

# VERN CLEVENGER

WALKING INTO THE LIGHT

1980-2025

VERN CLEVENGER: WALKING INTO THE LIGHT, 1980-2025.

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Facing page:

*Nepali School Children*

I came upon this image of children in Nepal in my older work. We were trekking in Nepal towards a remote entry to the Mt. Everest area. Most memories blur with time, but I can vividly remember this moment more than twenty years later.



The sun shines not on us, but in us.

—John Muir, *Journals*



# PREFACE

**M**ost photographers who find their way to California's Sierra Nevada mountains talk about the light. "There was light everywhere!" the photographer Ansel Adams exclaimed in a description of his first visit to Yosemite Valley in 1916. The light proved irresistible to the photojournalist and adventure photographer Galen Rowell, who writes that in the Sierra "light is not just illumination—it's transformation." For over half a century I too have been enchanted with the light in the valleys and mountains of the Sierra, and I have felt its transformative presence within myself.

My interest in photography began in the 1960s. I talked my mother into buying me my first camera: a 35 mm Kodak Retina; and as a teenager I learned to process film in a darkroom. But my understanding of photography as creative expression came from friends. Galen Rowell took me to a camera swap in Berkeley and picked out my first Nikon camera. He then encouraged me to express my experiences in the mountains with a camera—and, as I would later experience, to discover my place in the world. During my years living in Yosemite Valley, the basket weaver Julia Parker introduced me to Ansel Adams, whose black-and-white images inspired me to pursue fine art photography and the creative process of making

prints. I learned from the curator at the National Park Museum, Jack Gyer, and Museum Technician, Bea Weiss, what worked in a successful composition. I spent many afternoons in the auditorium of the Yosemite Museum listening to their insightful impressions of the strengths and shortcomings of my early work.

This retrospective gathers nearly fifty-years of self-exploration and artistic discovery in the mountains of California: in Yosemite Valley and Tuolumne Meadows, in the highest regions of Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks, and in the Owens Valley—as well as in other regions where I have traveled, including the foothills of the Sierra, the Pacific coastline, and the mountainous regions of Nepal. In each of these places, the words of the French writer Antoine de Saint-Exupéry have guided my creative work: "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly, what is essential is invisible to the eye." To see the world "rightly," it has taken me decades to learn, is to live every day with a generosity of heart and spirit—with the light that awakens in each of us when we encounter the beauty and mystery of the natural world.

Vern Clevenger, 2025  
Bishop, CA



# INTRODUCTION

BY DOUG ROBINSON

When I moved back to Bishop, there was Vern. He'd been here all the decades I was down on the coast raising two kids. Same for him, here in the Owens Valley. But we had been completely out of touch until I walked into Bishop's climber's pub, the Mountain Rambler, and saw him ensconced at a corner table, working on a laptop. Turned out it was his table, and his time of day there, late afternoon. Vern looks up, his gaze piercing. Notice me, it says. Do you see? Yes, and again gratefully. He hunched forward a little, reminiscent of the stereotype of a Neanderthal, with a mop of hair falling in his eyes. That part, at least, never changed. And there was a searching look in his eyes. He scanned knowingly. That part hasn't changed either—fifty years later. We have known one another fully a lifetime.

## I

When I met Vern, he was just a kid: powerful, hulking even, a bruiser of a teenager. Already he was pretty good. Claudia Axcell met Vern even younger. She was driving over Sonora Pass when this kid is sliding down a steep sandy bank toward the car. They almost collided. A creative seamstress, Claudia noticed. "His clothes and pack were all torn up," but then she gave him a ride anyway. And she coined the verb "Clevengered" for how he shreds gear.

Vern comes on so ham-fisted, it's easy to miss his fine art creativity. Last night at The Mountain Rambler, Vern and I were talking when Claudia walked up and gave me a hug. Immediately Vern said, "Hey, I want a hug too!" Claudia said later, "He hugged like he meant it." Being around him is always so real.

In Claudia's house I first came face-to-face with one of Vern's images. A section of indifferently-built masonry wall is inset with a crudely hung window. The whole thing is brushed over by too-hastily splashed-white paint. Rural kitsch. But a climbing vine has intruded, with shockingly bright blossoms, almost crimson. A graceful pulse of the natural world, overtaking civilized blight. The image, Fobes 40 Clematis," was captured along a stretch of the old highway to Mammoth, at barely a wide spot in the road once called Happy Jacks, where Claudia and I had sequentially inhabited a cabin of rough logs with a wood cook stove and shower built into in the corner of the sleeping porch. I had driven by that scene hundreds of times without noticing what Vern saw.

Teenage Vern was a kid with a camera, which didn't mean much, because who wasn't? Growing up in Oakland, he first crossed over the alpine threshold of the Sierra as a Boy Scout. I had too, coming from a different background a few miles down the Peninsula. That's the High Sierra, its backcountry. Way younger, both of us had been taken

camping in Yosemite, imprinting on a lower, mid-range Sierra. We couldn't know how lucky that was, how it would forever set a trajectory to the life of what was still a boy. Rambling higher on this pluton, lugging an ill-fitting pack frame through the grander Sierra, mountains were everywhere. *Let's scramble up that one!* Hey, I'm on top of the world and my perspective on this life has just shifted. Bonding with the alpine zone.

Back in the city there was Indian Rock. A tiny urban park, an underwhelming blob of stone. But set in the North Campus neighborhood of Berkeley where an older breed of Sierra lovers happened to live. Professors at the University of California, in shingle-clad houses. A tweedy lot, but they included the old guard of the Sierra Club, which was still hanging on to the last vestiges of its origins—it's founder John Muir had lived for a time in Oakland too—its roots as a climbing club that would famously roam the Sierra every summer as a knot of a hundred gentle folk, supported by as many mules. Berkeley professors were a mainstay of the Club, as were the high society of San Francisco. They were climbers, known for Sunday afternoon workouts scrambling on their neighborhood rock. David Brower had been one of the Club's young radicals in the 1930s when the climbing rope officially arrived in California (from Harvard) and changed everything forever.

After World War II Brower was mentoring the new young climbers who were putting Yosemite increasingly on the map, and then inviting all to a spaghetti feed including jugs of red wine at his home a few blocks away. He happened to become the first Executive Director of the Sierra Club as its focus shifted to conservation. Most of that more genteel spirit had faded away by the time Vern stumbled onto Indian Rock. Galen Rowell was in ascendency. The son of a professor and a classical cellist, yes, but also a High School punk in a tight white t-shirt

driving a souped-up Chevy. It was his rock now. And he mentored Vern, climbing on holds that were becoming slippery from generations of scraping feet. And took him to Yosemite. Galen and I had been making first ascents of High Sierra walls, so when he introduced Vern—re-introduced, as it turned out—it mattered. Soon this strong teenager was tearing up the place.

