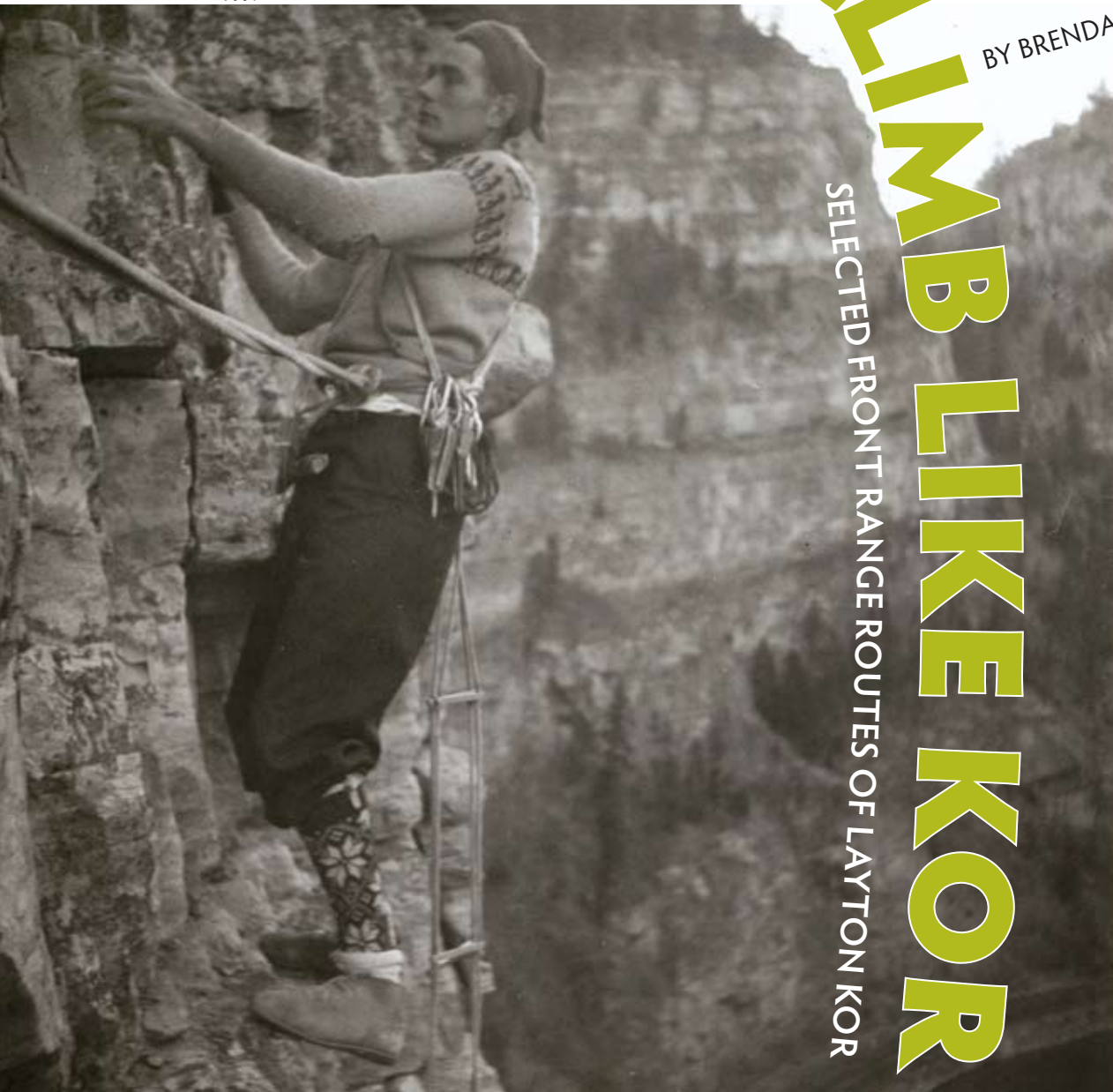


# CLIMB LIKE KOR

SELECTED FRONT RANGE ROUTES OF LAYTON KOR

BY BRENDAN LEONARD



◀ KOR EXPLORES THE ROTTEN LIMESTONE OF GLENWOOD CANYON. STEVE KOMITO

▶ CLIMBERS TACKLE WIND RIDGE. THE AUTHOR TOOK THE PHOTO WHILE CLIMBING "THE BULGE", LAYTON KOR'S FIRST MAJOR FIRST ASCENT IN ELDERADO CANYON. "THE BULGE' IS A RUNOUT, ARGUABLY DANGEROUS ROUTE, DESPITE ITS MILD GRADE OF 5.7," SAYS LEONARD. "THE CHARACTER OF THE ROCK DOESN'T ALLOW FOR MUCH PROTECTION TO BE PLACED, AND THE ROUTE WANDERS LEFT AND RIGHT, MAKING LONG, SWINGING FALLS A POSSIBILITY. I DIDN'T HAVE WHAT YOU'D CALL A 'FUN EXPERIENCE' ON THE ROUTE." BRENDAN LEONARD

Many climbers skip the third and last pitch of Eldorado Canyon's Wind Ridge. Who can blame them?

At the end of the second pitch of this climb on the Wind Tower in Eldorado Canyon State Park, just south of Boulder's Flatirons, it's easy enough to walk off to the north. Plus, the last pitch doesn't really end at the true summit, and there's some loose rock that you could very easily knock down on your partner.

Plus, the start of the third pitch involves surmounting what guidebook author Richard Rossiter calls "one of the weirdest roofs in Eldorado." Above your head is a right-pointing flake with more than a foot of space between it and the wall. Lots of lead climbers take a look at it, then another look, and probably decide, "You know, I think getting a beer might be more fun than climbing the third pitch today."

When I stood below that roof one warm January morning, I took what I thought was a logical course of action: I hoisted myself

up onto the flake and sat there to contemplate my next move.

This was not one of the better ideas I've had in my career as a climber.

My legs were dangling in the air like I was sitting on a diving board. If I slipped off making my next move, I'd land on the blocks of reddish-brown Eldorado sandstone about 8 feet below, and likely not on my feet. That, of course, would change the character of the day from going climbing to going to the hospital, which is one of those things I assured my worried mother would never happen when I started climbing.

