm, he had to be rescued by Townsend, who was teaching an introductory rock climbing class below. Without cell phones, paragliders got lost in the woods in Crawford Notch. Wilcox, the president of MRS, would field curious calls from Fish and Game officers wondering what all the commotion was. One Sunday, known thereafter as "Sunday Bloody Sunday," the air was so heavy with lycra-clad paragliders that Echo Lake's lifeguard, herself a climber, begged them to stop soloing up and jumping off: She simply couldn't rescue the pilots as quickly as they were plunking into the deep side of the lake. Tourists' placid mornings were ruined as fliers crashed into picnic tables.

The small breaks and seemingly funny mishaps ceded to graver injuries. Joe Lentini

drove his femur into his pelvis in the Owens Valley in California. Dave Karl severely broke his arm when he crashed flying off the South Buttress of Whitehorse—a far more serious game than the slabs—and might have bled to death clipped to his glider if Townsend hadn't sprinted to his rescue. Paragliding became more regulated, the testing of wings stringent. Besides, sport climbing had come to town: A hard-swinging contingent of newcomers, following in Surette's wake, bolted cliffs like Sundown and Rumney. The floodgates were open in the North Country, and it was hard to climb 5.13 when you were healing from broken bones all the time.

"What I loved about paragliding was the buzz. I miss it. No matter what you do, you'll never, ever get a buzz like you will from that. After a flight, you were on a cloud still, for days," Karl says.

On Mount Russell, Charlie Townsend watched as Dave Auble launched off the ridge and flew away, a diminishing blip against the vast Kahiltna glacier. The landing wasn't pretty—Auble cratered into the snow deposited by the five-day storm—but it seemed like the flight had gone all right. Townsend set up his own wing, took two exhausted steps, and was airborne. The pair had practiced paragliding in the winter as much as possible before their trip, even rehearsed kicking their crampons off before landing so they wouldn't snap their ankles. But, once aloft, Townsend realized that, in all his training back home, he'd never flown with a pack on, and now the heavy climbing and bivvy gear flipped Townsend upside down: a final insult. "Ten days on the hill, eight minutes in the air," he wrote in an *American Alpine Journal* report of the climb. "Before long, I landed in a heap near Dave a few hundred yards from the tent."

Charlie's matter-of-fact attitude about the whole affair takes some parsing. Onstage, he presents the flight as this comic moment in a haphazard vacation, and his timing is spot on: He's going for laughs, not deference, and the audience loves it. But I wonder if any of them realize how out there the climb was. Paragliding off Mount Russell was the apex of a whole bizarre, dangerous era. It was why Feral brought the gliders over in the first place—a tool that might make alpinism faster, lighter, maybe even a little less dangerous.

"For me that was always the appeal: as a mountaineering tool. Flying off a cliff still freaks me out. I mean, I've never even been off

a high dive," Townsend told me this year.

"Basically," Titoune reflects, "it [paragliding] didn't work." And it's true. A critic could argue the whole experiment failed: most alpinists don't bone up on their paragliding skills before expeditions these days. Some discovered the joys of flying outweighed those of climbing, but most went back to threading the rappel anchors.

"Charlie Townsend's the only guy I ever heard of who saved his life with one of those things," Wilcox surmises in his decades-thick Boston accent. There is a kind of poetry in jumping to safety.

The youngsters in town now are a little less wild. The best alpinist around is still Mark Richey, who just climbed Link Sar in Pakistan with Steve Swenson and Graham Zimmerman. Modern climbers find standing on the dime edges of Cathedral and Whitehorse far less fun than clipping overhanging bolts at Rumney or Shagg Crag. High standards aren't breached in North Conway: There's no gym here. Today's good climbers live in urban areas. A few locals still paraglide, though it's rare.

But once in a while, something crazy still happens. Last winter, my phone buzzed while I guided a group of college students in Franconia Notch. The snow, turning to rain, spat down in horizontal waves. I wiped my screen and checked my messages. It was my buddy Nick Aiello-Popeo, a fiery, driven alpinist in his late 20s.

It took a second for me to decipher the little pictures showing up on the screen, but there it was: Nick had just soloed *Repentance* and *Remission*, the two classic hard ice routes in North Conway. The link-up had been done before, once, by a visiting Steve House.

Nick's energy had always reminded me of a certain other North Conway maniac. I glanced down Franconia Notch towards the *Black Dike*, that first feat of daring. Bouchard, of course, went on to even bigger things, setting a bar that is still difficult to get over.

"Holy shit," I punched into my phone. "That deserves a lightning bolt for sure."

Michael Wejchert of North Conway is a frequent contributor to Rock and Ice. He profiled the late alpinist J.C. Lafaille in the May, 2019 issue.