Vern and I met in a climbing community so nascent it barely existed on anyone's radar. Far in the future was sponsored athletes climbing on artificial walls in the Olympics. Our memories of meeting diverge. Vern recalls being still in High School, arriving in Yosemite with Galen Rowell. As already mentioned, Galen was mentoring Vern then, a strong protégé both on rock and behind a lens. I recall a meeting in a Berkeley climbing shop, Mountain Traders.

Blame it on the parents. Worth repeating because it was so formative of impressionable young lives, both of ours took us to Yosemite by the time we were four. Camping; the Park is so much larger than its fabled Valley where we both ended up later, followers of the stone itself. My parents landed me in Tuolumne, a statuesque mountain meadow to the north; Vern went to Wawona, playing along the banks of the South Fork of the Merced River. His first memory of Yosemite, from two and a half years old, is of fighting a bear for a carrot.

I was a Silicon Valley brat, yet from before silicon got poured into the mix. But calling me a refugee from the "Valley of Heart's Delight" doesn't have the right ring. My first climbing mentors were geeky engineers who may, by then, have had traces of silicon under their fingernails. I was too young to think of asking. There were no climbing schools in California in the 1950s, but I found the Sierra Club's Rock Climbing Section. Army surplus was the style -- hardly chic—especially square-toed boots that were klunky on the rounded holds of sandstone bumps at Castle



Rock. By seventeen I was climbing in Yosemite Valley. It had recently become the center of the rock climbing world, yet we were the last to know it. Like I said, insular.

When you're young, what you see is what you get. You're inside this family; how could life be any different? And the same goes for one's early sense of place. Vern's Yosemite camping trips were formative. Somehow, they managed to stay up there all summer. From that Wawona Campground to Bridalveil Creek, where they burned the tent down. "I remember pulling Larry out of the fire!" then skipping beyond the fabled Valley to Tuolumne Meadows, ringed by granite domes. Fingering the graceful curves of that fine granite, Vern was already imprinting on the experience.

The Boy Scouts intervened for both of us. I began teaching "campcraft" at a Sierra scout camp. Leading backpacking trips there shepherded me into a life of guiding. It takes an especially lucky Scout Troop to be led by men with both skills and orientation toward the wilderness. But in California there's always been a strong connection from the urban centers to the High Sierra; John Muir had come up from the coast too. So Vern's early backpacking trips ranged, likewise, into the highest Sierra.

It turns out to be an important distinction among climbers, where the direction from which one first comes to rock foretells a lifelong orientation. Both of us moved down to Yosemite Valley out of the Sierra high country. Then, after an intense youthful engagement on those walls, we disengaged from there back into the high country from whence we had come. The predictability of that trajectory has become especially true now, when the average climber begins in a specialized urban rock gym, pulling down on plastic holds. Most of them stay indoors, even as some develop skills that lead onward to international meets. Of the three thousand new recruits who will walk into a climbing gym today, over ninety-five

percent will never venture outside onto real rock. The very few who eventually find their way from plastic onto stone will experience a bumpy transition. And dangerous. There's no air conditioning out here, and the ground is uncompromisingly hard. Often jagged too. The "gym to crag" transition is fraught with real-world perils. Mosquitoes, anyone?

Back in Yosemite, Galen had a camera, too. In fact, he had recently made the leap from being a Chevy mechanic who pounded out articles on a greasy typewriter in the back room of his shop to photographing a cover story on Half Dome for National Geographic. His mentoring of Vern added a crucial dimension right there. It's a truism that the student will surpass the master. Galen's photography was striking, though it became known for a certain flashiness. I will never forget one impression. On Guide's Hill in the Tetons I walked into the canvas tent that was home that summer to the renowned climber Kim Schmitz. Hanging on the wall was my first view of what became Galen's most iconic image: Potala Palace in Tibet, home to the Dalai Lama before the Chinese stormed the place and sent him into exile. A striking rainbow landed squarely on its roof. I knew instantly whose image it was, and I involuntarily cringed at the rainbow plunked down so neatly on that storied roof.

Galen later bragged that he had run a mile along a high-altitude ridge, camera in hand, until the rainbow lined up perfectly. Another image comes to mind, a set-up shot, timer on a tripod. In it, Galen had run into the frame, grinning, with his arm draped over the shoulder of the Dalai Lama. It had the feeling of a buddy shot leaning on the fender of a hot rod in the Berkeley High School parking lot. You won't see its like in these pages. I do not hesitate, even, to say these things about Galen. He influenced us both greatly, and only much later have we been able to struggle out from under that influence to

see his art in a somewhat balanced light. Pretty critical, I realize, of our old friend. I had taught him to ski. He was never graceful at it, though he hardly cared. It was, to him, simply a tool of mountaineering. As Vern once quipped, “Galen was an important mentor for me. But the worst one can do is to learn how to ski from him!”

## 2

It is an open secret that the high alpine realms of California’s Sierra are blanketed half the year under deep snow. It’s stunningly up there. Vern and I both gravitated to a freshly-imported Nordic form of backcountry skiing. Which led to a moment in 1980 that stands out vividly in my memory. We’re riding together in a gondola, up Mammoth Mountain to swoop off its steep Cornice run. Vern’s foot rests in my crotch as I lace tightly his leather boots. They’re bendy, but the best we have to steer our skinny metal-edged Norwegian skis. His leverage, sitting across from one another, has already relaxed my boots. We were at the cutting-edge of a new sport, another one that it turns out we were forging together. It felt exciting. More California innovation.

We were together in Yosemite, too, its stand-up, stark and scary walls a nearly blinding white-grey. They are almost too steep, too smooth. Scratching at climbing them is not user-friendly. Rather, that pressure-cooker Valley is populated by noble, world-class test pieces. Step up. We do, then retreat to Camp 4, its worn dust venerable long before we arrived to join a series of Golden Ages there, marching through many decades at the cutting edge of ascent. Hushed tones—set off by bursts of bravado—reflect a scuffed-hands humility, the only possible response to such walls. Generations become fleeting things among them.

So it began, long ago, that climbers aging out of such a realm found their way across the Sierra to this place, which

is also set amidst magnificence nearly too overwhelming. The eastern escarpment of the High Sierra rises just beyond the edge of our town, climbing ten thousand feet, or barely short of that, to be edged by a sky verging ultraviolet. I had to be at its feet for decades before it hit me: Mt. Tom is right there, and as the second most massive peak in the range, it is nearly as high over our eyes as Everest towers above its Base Camp.

And what should have been Mt. Emerson, chisel-shaped and two peaks south, is close to a thousand feet higher, brushing up against the near-mythical—at least around here—elevation of 14,000 feet. John Muir named it that, only to have his vision of honoring our great Transcendentalist elbowed off the map by early cartographers sucking up to a tinhorn bureaucrat in D.C.—the one who signed their paychecks. It’s been like that all too often in our great Republic, where appealing to the ineffable takes second place to commercial interests.