I wiggled, mumbled, and fidgeted around, knowing I had painted myself into a

corner. I nervously wedged a medium-sized wired nut in a crack and clipped my rope to it, hoping it would hold—if I fell, it would be the only thing keeping me from landing directly onto the belay ledge below.

No doubt I was now exhibiting all the grace of a drunk trying to get onto a barstool as I pulled myself upward. That's when my belayer, friend, and climbing partner, Lee, calmly said, "Your nut just fell out." Now I was, for all intents and purposes, free-soloing. I frantically clambered my way to the next good stance a few feet away and placed a cam.

This type of experience, I've noticed, is pretty typical when I decide to climb any of the moderate routes first climbed in the 1950s and 1960s by a man named Layton Kor.

In the 21st century, routes are assigned grades in ascending order of difficulty on an open-ended scale starting at 5.0 and currently topping out at 5.15b. I consider myself a slouch capable of grazing 5.10 on occasion. How difficult is "one of the weirdest roofs in Eldorado?" It's rated 5.6. Go to any indoor climbing gym in America, and you'll have trouble locating more than one route rated that low.

Kor, a bricklayer who stood between 6 feet 4 inches and 6 feet 8 inches (depending on who's telling stories about him), went on a still unrivaled spree putting up dozens of routes all over the western United States. It all started in Colorado's Front Range near his then-home of Boulder.

His routes rarely make sense to those of us who learned to climb by searching for holds on the rock's face. Kor's routes are often three-dimensional, calling for techniques like chimneying and off-width climbing; jams where hands and feet are wedged into cracks at weird angles; and lots of thinking to find one's way up and over blocky roofs.

