

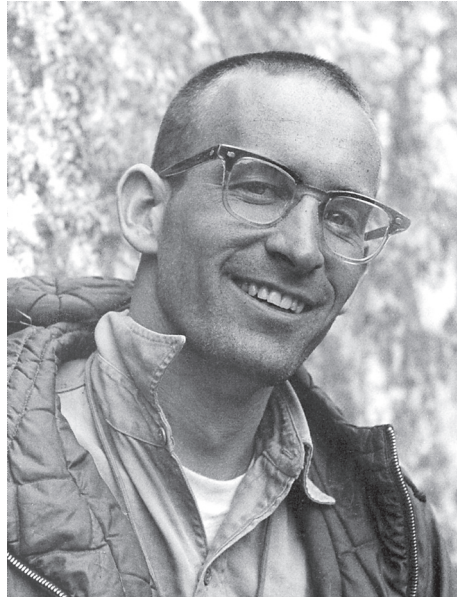
In Memoriam: Royal Robbins

To say that Royal Robbins invented and saved modern climbing in one fell swoop might be a stretch, but not much of one. With his death on March 14, 2017, at 82, after a prolonged illness, some of the elegance has been whisked away from the sport. In the golden age of American climbing, a few names could be bandied around as the most influential: Yvon Chouinard, Tom Frost, Chuck Pratt, Layton Kor, Doug Robinson. But undoubtedly, Robbins emerges: the name on the tip of everyone's tongue.

Robbins had an ego, though it seemed less the arrogance of an athlete and more the conviction of a zealot: a human who would make no compromises and literally risk life and limb to leave—with as little trace of his passage as possible—his mark on the steep granite walls of Yosemite. Outwardly, with his looming, perfect posture and black glasses, he projected a hawk-like intensity across the bohemian dalliances of Yosemite in the late 1950s and early 1960s. But inwardly, Robbins was a man searching for transcendence. He loved the poetry of Emerson. He yearned to escape a difficult childhood by forging his way up blank granite slabs, by exploring California's untouched passageways of rock, by applying an ethos to climbing that preserved it for future generations.

Robbins was born in Point Pleasant, West Virginia, in 1935. His father, Royal Shannon Robbins, abandoned his mother and the toddler he'd given his name to. Royal's mother married a machinist, and the family moved to Los Angeles. Robbins's stepfather drank often. He beat Royal and his mother.

To escape, Royal committed small crimes and jumped freight trains with other miscreant teens. Climbing, back then, was not something one simply tried as a matter of happenstance. Cities did not have gyms dotted with bright, plastic holds. With minimal equipment, climbing was still a dark art. Climbers tied in by knotting the rope around their waists. They used few, if



Royal Robbins in his late 20s. TOM FROST/WIKI-MEDIA COMMONS

any, pitons. Whoever went first endured deadly consequences for a mistake. Broken ribs—the result of a knotted rope tied around one’s waist—were a best-case scenario for a fall. At the time, Robbins had no idea he would pioneer new, safer, and more graceful techniques for ascent.

At age 14, in the 1940s, he took a Boy Scout trip to the High Sierra, and his life changed. When the trip ended, Robbins wanted more, and he joined the Rock Climbing Section of the Sierra Club. Soon, he was scampering up rock faces in Tahquitz, in Southern California. He dropped out of high school, preferring to educate himself. He later became enamored of the transcendentalists, and of Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*. Most readers tend to hold Ahab at arms’ length, but Robbins embraced the character fully. The 2,000-foot north face of Half-Dome had become, in his mind, a white whale of sorts. By 1957, this obsession consumed him.

Climbers relied on two main forms of protection in the 1950s. Commonly, pitons were used: Though they varied in size, from thin strips of iron to five-inch metal wedges, a climber hammered them into a crack, clipped a nylon ladder (called an etrier or aider) into the piton, and stood in the etrier to hammer the next piton. Obviously, this method only worked when a crack appeared to drive pitons into.

The other anchor was an expansion bolt: A climber hammered into the bare rock with a masonry bit until a hole appeared, placed a bolt with an eyelet hanger into it, and clipped his or her etrier to that.

At first, bolts were used only when necessary. It’s a slippery slope: Climbers can hammer in endless bolts on previously blank walls. When Robbins and his cohorts stumbled upon Yosemite in the 1950s, very few climbs had been done, and the easiest fell first. The northwest face of Half Dome remained the prize everyone lusted after.

Robbins made a few attempts. On one, with Jerry Gallwas, Don Wilson, and Warren Harding, the team ascended a mere 500 feet over five days. When he finally completed the climb in 1957, with Mike Sherrick and Gallwas, it was with a newly designed piton and the conviction of a man willing to make a leap of faith. The climb was, to borrow the nomenclature of the era, a space shot.

As new routes began to streak up the walls of Yosemite, the next great prize to fall was the Nose on El Capitan: the massive buttress of granite that juts up, like a giant nose, 3,000 feet from El Capitan meadow. Harding spied the line—considered out of the question to most climbers—and launched

up it, using an anything-goes ethos. The team descended to the valley for breaks, leaving ropes in place. After two years, Harding finally topped out El Cap. Harding's climb, and the ones to follow, were nothing short of breathtaking achievements, but they seemed anathema to Robbins, who crusaded that style and cleanliness were paramount. To prove his point, he repeated Harding's Nose in 1960 with Tom Frost, Chuck Pratt, and Joe Fitschen, taking seven days, bottom to top, without leaving the wall. (Harding's team had taken 45 days over two years to finish the climb.) Robbins' repeat of the Nose is as talked about as its first ascent.

Doubtless, the rivalry between Harding and Robbins helped spur the "clean climbing" revolution. It takes a special breed of person to question and modify methods that had been held sacrosanct. During a 1966 trip to the Lake District of England with his wife Liz, Robbins found the climbers there were using "nuts" slotted in cracks to protect themselves from falling. He returned to Yosemite, vigorously preaching "clean climbing" to his hammer-wielding cohorts. Nuts did not scar the rock, and the climbers started using as few bolts as possible on climbs, wishing, as Robbins had, to leave little trace of their passage. Climbing exists in its modern form because Robbins had the courage to question his own generation's methods.

Arthritis demanded Robbins cut his climbing career short. He instead took to kayaking, pioneering first descents in much the same way he'd forged new routes up the nation's steepest rock walls. He and Liz started the successful clothing company Royal Robbins, applying the same ethos to clothing as they did climbing. He is survived by Liz and their children, Damon and Tamara.

Climbing may be embodied by flashy movies and big-name sponsors today, but I, and many others, prefer the old black and white shots of Robbins, framed perfectly against the bright sky and unyielding granite of Yosemite, simple as can be.

—*Michael Wejchert*