Later, the same thing happened to our water rights. It was the turn of the Twentieth Century, and sleepy Pueblo de Los Angeles off to our south was stirring to life and sprouting orange groves. They required water. In a westward era of engineering visionaries the trans-Continental railroad had scarcely landed there, bringing a wave of thirsty bungalow-dwellers. Among them was William Mulholland, who imagined this Owens Valley’s water into hundreds of miles of aqueduct. A certain amount of city-slicker hoodwinking went into securing the water rights. Mulholland stood up at his dedication ceremony, at the foot of hundreds of feet of showmanship, a cement-lined cascade of the freshly-delivered water, and gave the shortest-ever speech for what was after all a planet-altering tap. “There it is. Take it.”

Locals around here were still grumbling about the “stolen” water when we climbers began arriving over half a century later. It took another couple of decades for

us, the new preservation-minded immigrants, to realize that the City of L.A.'s Department of Water and Power, whose wells now dotted our sage flats, had actually saved this National-Park-quality landscape from becoming yet another San Fernando Valley, where the orange groves had already given way to light industry, like Hollywood, and sprawls of suburbs.

Vern is among those who could see it. His boxy plate camera followed the even larger ones of Ansel Adams to capture the near-desolate open land along the banks of the Owens River with the peaks rampant beyond. He showed me another tonight. A new one. See, he's still struggling to elucidate this grandeur, for now squeezed into a handheld screen, with improbably-lush lupine in the foreground. He has an eye, and I am grateful.

### 3

Vern has served his apprenticeship to give us glimpses into the stunning nature of wild country. Sometimes backpacking upwards of forty pounds of rosewood 4 by 5 camera, film plates and an assortment of hefty glass lenses, lashed on top of the usual gear for surviving weeks in the alpine zone. Sometimes carrying one of his kids as well.

Miles from nowhere the hard work begins. Waiting for the light. Pacing. Eyes scrunched. Eyes already practiced to see out there, and then to look deeper. He's doing it all for us, flipping through on the coffee table. Maybe it's cold. A gust begins to vibrate the heavy tripod. Margaret and the kids have long since gone back to camp to make dinner. And still it's not quite the light, not the evocative force he's conjuring. Precipice Lake has not revealed its depths. When it does, Vern calls that his first good shot. It's been four years since he began lugging that camera.

Foreground matters, especially in vistas of grandness. It's come to be what I look for first. Recently Vern shot

the Mt. Whitney skyline from down in the Owens Valley. Like Half Dome, one of the most studied of vistas. On a certain Bridge in Yosemite, at a certain time of day, there is a lineup of the butts of photographers. Lotta expensive glass, but no foreground. Maybe the polished bridge railing? Vern found, among dry sage, an overflowing lushness in bloom to frame the etched gleam of high granite. Coming along without intention he saw, having driven there to drop his son off for a rite-of-passage month-long solo pilgrimage up the spine of the Range.

I like too that some of these shots feature light so flat that no one else would bother to pull out even an iPhone. A fence running into its gradual distance, sky as featureless as the snow it divides into—what? I would have shrugged and not even let up on the accelerator. Because I know the stunning backdrop of shining granite peaks that are *right there*, behind the shrouding mist. Not that day. No Sawtooth Ridge; no western blue sky. Instead, seeing, the subtle vision of a fine eye.

And I think of the shot from Walden Pond. You may not, before today, have appreciated Indian Rock in Berkeley, but we all know of Walden. Thoreau's hut is gone, though; what's there to see? Admittedly a snob of Western light, I think of the East Coast as tangled woods lacking great vistas. I once backpacked an entire weekend in North Carolina, only to find just one glimpse through trees of any magnitude. Yet Vern sees, going East by choice, year after year. What I still don't—well, see, is how Vern teased out of Walden's locale such transcendental light.

Enough! Vern, brother, love you man. Thanks for being in my life. Now let's feast on some photos.





BOOK ONE

# QUINTESSENTIAL VISIONS





## Spellbound in Rock Creek

“Spellbound in Rock Creek” might be my best Milky Way image ever! I was so hopeful up there that night, but I always needed to check on a computer to be sure.

I had taken a great shot up there in 2018, but there was an even better capture waiting for me somewhere in Rock Creek. Back then, there were problems with the original captures, and I knew I was a more skilled photographer now. I had an older image on my webpage that was really wonderful and inspired me to take a closer look.

For me, my camera is just a tool. I do not shoot with the left side of my brain. It is fine for people to capture memories with their iPhones, and I had mine with me, but I put it away after seeing the scene in front of me that night. I had a clear concept of what I wanted to present. During one critical moment at 9:05, I could not find any of the three readings in my pack. It did not matter—I just KNEW what to do without thinking. I could adjust the camera by feel and spiritual means.

I was extremely excited walking down the trail, but when I saw the result, I was stunned.

## Aspendell Aspen #2

Every year, on the East Side of the Sierra, fall colors appear in the canyons of Bishop Creek. And I am out chasing the colors: in Rock Creek Canyon, along Grant Lake, in Lee Vining Canyon, or above the shore of Mono Lake. The alchemy of summer rains and cool autumn nights creates the color that calls me to the mountains every day. One of my favorite spots is near Aspendell, just below the confluence of the North and Middle forks of Bishop Creek, where in 1993 I had first experienced evening light in an aspen grove. Nearly thirty years later, I found myself in the same place where I captured this magical balance of light and color in the aspens.







## Portland Japanese Gardens

I had heard about and seen versions of this capture for years, maybe decades. So in this case, I did not discover this image. But I was sure that in late October, the autumn colors would be superb. And how true, the Japanese Gardens were on fire the last week of October. And there was a light overcast too, a rain stopped a few minutes earlier, the wet leaves were shimmering. By chance I met another photographer from the Bay Area at the gate, we had the same idea in mind. And he was originally from Japan! We had the afternoon alone in this spot too. An employee from the Garden mentioned you were allowed only 15 minutes on the weekend! I made many captures of this superb spot, its really a small shooting area, maybe the camera positions are about 5 to 8 feet apart. Every one of them is great, but I preferred a wider angle viewpoint. This decision let me use my very widest lens too, a Canon 16-35L, version 3. It is an incredible lens!











### **Dawn—Bear Creek Spire and Little Lakes Valley**

This Sunday morning in October I encountered some of the finest light I have ever seen over Bear Creek Spire and Little Lakes Valley in over 35 years of living in the Eastern Sierra. We left the parking lot in the pre-dawn darkness and arrived at this beautiful site in time to brew coffee and prepare for the sunrise. As the sun climbed in the east and the light spilled into lingering clouds and the Sierra crest, I captured the crystal-clear pink light at the first hint of dawn.