Sometimes, his routes also ask you to calm yourself with the words, "Okay, this is only 5.7."

Kor wrote four articles for *Trail & Timberline*, detailing some of his adventures in Colorado, Utah, and Yosemite. In March 1960 ("Hallett's Second Buttress," #495, March 1960), he wrote a short article describing one of his early climbs: the first winter ascent of the second buttress of Hallett Peak in Rocky Mountain National Park.

"I hammered in a piton under the overhang, clipped several karabiners [*sic*] in, and leaned back almost horizontally under the roof," Kor wrote. "I stretched—just a few inches more. The piton relieved itself from the rock and I found myself 15 feet lower, upside down and completely speechless."

He survived, of course, and continued on. "Two small overhangs, the final chimney, and we stood on the snow-covered rocks of the summit. The ascent, although very cold, had only taken us five and a half hours. Food and water, a little rest and the fact that we had done the first ascent of the second buttress, made it a perfect day."

In March 1967, after having put up new climbs across the United States and Europe, Kor returned his sights to the Diamond of Longs Peak. Climbing the 900 vertical feet of this wall, all of which sits above 13,000 feet, was not permitted until 1960, when Californians Dave Rearick and Bob Kamps claimed the coveted first ascent. But Kor, along with partner Wayne Goss, would try for the first winter ascent.

In two pushes over several days, Kor and Goss battled snow, cold, wind, and rotten rock to add their names to the history books with a bold climb on the iconic face.

But it wasn't easy.

"One hundred feet up, the rock became rotten and the smooth diagonal overhangs stopped all progress," Kor wrote ("On the Granite Wall," *Trail & Timberline* #582, June 1967). "I was trying desperately to place a piton on my left, when the tiny angle holding my weight popped out and a terrifying 20-foot plunge into the dusk followed. When it ended I was swinging upside down squinting toward Goss, whose bright smile showed it had been an easy catch."

Soon after, Kor's resolve would be tested once again.

"It had turned completely dark as I hung from my tortured fingers, placing several pitons to secure the belay. 'Lightning' Goss, who was in remarkable shape, removed all the pitons in just a few minutes, and soon headlamps cast out two beams halfway up the Diamond. 'Just above is the bivouac,' I told Wayne, not really sure about anything except how lousy I felt."

The bivouac provided little relief. "After joining me in idle comfort, [Goss] fired up the stove to provide us with the only food we could consume, hot raspberry Jell-O."

Sustenance consumed the next morning (another bowl of hot Jell-O for breakfast), and the two set out for the top. But it would be nightfall before they knew if another bivvy was in store.

"After many minutes of struggling with rope slings and my headlamp cord I somehow managed to force several pitons deep into the icy crack, setting up the last belay of the climb," Kor wrote. "Wayne soon shared my position at the hanging 'spaghetti gar-



dens.’ After a few minutes rest we changed places and I led into the night with a blinking headlamp until the wild blast of the wind told me it was all over.”

Between 1957 and 1968, Kor pioneered new vertical terrain in Eldorado Canyon, Rocky Mountain National Park, the Utah desert, Yosemite, and the then-unexplored and still-feared Black Canyon of the Gunnison, employing aid climbing when sections could not be safely and efficiently free climbed.

Former CMC member Bob Culp reminisced in his November 1970 *Trail & Timberline* article, “Boulder Rock Climbers: Faces of the Sixties” (#623, November 1970), remembering a novice Kor as enthusiastic, but “tall and skinny and seemingly graceless on the rocks.”

Culp and Kor became friends and prolific climbing partners, putting up first ascents in Eldorado, the Black Canyon, and Rocky Mountain National Park, including the imposing Northwest Face of Chiefs Head Peak. In the article, Culp tells of a particularly rattling first ascent in Glenwood Canyon.

