

Act-III

My Life in Spire Repair

Third Ascent of the Leaning Tower – with Layton Kor

Layton Kor was probably the largest bundle of energy to ever climb a rock. Everyone is probably aware of his height – I wonder how many know how tightly wound he was. This guy was intense. Don't get me wrong. His behavior off the rock was not abnormal – except when he was behind the wheel of his automobile.

It was early 1965. I was in my tenth year as an aerodynamic engineer at North American Aviation in El Segundo. My climbing experience was initiated in 1961 and was limited to Stoney Point, Tahquitz Rock, and three trips to Yosemite. My first and only Yosemite climb in 1962 was Higher Cathedral Spire. I returned to the Valley in 1963 for one weekend to climb the Higher Spire again. In 1964, another Higher Spire ascent with Swan Slab and Patio Pinnacle thrown in. That's it – my entire Yosemite experience over a three year period amounted to five short ascents. Then I met Layton Kor and the curtain went up on Act-III of *My Life in Spire Repair*.

It was March of 1965, Layton was working at Chouinard's tin shed in Burbank near the Lockheed aircraft plant. My Stoney Point climbing buddies, Dennis Hennek, and Ken Boche were both working for Yvon then and when I had time after work I would go by the tin shed by to visit and pound a few rivets in 1¼-inch angles. Compared to the motley crew, I looked sort of out of place in my suit and tie, but on my first visit Layton was impressed with my work ethic. I don't remember when or where it happened, but one day he asked if I was interested in doing a Yosemite wall climb. I didn't even ask which wall, I just said yes.

The Leaning Tower - he wanted to do the third ascent of the Leaning Tower. The first ascent in 1961 had just been followed by Robbins' solo second ascent in 1963 and Layton had been quizzing Royal about the logistics. According to Royal there were still lots of bolts missing hangers and some bolts needing replacement. Other than that, he bade us well.

It was mid-April. There was still six feet of snow on the ground in the Valley when Kor and I drove into the Bridalveil parking lot. With help of Ken Boche and a few other friends, we stomped in a path – a six-foot deep trough – up to the Tower traverse ledge. It took us a couple of trips and most of the day to deposit our equipment. Kor and I spent that night in Camp-4. I think we were the only tent in the campground. I had a large McKinley canvas tent – large enough for Kor to stand erect. We sat that night under a roaring Coleman lantern discussing Kor's plan. He had a "plan." I had no clue.

It was obviously going to be a cold ascent and we were only taking down jackets. We would use our rucksacks for our feet. Layton had borrowed two pairs of Jumars from somebody and he had shown me how they worked in the tent the night before. We would not take a stove- just cheese, bologna, gorp, and water. Kor was convinced we could use candles to warm our hands on the bivouac. That was his "plan."

Up early the next morning, we trudged through the snow trough to our gear and began the traverse out to the beginning of the bolt ladder first pitch. The ledge was snowy, wet and slippery – and cold. There was no question as to who would lead the first pitch. Layton clipped into the first bolt and seconds later began what was to be a non-stop, irate conversation with the Tower, with God, and with anyone else within earshot. I had never heard anyone curse as often and constantly while climbing. I heard curses that I had never heard before or since – though I admit that one of his favorite rubbed off on me and I still hear myself using it – hopefully nobody else does. It is one that I can only repeat here as a reference to "matriarchal prostitution." Every missing hanger, every loose bolt, every scraped knuckle, every dropped nut (those that hold the hanger on the bolt), and every time he didn't get his foot quickly into the next loop, a curse would echo off the wall and down the Valley.

Layton climbed quickly and was up to the belay bolts – he was breathing hard when called down "Off belay." I'm sure his respiration rate was due to more to his conversation than to his exertion. The Robbins Jumar hauling system was not in our repertoire, so we hauled our food and gear by the old fashioned way - hand-over-hand.

My expertise with Jumaring was elementary at best and it took me longer to second the pitch than Layton took to lead it. When I finally arrived at his position he was already getting anxious and quickly put me on belay and urged me upward. About a third of the way up my pitch I clipped a bolt and in the process it came out in my hand. I thought, Whoa, now what? Layton was getting nervous, "Pound it back in, Lauria." I tried, but it still just fell out when I tried to clip it. "It won't go, Layton."

Kor was reaching the red line on his patience meter. He had the extra bolts, but rather than send them up to me he suggested I come down and let him finish the pitch. With great relief, I descended and he took over the lead, replaced the bolt with a new one, and with minimal expletives raced on.