## The Milky Way over the Evolution Peaks

On a stormy late-summer journey into the wild reaches of Kings Canyon National Park I expected rain in the afternoon followed by clear early-evening skies. I made a few captures at the moment the sun dips below the horizon—called the “blue hour,” from the French *l’heure bleue*. Though when I had my camera in place the rain returned. Then around 8 PM it cleared. The Milky Way briefly appeared in the sky above my tent door. But then the cold rain again began to fall. Back home, with the image still in my mind’s eye, I reviewed a sequence of images in my files. While most images of the Milky Way are made up of two or more captures in the field, when I shot my original images, I had yet to grasp how two or more captures can record what is there in a single exposure. In returning to my cache of images of the “blue hour” I discovered a combination that would present the foreground as I had envisioned it.









### **Dawn, Autumn, Lake Sabrina**

As it happens, I made a wonderful image at this location back in 1999. But over the years I had forgotten about this place—and its possibilities. Then in 2013 I scheduled a back-country workshop for the same days that the colors were at their peak. It turned out that those days were quite stormy and a bit too cold for a group in the mountains. And so we decided to spend our first day at North Lake and scout locations around Bishop Creek. On the following cold and windy morning, before dawn near the shore of Lake Sabrina, I was fortunate to capture a flood of golden light spilled on to the peaks above the valley.



## North Lake Skyline

This is the very first print from my new digital camera. I must admit that I was very concerned about the quality of this new Canon all summer. I made the purchase in May, and then photographed all summer before I found the time to begin making prints. The results are really stunning! In this case, I would never have had the time to set up my 4x5 camera. The light only lasted about 90 seconds. Earlier it had been cloudy, and then later, rainy for a few minutes. The sun broke through briefly, revealing this stunning scene. The Autumn of 2010 had the best color of my career here in the Eastern Sierra. Maybe the reason was a combination of good color, and the idea of “mindfulness” when shooting.







### First Snowfall and Rock Creek Autumn Aspen

This image is just above Rock Creek Lakes Resort (home to the Pie in the Sky Cafe) here in the Eastern Sierra. I had worked this location a few times before, and made a wonderful image just after a rainfall in September of 2001. This year, 2011, we had an early heavy snowfall in the mountains. I was sure that this setup would work, and that I'd be able to retreat to the store when I inevitably became wet and cold! Even so, I had no idea that the snow and autumn aspen would be so perfect together. The weather was so calm that I was even able to make a horizontal panoramic image, a method of using five vertical captures to seam into a single panoramic later on. The final print here is amazingly sharp. I doubt that I could have done better with my old 4x5, which is encouraging as I continue to switch to digital cameras!











## Half Dome and Night Sky

I have made many trips out to North Dome to photograph Half Dome. My daughter, Sabrina and I have tried in the winter, and twice with the rising full moon. Neither of those concepts has worked out so far. July of 2015 afforded an opportunity to try again. As I packed my camera bag for the trip, my phone rang with a young family from San Diego. They have attended several workshops; their children have never spent much time in the Sierra. I was happy to invite them along! They went on to North Dome while I scouted my pre-selected location. I made several captures in the gathering darkness and then waited for the Milky Way. Somewhere in this time-frame I realized the Milky Way was not rising where I had envisioned, and clouds were gathering overhead. I have learned to press ahead though, ones ideas seldom work out as planned. In this situation I was very pleased with the Milky Way and clouds. I chose the best capture and combined it with the best exposure made in the last light of day.





### **Super Flower Blood Moon Eclipse over Mount Whitney**

While the West Coast was deep in slumber, the heavens produced a wonderful extravaganza in the skies. The eclipse began at about 3AM, and was gone by 415AM. I had a Gatorade bottle full of coffee, and was really prepared for this shoot. There is a panoramic made earlier too. But I must admit I was baffled by how to expose this image. One really needs to have about a one second exposure to stop the motion in the moon. And the scene was WAY too dark and contrasty, for such a short exposure. I had only seconds to make the image. I made two exposures and combined them later here in the Gallery. It was a beautiful night, I saw the eclipse, and then went back to bed at the Dow Villa in Lone Pine.

## Temple Crag and the Milky Way

The day started calm, blue bird Sierra sky at its finest. My son, Dylan, and I set out for a dream image I have wanted to shoot for years. The Milky Way over Temple Craig ... what a sight to see this will be. We meandered up from the desert, the sound of high elevation winds gently singing through the air. Around 3pm we took a short break, “the temperature sure is dropping” we commented... the winds now notably stronger above us..

We reached camp and immediately needed layers. It was cold, very cold. By 9pm the preliminary shooting had begun. We were dressed in all our clothing, me in multiple layers of down and Dylan in a large expedition grade parka. The wind was howling and the tripod was held securely with a large sack of rocks. We grabbed a few preliminary shots and headed to bed, alarms set for 130AM, waiting, as the Milky Way drifted into position. The alarms sounded but neither of us had slept, violent gusts had kept us wide awake. We piled rocks on our sleeping bags and struggled to stand against the prevailing wind. Returning to the image location revealed the tripod, star tracker, camera, and sack of rocks all on the ground. A gust had clearly dominated our logical use of weight. Shivering and with numb fingers we struggled to get the set-up back. Our first few shots proved complete failures. Blurred stars, blurred image, something wasn't right. Close inspection proved the star tracker had suffered a fatal wound in the fall. Cracked, damaged, and wiggling it was removed. Morale was quickly dwindling into the darkness. We were getting blown over, hats blown off, stumbling, numb, frozen knobs, camera moving and falling. With wind now gusting upwards of 60mph it wasn't looking good for this dream image requiring a motionless 20 second exposure. We struggled for an hour, time and time again, 3... 2... 1... shooting... Dylan pulled down with full strength on the tripod as I attempted to shelter the camera. We shot roughly 30 images that night before finally giving into fatigue ... and one ... only this one image turned out sharp.











### Winter Aspen Glow—Eastern Sierra

This capture was in my mind, and I actively worked on it since 2009. Back in the days when I when I had a loaner system from Nikon, I attempted my first images from this location. It required a LONG time for the right-side of my brains to come up with stunning image, all the way to late 2020. There were other possibilities, but I remember becoming aware of these aspens in the spring of 2015. I conceived of various compositions and lighting contingencies and made many attempts in the last five years. I worked the theme in the spring of 2015, and again in the summers, and made attempts the autumns of 2017 and 2019. Without snow in autumn, and after a recent snowfall too. All were good – but they did not have that “special extra” of my portfolio images. Eventually in the early winter of 2020, I found success. The first substantial storm with a few inches of snow, the road was not closed yet, a strong reflection a nearby snow covered slope. All these things were key to success. And my post-processing had advanced enough to handle an extremely high contrast scene too. I am quite happy with this image.





