

## UPPER WASHBOWL, From Page 21

rules around here, and you are reminded of that every day.”

He married a woman from Tupper Lake (Jamie Konkoski), fathered a son (Jasper, now eight), and tried to make a go of it as a free-lance guide, supplementing his income with a variety of other jobs. In 2009, he started working for EMS, which has grown into a full-time gig.

We park along Route 73 near Chapel Pond, where we meet three others who will join us: Josh Wilson, a photographer; Will Roth, another EMS guide, and Monique Wicks, a friend of Will. From the highway, we follow a herd path past the Creature Wall, another climbing crag, to the talus below Upper Washbowl. In a half-hour or so, we reach the base of the Wiessner Route, a short chimney-like feature next to a corner in the cliff.

The crux, or hardest part, of the 335-foot climb lies only forty feet above us: a large rectangular block, about the size of a refrigerator. Even Wiessner had trouble surmounting the block when he made the first ascent in 1938. He did the route with two partners, Bob Notman, a former president of the Harvard Mountaineering Club, and M. Beckett Howorth, a physician afflicted with the climbing bug. Howorth later wrote: “Having observed his labors in circumventing the block, and being naturally lazy, I found a way to traverse from the sloping slab to the top of the block, thereby avoiding the crack, much to Fritz’s disgust, and Bob followed.”

Matt and I are determined to do it Fritz’s way, but we have to wait while Will leads Josh and Monique up the cliff on a different rope. After Josh gets in position to take photos, Matt climbs to the block, places a camming device in a crack, clips the rope to the device to catch him in case of a fall, wedges his foot in the crack, stands up, and hoists himself over the block. He makes it look so easy. He then continues to a ledge about seventy-five feet up, placing cams en route, and anchors himself to the rock.

“On belay!” he calls down.

“Climbing!” I shout back.

“Climb on!”

The moment of truth arrives. I am at the block and reach upward to retrieve the camming device. Normally, this is a simple matter: you pull on a trigger on the shaft to retract the cams, allowing the device to slip out of the crack. But this one is set deep in the crack and under the block, making it difficult to grasp the trigger. As I struggle with the trigger with one hand, my other hand is wedged in the crack, holding much of my weight. It doesn’t take long for my arm to tire. I start to worry that I’ll slip. Since I’m attached to the rope, I won’t get hurt if I fall, but I want to climb the route cleanly. I retreat to better footholds to rest, then have at it again.

Eventually, I get the sucker out, but I still have to climb over the block. Following Matt’s example, I wedge my right foot in the crack and stand so I can grasp the top of the block. When my hands find some good holds, I know I can do it. With the four climbers above shouting encouragement, I work my feet higher and pull myself onto the block. Yes! I did it the Wiessner way, albeit with more grit than grace.

The rest of the climb is easier. On the second pitch, we find generous handholds and footholds to facilitate the ascent. The pitch ends at a cedar tree near Slanting Ledge, a wide ramp that bisects the cliff. The comfortable ledge offers climbers a respite and a chance to savor views of the Great Range.

For the third pitch, climbers typically walk 150 feet along the ramp to a short chimney at the far end, where the



**ABOVE:** Upper Washbowl offers a view of Chapel Pond Slab on the other side of Route 73.



Photos by Josh Wilson

**LEFT:** Monique Weeks prepares to make a move on pitch four.

Matt makes quick work of the short pitch, following a large crack on the left. I follow without much trouble, finding plenty of footholds and handholds on the way. The exit at the end entails a slightly tricky move.

I’m the last in our group, and when I finish we all exchange hoots and high fives. After we take in the views again, Josh, Will, and Monique begin following a path that leads back to the base of the cliff. Matt and I stay behind so I can get video of him talking about Wiessner.

“He put the route up wearing mountain boots, using hemp rope, pitons—it was very bold, brilliant climbing for the day,” Matt tells me. “As we found out today, the climbing is just as exciting as it ever was.”

On the same weekend in 1938 that he climbed Upper Washbowl, Fritz established the Wiessner Routes on Wallface and Indian Head. The one on Wallface is seldom climbed, and the one on Indian Head is on private land and closed to the public. The Upper Washbowl route, though, is a classic that continues to attract climbers of all abilities. It’s included in *Selected Climbs of the Northeast*, a compendium of the best climbs in New York and New England.

“It is an impressive route, especially when considering how early it was first climbed, not to mention the commitment involved with heading so high up into the

unknown,” the guidebook says.

Wiessner made his mark venturing into unknown vertical realms. Among his feats: in 1935, he established the first routes in the Shawangunks, the most popular climbing cliffs in the Northeast. That same year he put up perhaps the hardest route in the country on Ragged Mountain. In 1937, he became the first to scale Devil’s Tower in Wyoming without artificial aids. In 1939, he nearly made it to the top of K2, the second-highest mountain on Earth, a remarkable achievement for the time. The generations of climbers that followed, in the Adirondacks and elsewhere, remain in his debt. ■

final pitch begins. When Matt guides, however, he divides the ledge into two short pitches so he can stay in communication with his client. Thus, he sets up a belay anchor next to a giant inside corner. The crack in the corner is Partition, one of the best of the harder routes on Upper Washbowl. It’s also a sober reminder of the risks of climbing. In 2010, Dennis Murphy died in a fall while preparing to rappel from the top of Partition. He hit the ledge and then plunged to the bottom of the cliff. Murphy was a manager at the EMS store, and Matt knew him well.

From Partition, it’s an easy scramble (mostly walking) to the start of the final pitch, a wide crack in the corner. It’s the hardest part of the climb after the rectangular block.