

The Original Vulgarian

John Hansen

1937-2005

By Don Lauria

I met John Hansen in the fall of 1961. We were both working as engineers at North American Aviation in El Segundo, California. I had just returned from vacation and my first excursion to the summit of a Sierra peak. The traditional routine was to pass around any photos from one's trip for all to see. One of my colleagues, upon returning my box of slides, mentioned he knew a guy in the Computer Department who was an avid mountaineer and asked if he could show the slides to him. I said okay and a little later he returned with John Hansen.

Hansen was not too tall, maybe 5' 9", but very wide, very fit, built like an ape. He had a New York accent, a cauliflower ear, a mischievous laugh, and a great gift of gab. He immediately needed to know of my entire personal mountaineering history (which at that moment involved a single non-technical Sierra peak). He asked if I was interested in learning to climb. I asked if he meant with ropes and stuff. He answered that, of course, ropes, pitons, ice axes, crampons - all that stuff! I replied that he must be kidding - I was definitely not interested. He insisted I go with him to **Stoney Point** and do some bouldering. Bouldering? I politely said no. He insisted. I said no again. He questioned my sense of adventure and suggested the coming weekend would be ideal for my introduction to rock climbing. For more than 15 minutes he parried my refusals. His persistence won out. That weekend would change my life.

I drove 35 miles to the San Fernando Valley where John lived with his wife and infant son and arrived at 7:00 AM, as agreed, to find him still in bed. He came to the door naked. "Oh man, sorry. I overslept. Come on in. I'll be ready in a minute." He returned to the bedroom. I could hear an infant crying and his wife's complaining. He had obviously forgotten to tell her of his plans. He emerged from the bedroom wearing a beige wool sweater, brown corduroy knickers, mountain boots, and a navy blue beret. "Come on, let's get something to eat."

We stopped at an IHOP for pancakes. John's beret and knickers got a few looks as we entered, but I was so absorbed in interesting and enthusiastic conversation about rock climbing, I soon forgot the stares.

I spent the entire Saturday climbing at Stoney in a pair of John's mountain boots two sizes too small for me. He took me around the entire area, climbing everything in sight. By the end of the day I could barely lift my arms. I was exhausted - but was I stoked!

That evening at John's apartment, he found a "not-so-dear-John" note from his wife - she had packed up and left with child. Seemingly unperturbed, John filled me with Gerwurztraminer and tales from his **Vulgarian Shawangunks** days. Well into the evening he talked about mountaineering - famous European and American climbers and climbing history. He pulled six mountaineering books off his shelf and insisted I take them home and read them. By the time I got home I was already planning my next weekend at Stoney Point.

I climbed four more times with John at Stoney Point, and then, on New Year's Day 1962, he took me out to the Devil's Backbone on Mt. San Antonio with my brand-new boots, brand-new ice axe, and brand-new crampons. He tied me into a 9mm rope and told me to take a running leap off the ridge down the steep north face to practice a self-arrest. My first attempt ended abruptly at the end of the rope. I had not only failed to slow my descent, I had forgotten to put on my brand-new leather gloves which left all the knuckles on both my hands bereft of skin. My second descent, with gloves, was successful and I figured that I had mastered the art - no need to do that again. My life as a mountaineer had begun.

John was a gregarious sort and he introduced me to many well known climbers including Yvon Chouinard, Bob Kamps, and several of his **Vulgarian** buddies like Jim McCarthy and Art Gran.

One November evening in 1961, we visited Chouinard in his little room in back of his parent's home in Burbank. It was Yvon's 23rd birthday. The evening could have been a bit more cheerful, but Yvon was due to report for his preinduction physical the next morning and was not happy about it. However, Yvon had a plan. He heard that a sufficient amount of soy sauce consumed prior to a physical exam could raise one's blood pressure to 4F levels. So John and I went out and bought a six pack of eight-ounce bottles of soy sauce and returned to watch Chouinard down as many as he could stand. The birthday party ended and later that week a very sick Yvon was inducted into the U.S. Army. The experiment had failed and Yvon ended up in Korea for two years. Yvon mentions this happening in his new book *Let My People Go Surfing*.

John and I climbed together just a few more times at Tahquitz Rock and in Yosemite through 1964 and then saw each other on mostly social occasions, some of which were memorable - and somewhat **Vulgarian**. Like the night he and Dave Huntsman went out in Dave's VW to try out John's new small caliber pistol. After attempting to shoot out a few street lights,

John accidentally fired a round into his calf and refused to go to the emergency hospital fearing the required police report. Later, Dave forced him to seek treatment. Then there was the night at a small gathering in Dave's home. John was challenged to an arm wrestling contest with a complete stranger at the kitchen table. After many seated minutes of stress and strain without an apparent winner, the two adversaries, still locked in combat, rose to their feet and fell across the kitchen table breaking the table's legs and careened into the matching chairs doing irreparable damage to them also. It took three of us to pry them apart and three years for Mary Huntsman to forgive him.

It was in the early 70s that John's profession became more important than his passion and after his second marriage to an assistant district attorney, he quit engineering and the sciences to become lawyer himself. A few years of individual practice tending to needy clientele and he realized he could not afford the profession. He quit law and returned to science. We remained distant friends for the next 41 years until his death in 2005.

Though not an exceptional climber, John was an exceptional person. He was an engineering physics graduate from Columbia University, a champion collegiate Greco-Roman wrestler, and a fierce liberal - politically and socially. He had the strength of an ox and intelligence bordering on genius. He could overhaul automobile engines as casually as he discussed celestial mechanics. He was conversant in the calculus of variations, a connoisseur of fine wines, and generous to a fault.

I'm relating this to you because, although few people have heard the name *John (Jack) Hansen* in connection with climbing or mountaineering, after all these years, I discovered something about John that he never shared with me – something that should be known. Something that should be part of climbing history.

Most of us that climb, or have climbed, have heard of the "Vulgarians" – **the outrageous Shawangunk climbing cabal of the late 50s and early 60s**. Here's a little history from the *gunks.com* website - an excerpt from a conversation in August of 2004 with Dick Williams, one of the early Vulgarians and one of the many reputable climbers to come out of the Gunks:

Dick Williams -*So, that particular morning we were all at the base of **Never Never Land** and [Jim] McCarthy is trying to do the direct finish. So anyway he's up there - I don't think I'd ever belayed anybody before - it was my first time, so I'd been watching some people belay and they'd belay over the shoulder with the rope under your armpit, like this, you know.*

Interviewer -*Wow.*

Dick Williams -*And Jim's about to do this final bit and he looks down and he sees how I'm belaying. And he says, "You don't belay someone my weight like that." I said, "Ok." and just dropped the rope. "If you don't like it, get somebody else to do it." Everyone goes racing to the rope. Jack Hansen gets a hold of the rope and puts him on belay. **Jack Hansen was the guy who coined the phrase, "the Vulgarians" - he gave us that name.***

Interviewer-*He puts him on hip belay, right?*

Dick Williams -*Body belay, yeah. So Jim goes up, sure enough he falls and that big tree that's there now was just a little sapling and the rope was behind it and it really broke the thing. **John** didn't let any rope go through his hand - he probably [held] about a 30-footer.*

So now you know what it took me 41 years to find out. Not only was Hansen a Vulgarian, John Hansen was the "original" Vulgarian.