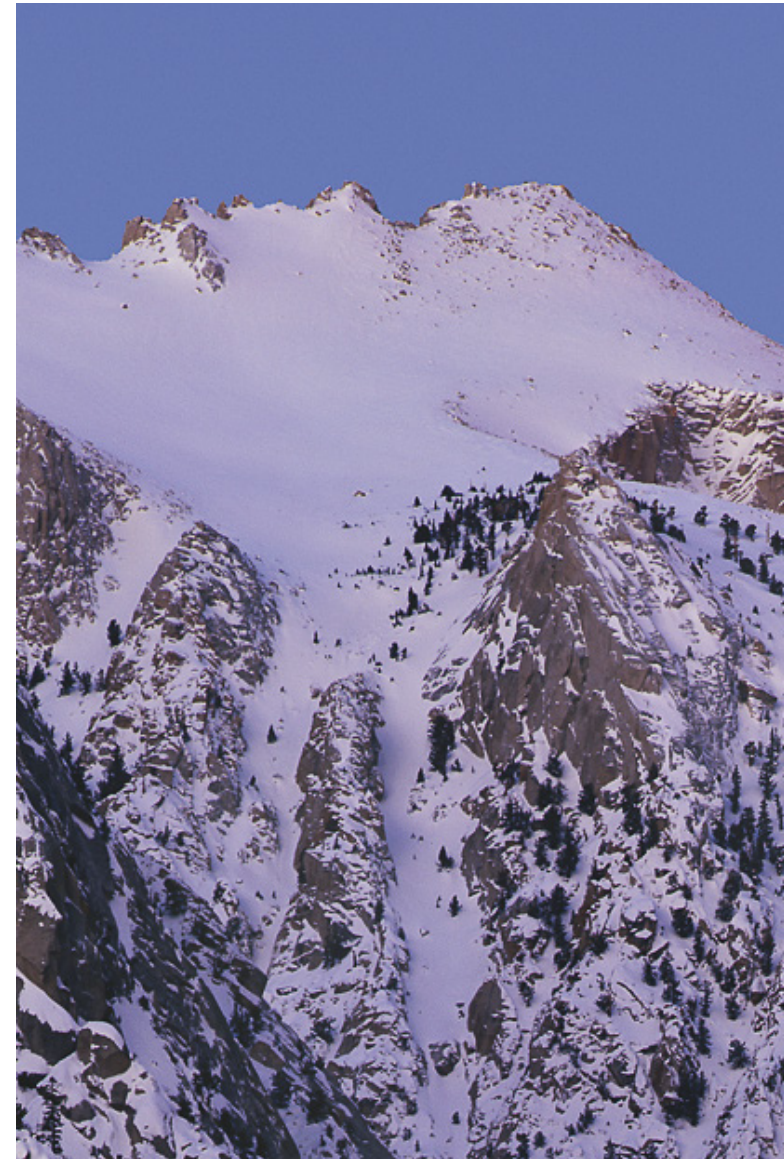


### The Palisades and the Milky Way

This capture can only be described as breathtaking. Both of my adult children, Dylan and Sabrina, and myself agree that there was nothing to do except laugh with joyful wonder when we first saw these captures in the review mode of my Canon. I am so grateful that they were along--this night will never be forgotten. We were bivouacked at 14,000 feet in the Palisades in Kings Canyon National Park, and I have never seen the Milky Way so bright. The night was not really dark until 11PM. It was a good night to be both mindful and focused, as I doubt that I will ever see this setting again. I had always believed that this idea would be an essential part of my lifetime portfolio. Several years elapsed as I found one excuse after another to NOT make the hard trip to this location. Finally I realized that I was getting older, and that getting down the peak was becoming more dicey as time wore on. But I also knew that I was gathering skills each summer, too, so by 2018, all seemed to be a “Go”. It was an incredible evening, though I wound up very cold and my kids were scattered about on the talus by morning.

### Mount Whitney Pink Glow

Storms plagued the High Sierra in January of 1995. On the first clear morning in 19 days, I awoke at 4:00 A.M. and drove down highway 395 to Lone Pine. Then I drove in 4WD up the Whitney Portal road until the truck was stuck, and set the camera next to the tailgate! I composed this image from above the Alabama Hills, maybe half way up the road to Whitney Portal. The great distance required the use of a very long telephoto lens. I had made an attempt at this shot a couple of weeks earlier, but the alpenglow light just did not happen. But here the light was some of the cleanest and best alpenglow that I have ever witnessed in the Sierra Nevada.









### **Dawn, Lunar Eclipse, Super Moon, Mount Ritter**

“Don’t do a mess-up, Dad”. That was a quote from my son, Dylan, way back in 1996, while we were working on an image that would become an important image in my portfolio, “Cathedral Peak Alpenglöw”. My wife, Margaret, and Dylan’s partner, Dahlia were both with us today too. Later in the Gallery he mentioned that he wished to utter those exact words once again, the scene before us was truly a “once-in-a-lifetime image”. But he was wisely silent this time. I must admit that I was not nearly “mindful” enough this morning. The shooting window on this capture was about thirty seconds. Once again I was equipped with an unfamiliar Canon 400mm telephoto lens. I have been a more traditional photographer (with much shorter 4x5 lenses used in daylight) over the years, and I do not have nearly the practical experience with night shooting. The tableau before us was astonishing. “Dawn, Lunar Eclipse of the Super Moon, over Mount Ritter” will not be seen again by my lifetime.