I cleaned the pitch and when I reached his belay stance, Kor suggested that for the sake of time he should lead the rest of the pitches – to Guano Ledge, I thought. He was off, epithets flowing eloquently, and after two pitches requiring several hanger/bolt modifications and some very tricky wet face-climbing over the last ten feet, we arrived on snow covered Guano Ledge. Ahwahnee Ledge was out of the question – It was two feet deep in snow. We attempted to level out the very sloped Guano Ledge by clearing the upper portion and building up the lower portion of the ledge with the cleared snow. The temperature was in the 40s and everything was wet and it was getting dark – and did I say it was cold?

Never fear, we have candles. We settled down in our dampened down jackets with our feet in our rucksacks. Kor fought desperately with damp matches to light up three candles. With our 3-candlepower heater ablaze we soon realized that whatever heat was being generated, we couldn't feel it. The worthless matriarchal prostitutes!

It wasn't all a lost cause – we did have a cozy candle lit dinner and Kor revealed his future plans to climb every major wall in the Valley before he left for Europe to do the Eiger. He talked a little about religion, only to abruptly change the subject to his "plan" for tomorrow. Layton quite reasonably thought it would be best for him to lead the rest of the climb. It was obvious that my inexperience was just slowing us down. So it was agreed – I was now auditing the course – and did I mention it was cold?

We still had seven pitches to go and Kor knew it. He almost left skid marks leaving the ledge in the morning. He was around the corner out of sight, but never, never out of earshot. "You damn [matriarchal prostitute]!" resounded from the canyon walls.

The most of the remaining pitches are just a blur in my memory probably because all I did was belay and clean. There were two exceptions - The Evil Tree, where I learned even more new ways to cuss and the final pitch – the pitch where one traverses out from under the last overhang.

It was getting late. This was the sixth pitch. Kor finished it and, now out of sight, called down for me to be careful cleaning. He warned me about the difficulties of Jumaring and cleaning a traverse. Eventually I found myself up in a corner, with my head bumping an overhang, detaching my lead Jumar from the rope to bypass the next pin. With one aid sling on one side of the pin and the second aid sling on the other side, I began to understand the difficulties.

It was only after removing all but the last piece under the overhand that I had an epiphany. I realized that each time I detached the lead Jumar from the rope, I was supported by only one Jumar. Duh! But here comes the good part. I realized that if the Jumar (the ONLY one supporting me) came off the rope, I would plummet to the end of the rope – in those days, approximately 150 feet! Why, you ask? Read on.

This was my first wall climb and my first experience with Jumars. Nobody told me that I should attach them to my swami belt. I had just done the entire climb without ever being attached to my Jumars! The only thing attached to my Jumars when I released them from the climbing rope were my aid slings.

It was too dark and I was only a few feet below finishing the pitch, so I put the thought of my mind and continued on. I was too embarrassed to mention my folly to Layton. I wouldn't have had time to anyway, as he was up and moving before I sat down. Over his shoulder came, "Come on we have to get down – now!"

So off we went on the wet rock as it began to drizzle. Layton knew approximately where we were going based on his discussion with Royal. I just tried to keep up. We managed to find the rappel anchors in the Leaning Tower Chimney and after three very wet and cold rappels we were on easier ground heading for the snow trough and the parking lot.

Two days later, at my home in Canoga Park, Kor was sitting at the breakfast table with me and my three kids and my wife relating to them the details of our little adventure. He kept rubbing his left eye nervously. I noticed that the eye was quite red. He thought there was just a little sand left over from the Tower, but hours later the irritation had become almost unbearable. So we took him to the closest ophthalmologist we could find. When he emerged from the doctor's office his eye was patched. The doctor said he had

found a sliver of steel near the center of his left eye's lens (obviously chipped off a piton on the climb). If it had remained in the lens any longer it would no doubt have left a rust mark and Layton's vision would have been impaired – requiring eventual surgery.

For at least a year after the Tower, I would receive a card or letter from Kor relating his latest climbs and his future plans – the last coming from Europe. It was over twenty years later that we met up again.

I attended the AAC annual Banquet in Las Vegas in December of '86. At that banquet, as I entered the dining area, I bumped into Yvon Chouinard. We exchanged greetings and he mentioned that Layton Kor was in attendance.

“Where?”

“He's hard to miss”, Chouinard motioned across the room. I looked in the direction he was pointing and there in the distance, standing well above the crowd, was a silver-haired giant. By the time I got over to him he was seated at the dining table, his back to me. I tapped him on the shoulder hesitantly, fearing he would not recognize the idiot he led up the Tower in 1965. He turned, “Lauria, you rascal, how are you?”

I'm not sure I ever told Kor that I was never attached to my Jumars.