“Kor and I visited Glenwood Canyon that spring and after climbing three overhanging nightmares and nearly getting smashed by falling rocks and falling into the river, we headed home,” he wrote. “We had put up the Cima Fantissimo, an unlikely overhanging 600-foot climb on bad rock. Dangling from pitons, hidden by roofs, Kor would cackle ‘Hee Hee, Roberto! You’ll love this one—it’s horrible!’”

My first trip up Wind Ridge and its weird roof didn’t turn out to be so horrible; after the roof, it’s fairly easy climbing to the top. I climbed past a small tree just below the summit, using it for a handhold, and wondered if the tree had been there in 1959 when Kor put up the route. At the top, I built a belay and enjoyed the view, deciding that after battling the roof, I’d had enough for the day. I was no Kor.

Wind Ridge was one of the easier climbs Kor authored. There are a handful of others that offer similar levels of difficulty for those who want to follow in the footsteps of one of Colorado’s most legendary climbers. And you don’t have to climb 5.11 A4—you don’t even have to know what A4 means.

Here are four moderate Front Range climbs, pioneered by Layton Kor. Δ

*Brendan Leonard is a freelance writer and the charity climb coordinator for nonprofit Big City Mountaineers.*

## OUT YOU GO

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### KOR’S FLAKE

**Sundance Buttress, Lumpy Ridge, Rocky Mountain National Park**

**FIRST ASCENT** Layton Kor and partner, late 1950s

**START** Twin Owls trailhead, Rocky Mountain National Park

**APPROACH** 3.3 miles

**DIFFICULTY** 5.7+

**THE CLIMB** A challenging five-pitch climb on Lumpy Ridge granite with a little bit of everything: chimneying, off-width, face climbing, route finding, and exposure up high.

**TIPS** Don’t take a large pack on this route. You’ll descend very near to the start of the climb, and climbing the off-width section while wearing a pack is difficult. Take big cams to protect the off-width on the third pitch.

### WIND RIDGE

**Wind Tower, Eldorado Canyon**

**FIRST ASCENT** Layton Kor and Jane Bendixon, 1959

**START** East Parking Lot, Eldorado Canyon State Park

**APPROACH** 0.2 miles

**DIFFICULTY** 5.6

**THE CLIMB** Two (or three) pitches of crack and face climbing on Eldorado sandstone, along the natural line on the skyline ridge on the west side of the Wind Tower.

**TIPS** Get to Eldorado Canyon early to climb this one. The short approach and slew of moderate-grade climbs make the Wind Tower one of the more popular areas in the canyon. With half a dozen other parties climbing routes very close to yours, it can sometimes be hard to communicate with your partner.

### THE OWL

**The Dome, Boulder Canyon**

**FIRST ASCENT** Layton Kor and Ben Chidlaw, 1959

**START** Parking Lot 1.2 miles past the intersection of Canyon Blvd. and Third Street in Boulder.

**APPROACH** 0.2 miles

**DIFFICULTY** 5.7

**THE CLIMB** Two pitches of stout 5.7 climbing. The first pitch includes an exposed move swinging out onto a pair of knobs, and a left-angling hand crack. The second pitch tackles an awkward A-frame roof that many use a “head jam” to surmount. If you and your partner swing leads, neither of you will be getting off easy on this one.

**TIPS** Bring long slings for the meandering first pitch. After you’re done (or for a warm-up), take a lap on the 5.6 East Slab, an excellent 100-foot climb.

### SOUTHEAST ARÊTE

**Second Flatiron**

**FIRST ASCENT** Layton Kor, free solo, 1959

**START** Chautauqua Park Trailhead, Boulder

**APPROACH** 1 mile

**DIFFICULTY** 5.7

**THE CLIMB** A fun four-pitch romp with a section of 5.7 climbing. You’ll be in relative solitude on a weekend day while climbers swarm the routes on the First Flatiron and Third Flatiron, right next door.

**TIP** After finishing this line, don’t deny yourself a true summit of the Second Flatiron. Continue up Southside, a 5.6 pitch to the top. If you’re uncomfortable downclimbing class 4/low class 5 rock, bring webbing and a rappel ring to rap off the summit block.