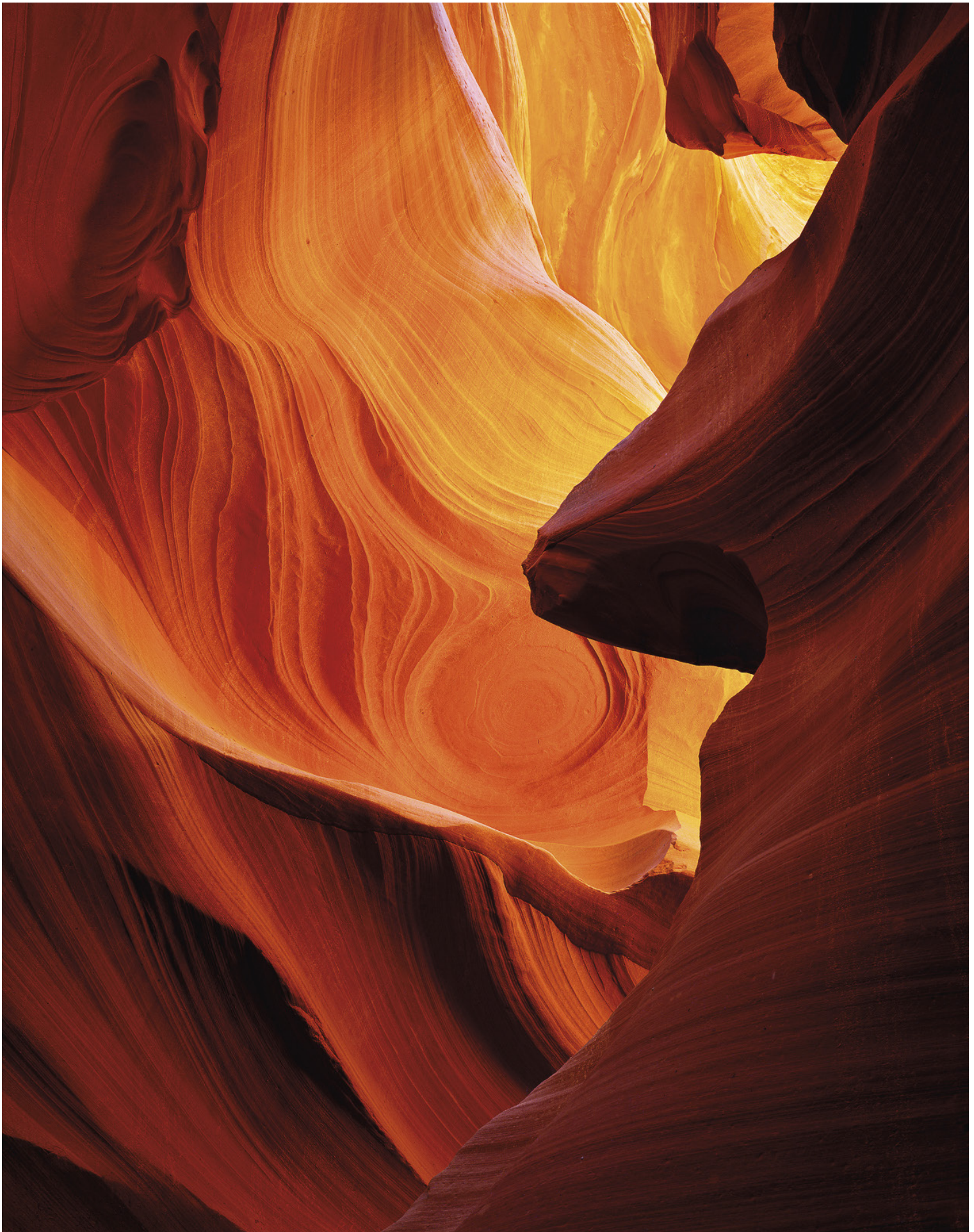
### Early Autumn—Walden Woods

Margaret and I recently visited the New England states to visit old friends, and to visit our daughter, Sabrina, a freshman at Yale. This is a bit flippant, but I follow the KISS rule with all important work. There are too many complicated features on modern cameras. This idea is even more important when capturing what could be a once-in-a-lifetime image. I was at the Walden Woods during the trip, the colors were spectacular, and I had good light. During the last part of the drive, I slipped into a mindful mode, chose what photographic tools to employ, and kept it simple. I wanted the creative, right side of my brain to be in charge. Concord, Massachusetts is an historic location from the Revolutionary War, and I would love to visit the area again. I have been exploring the area three times this year.

### Antelope #1

Of all the famous slitrock canyons of the Southwest, Antelope Canyon is perhaps the most photogenic. I made this image during my first visit and have never done another one as strong.







## Precipice Lake

This image is my first signature piece. Its success helped push me into a career as a full-time photographer. My inspiration came from seeing Ansel Adams' famous black and white photo of a frozen Precipice Lake using a much different concept. My friend and fellow photographer Claude Fiddler, my wife Margaret, and I made the trip together. We set out from the west side of the Sierra Nevada for two days on a hot, dusty trail. When we arrived, I was surprised to see the striking effervescent green of the water. I had only been shooting large format for 4 years at the time. There was still a big learning curve. I used no filters or polarizers. It was possibly blind luck that the old Ektachrome 64 film worked so well for the image. I only managed one original of this scene at the time.











### Seven Gables / Big Lear Lake

A father now, this was my first trip in years solely devoted to photographing the High Sierra, and I was on my own for four days. Hiking out of Pine Creek, I headed over Italy Pass. I had visited Big Bear Lake in 1981 and knew of its potential. At that time, I had only a 35mm camera with me. With my 4x5 camera on this trip, the conditions were incredible! I camped here on the second day and scouted locations. It snowed a few inches each day, so I set up early the next morning hoping to catch the fresh snow on the scene. As it turned out, the better image transpired later in the day as the snow melted and revealed the bright green of the wet grasses. The cloud cover put the foreground in the shade while the peaks in the background received ample direct light.







### Yosemite Valley View in March

We have made the time to journey back to Yosemite several times this past year. During those trips it's been wonderful to take a new look at the park through my "photographic eyes" of today. I grew up in the park, and my earliest mentors were there too, but I hadn't been back for close look in years. It has been a wonderful time, searching for that exquisite light and season using all my 25 years of experience. As my children have become older, there has been more time to devote to new photographic themes like Yosemite. I made this image in March of 2007 during a stopover on the way to San Francisco. Margaret and I noticed a storm gathering over Mammoth, and we made time to allow a stop in the Valley just after the storm cleared the next afternoon.







### Half Dome and Illilouette Falls

In 1977, I hiked to the base of Illilouette Falls. The image of the falls pouring into its own deep canyon made an impression that has lured a return ever since, and I knew I would have to come back to this enchanting place. In early summer in 2008, it was time. On a hunch, I decided to take a close look from the top of the falls before going to the bottom. The trail in this area is routed far back from the edge. The perch I spotted to shoot from was precarious to reach, even with my extensive climbing background – an overhang of rotten rock upon which to set up my tripod and camera. Setting up atop was followed by the alarming prospect of maneuvering around the camera and tripod, working and changing film, with such unnerving high exposure! Later I saw that the perch was undercut by a good 50 feet! I was lucky to manage good results on my first attempt at this staggering view which leads down Illilouette Canyon and on to the magnificent Half Dome.



## Korakia Doorway

Unlike many of my photographs, this particular doorway was not carefully scouted. One morning, I was out for a run before the La Quinta Arts Festival. I just happened to glance up and saw the most wonderful door I could ever imagine. At the time, I was slightly early for what might be the best light of the day so I immediately ran back to my car and grabbed my camera. Knowing that this was one of the most important images of my career, I was very worried about the outcome. I quickly exposed only two pieces of film before the sun came around the corner of the building and washed out the scene. Today, this doorway is no longer an appealing subject because other trees have been planted and the original bougainvillea has grown to overwhelm the composition.







## San Juan Capistrano Hallway

While driving I-5 with my son, I decided to have yet another look at Mission San Juan Capistrano. Dylan walked inside and, clearly taken aback, blurted “Wow!” In 2000, the bougainvilleas around this archway were in bloom far better than I had ever seen. I knew the best light would be late afternoon, so I planned to return at 4:30, leaving barely enough time before closing. By then, the line of trees to the west and the possibility of low lying clouds would soften the contrast of this scene between the dark shadows of the hallway and the brilliant highlights along the left courtyard. The foreground bougainvilleas would be completely in the shade. The most brilliant colors of flowers or forests are often found in shady or foggy lighting conditions.











## Bridgeport Fence

This fenceline image holds a special place in my heart. The journey to capture it was both challenging and rewarding. Picture this: I'd attempted similar shots in various locations, but none quite matched my vision. Then, on my drive back from Reno, I stumbled upon this spot in Bridgeport. The day wasn't as cold as it appears—I was soaked, my camera was wet, and my truck ended up stuck off the side of Highway 395. I had to wrestle with chains to get back on the road!

The timing was serendipitous; my photo emerged just before the release of the movie “*Fargo*.” It gained unexpected popularity, and digital printing breathed new life into it. Recently, I've had intriguing encounters with folks from the east coast who work in the barbed wire industry. They pinpointed the precise ranch where this fenceline stands.

Isn't it fascinating how art connects us across time, space, and industries? If you'd like to hear more tales from my photographic adventures, I'm all ears!



I only went out for a walk, and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out,  
I found, was really going in.

—John Muir, *Unpublished Journals* 439



# VERN CLEVENGER: A BORN MOUNTAINEER

BY MARK C. LONG

## I

Vern Clevenger first set foot in Tuolumne Meadows when he fourteen. It was the summer of 1970, and he was in the mountains on a backpacking trip. The following year, Vern returned to climb with members of the Sierra Club. On the Tioga Road, where Mount Dana and Mount Gibbs rise in the East beyond the sloping granite of Lembert Dome, he caught a glimpse of the Sierra crest on the Eastern edge of Yosemite National Park. He was looking at the landscape that would change his life. “The view took my breath away,” Vern recalled years later, “and it took my life away too.” He had completed his junior year at Oakland’s Bishop O’Dowd High School; and he had been accepted at the University of California, Berkeley. Little did he know those plans were changing. He was walking into the range of light.

Though he had come to Sierra much earlier. His mother drove him and his brother up from the Bay Area for extended summer vacations—at Wawona along the banks of the Merced, at Bridalveil camp along the Glacier Point Road, and in Yosemite Valley. Back home in Oakland,

before he was ten, Vern spent days hunched over his copy of *A Climber’s Guide to The High Sierra*—a young boy imagining trails, high mountain passes, and peaks. The *Guide* was a treasure for a boy dreaming of the mountains. It included black-and-white plates of the High Sierra landscape by Cedric White, Francis P. Farquhar, Philip Hyde, and Ansel Adams, images that filled Vern’s head with the promise of mountain exploration and adventure.

Vern learned to climb with his Boy Scout troop—at Indian Rock, in the Berkeley Hills, where he met experienced climbers who invited him on weekend climbing trips to Yosemite Valley. One of these climbers, Galen Rowell, already an established Valley climber, recognized Vern’s determination and ability. It is not surprising, then, that he made the time to visit with Vern’s grandmother in Oakland, where Vern was living at time, to assure her of the many virtues of her grandson spending weekends in the mountains. “Vern was the shaggy kid who showed up in Yosemite at fifteen following Galen Rowell around like a clumsy puppy,” recalls Doug Robinson, “then found his feet to become the edge-master of Tuolumne Meadows, where face climbing had already reached a high, thin art.” (198 *A Night*). Rowell was a



generous mentor for Vern as he found his way in the Valley and he remained a trusted friend as Vern continued his journey as a mountaineer and photographer.

These early mountain experiences gave Vern the confidence to begin exploring on his own. In December of 1971, Vern and his friend Bill Dougherty, both Eagle Scouts, set out on a winter ascent of Mt. Shasta. After two days of climbing, they reached an elevation of 13,200.' But the following morning it began to snow. With temperatures below zero, and wading through hip-deep snow drifts, they descended into the wrong canyon. When they reached timberline, at around 7,000-feet, they realized their error, and set up a camp. There they rationed their remaining food to wait out the storm. The weather finally let up. On December 30th, after eleven nights on the mountain, and they were able to descend to the U.S. Plywood Lumbermill outside the town of McCloud. As it happened, the film and television actor Fess Parker, on location for a pilot film for television, drove them to the hospital. There they were treated for frostbite, exposure, and hunger. "I'm glad we could get down on our own because it would have been embarrassing to be rescued," Vern told a local newspaper reporter. And in a front-page story in the December 31st issue of the *Oakland Tribune* Vern's father responded to a reporter's question about whether he would allow his son to climb the mountain again. "If he wants to go up there again, I'd say yes. He's a born mountaineer."

## 2

By the age of seventeen Vern was living in Yosemite Valley. There he quickly established himself as among the most gifted and ambitious climbers of his generation. His mentors included a legendary big wall climber, Jim Bridwell; and, as a resident of the infamous residence of

Yosemite climbers, Camp 4, he absorbed the wisdom of a generation of climbers that included Royal Robbins, Chuck Pratt, Doug Robinson, and Yvon Chouinard. Vern earned a reputation for pushing the boundaries of free climbing. "It was obvious that he was a cut above the rest of the climbers," Rowell recalled. "I'm not sure how well he did in school, but when it came to climbing, he was far smarter than the rest." During eight seasons climbing in the Valley Vern's partners included the world's foremost climbers, including Dale Bard, Ron Kauk, and John Bachar. In addition to impressive first ascents, he successfully completed a free climb of the Harding Route on the east face of Washington Column as well as other formidable Valley routes.

Then in December of 1976, Vern was among the climbers who learned that a plane had crashed in Lower Merced Pass Lake in the Clark Range—a twin-engine Howard 500 transporting 6000 pounds of marijuana from Mexico to the US. In the spring, as climbers began hiking in to the accident site, Vern packed in a borrowed chain saw to cut sodden marijuana bales out of the ice. But on his walk back to the trailhead Vern was stopped by rangers. The next day found him in the Yosemite Valley jail. Though a judge declined to sentence him for drug possession and he was released.

Through the 1970s Vern found his way on the smooth granite domes and slabs of Tuolumne Meadows. Living in the Sierra Club camp, he was an inescapable presence, and his first ascents would become legendary—on climbs that challenged him and his peers. He was a dedicated and visionary climber whose experiments with technique, equipment, and style helped him complete climbs unimaginable to earlier generations of climbers. In a letter to Bob Kamps published in the 1975–1976 issue of *Ascent* magazine on the state of climbing in Tuolumne Meadows, Tom Higgins commented that "Vern Clevenger's looseleaf



bundle of routes looks like an underground journal, a cauliflower ballooning in the rough. God. As many new routes in two years as in the previous twenty!” (23). Vern’s numerous first ascents included delicate face climbs above Tenaya Lake, and on the smooth northwest face of Medlicott Dome, as well as more sustained lines on the magnificent West Face of Fairview Dome, including the routes Mr. Toad’s Wild Ride, Heart of Stone, and Pièce de Résistance.

Outside the Park boundaries Vern pursued ambitious first ascents and mountain traverses throughout the High Sierra—with Rowell, Claude Fiddler, and others. His accomplishments included the first complete traverse of the Minarets, in the Ansel Adams Wilderness, and the Sawtooth Range traverse on the northeast boundary of Yosemite National Park. Vern’s passion for climbing led him into the southern regions of the High Sierra. He also traveled further afield, including the Shawangunks in New York. There he and partner Ron Kauk completed a number of difficult routes, including the second free ascent of the well-known route Super Crack. Then in 1982 Vern traveled to the Khumbu Region in Nepal to attempt a first ascent of the last named, unclimbed peak in the Everest region, Cholatse (Jobo Lhaptshan). With Peter Hackett, Bill O’Connor, Al Read, John Roskelley, and Galen Rowell he successfully climbed the 21,130’ peak, alpine style, via the southwest arête.

### 3

Though Vern’s adventures in the mountains were mostly close to home, in the Sierra Nevada, the mountains he first imagined reading *A Climber’s Guide to The High Sierra* as a young boy—and, as he would later learn, that his grandmother explored on summer outings as a member of the Stanford University Alpine Club. Too,

in Tuolumne Meadows, on a sunny August afternoon on the sandy beach at the eastern edge of Tenaya Lake, Vern was introduced to a new climbing partner. The following day he roped up with Margaret. She readily scrambled up a difficult face climb. Vern was impressed. And over the next decade, Margaret established herself as a formidable climber on many of the most difficult routes in Tuolumne—and Vern and Margaret became a *tour de force* on the granite domes of the Meadows. They also hiked and climbed throughout the most remote regions of the High Sierra—as well as on extended trips through the mountainous regions of Nepal. In 1983 they celebrated their relationship in a marriage ceremony at Parson’s Lodge.

In 1989 Vern and Margaret’s life took a turn when their first child Dylan was born. Although in less than three years they were back in the mountains on a thirty-day hike of the John Muir Trail with their young son. Their second child Sabrina arrived in 1996; and in 2000 the family was in the mountains again on a through-hike of the 212-mile Muir trail. In the years that followed, Vern and Margaret continued to share their love of the mountains with their growing children. And as the family explored the Sierra, Vern and Margaret navigated both the challenges of raising children and the difficult terrain of love.

A devastating medical diagnosis of a brain tumor in 2004 changed everything. Vern’s prognosis was, at first, thirteen months to live. An eleven-hour surgery to remove part of the tumor, followed by chemotherapy and radiation treatments, changed the prognosis to six years. But in 2008 an MRI revealed new growth, and Vern endured another surgical procedure and round of chemotherapy. Living through surgery and recovery and recurrence was of course enormously difficult. Though as he navigated his daunting health challenges his mind was never far from the mountains. In fact, the day after his last

chemotherapy treatment, in 2008, he walked alone into the Ansel Adams Wilderness and completed a one-day ascent to the 13,000 foot summit of Mt. Ritter.

In the years that followed both Dylan and Sabrina joined their father on countless High Sierra adventures. When Dylan was fifteen, he completed a trans-Sierra ski trip with his father—from the Ostrander Ski Hut to Mammoth Lakes. They completed a father-and-son ascent of Michael Minaret, established a new route on the North Face of Mount Gardiner in Kings Canyon National Park, and teamed up on ambitious backcountry climbs and ski descents. Vern and his daughter Sabrina took many trips together as well, including a six-day cross-country circuit around Mt. Lyell. And on a cold June night in 2018 Vern bivouacked at 14,000' with Dylan and Sabrina to capture night time images of the Milky Way over the Palisades crest. On these and other sojourns Vern's children joined in his creative process. Once she was older, during her final year of college at Yale, Sabrina reflected on an early-January photoshoot of the supermoon with her father in a Bristlecone Grove high in the White Mountains. "Things you learn from going with Dad for pictures: it's usually really cold, but it's also usually really cool."

With their children growing, and now exploring the world on their own, Vern and Margaret resumed their mountain adventures together. As they reacquainted themselves with the remote region of the High Sierra they began calling themselves "Lucy and Bolton." Their inspiration was Bolton Colt Brown, a Professor of Fine Arts at Stanford University, and his wife Lucy Fletcher Brown—an intrepid couple who roamed the Sierra over a century before them, and who in 1865 made the first ascent of Mount Clarence King. It is an appropriate comparison, as this nineteenth-century pair brought their two-year old daughter to a high camp in the Sierra backcountry a century before Vern and Margaret began walking the Muir

trail with their children.

Vern's outlook on life and art matured over his years of parenting. "I became a more spiritual person," is how he explains it. At the same time his medical challenges and treatments prompted deeper reflections on his own life as well as his place in the world. Coming to terms with his past turned out to be a spiritual journey that in turn reinvigorated his creative process. He developed a more intuitive sense of his work as a photographer and a deeper spiritual connection to the landscape. "I feel more ready now," Vern wrote in the fall of 2019 during an extended stay in his beloved Tuolumne Meadows. No longer preoccupied with climbing, Vern experienced a clearer sense of his surroundings. His mindful process led him to new locations in his familiar landscape. He recognized, as he put it in his journal, that "it is a wonderful time in life to be an artist."

In retrospect the arc of Vern's life is as improbable as it is inevitable. His formative early childhood experiences in the mountains sustained him as he navigated family challenges at home. Through his teenage years, consumed with climbing, he escaped the complications of his family while building a sense of place in the climbing community. Writing about this tension between escape and belonging in the life of a climber, Doug Robinson observes that to "climb with intense concentration is to shut out the world." In Yosemite, as Vern can now see, he was shutting out the difficulties and uncertainties of his family life. At the same time, during his years as a climber—and in the decades of mountain exploration that followed—Vern began to face his insecurities as he struggled toward a greater sense of meaning and purpose in his life. In fact as Robinson goes on to suggest, "the laborious and visionary parts of climbing" can initiate a process of "liberating the individual from his concept of self. . . showing the self to be only a small part of a subtle integrated universe"



(“Climber as Visionary,” *Ascent* 1969). Through climbing Vern was finding his way.

Vern’s journey is a story of engaging the mind and the body in a particular place in the world. In this recognition of the world beyond himself Vern was developing a more expansive sense of his place in the world: a sense of place that John Muir described in his journal on a walk from Tenaya Canyon to Tuolumne Meadows. “When we try to pick out anything by itself,” Muir wrote, “we find it hitched to everything else in the universe” (157). The life of a visionary mountain traveler, as Robinson suggests, is not some “supernatural or otherworldly” pursuit. Rather it is a way of being in the world that “amounts to bringing fresh vision to the familiar things of the world. . . always to great degrees of intensity, but never beyond the boundaries of the real and physically present.” As a photographer, then, Vern has successfully transformed his vision as a climber into the creative process of capturing moments in the landscape where he makes his home. His images share with a familiar and surprising vision of the real world, the world to which we belong.





BOOK TWO

# YOSEMITE

