



FEATURE

A first ascent of Peak T
in the Gore Range

by Joe Kramarsic

It might be viewed as pure speculation to think that the exact summit of a 12,000-foot mountain in Colorado may have been unclimbed until the second year of the 21st century. But this is the case that we—Stan Wagon, Jim Koegel, and myself—tentatively put forward regarding our climb of the topmost boulder as the true summit of Peak T (12,640') in the Gore Range on August 25, 2002.

Peak T is one of the Gore Range's fabled lettered peaks. It is located on the remote ridge south of Upper Slate Lake. It is a sharp, spearhead-like peak that can be identified easily in the panoramic views of the range from across the Blue River valley on the Ute Pass road. This dramatic view of Peak T is a paradox, since it becomes hard to identify on the ridge line above the lake. It is precisely this hidden aspect of the mountain that caused me to climb a peak further to the east on my first attempt at Peak T in 1981.



Peak T is also remote and hidden in another sense. The mountain is not found on any of the lists of the highest peaks in Colorado. Although it is separated from the higher Peak S (12,857') to the west by a half mile of rough ridge, it rises only eighty feet from the saddle and so does not count as a separate mountain for peak baggers who follow the arbitrary 300-foot minimum drop criterion. But to those of us who climb regularly in the Gore Range, Peak T retains its historical status as a separate peak ever since the early expeditions to the Upper Slate Lake region in 1933 and 1934 by Kenneth Segerstrom and Dudley Smith.

These pioneer climbing expeditions to Upper Slate Lake counted Peak Q (13,230') and Peak L (13,213') as the prime prizes. When Segerstrom and party first climbed Peak Q in 1933, the earlier letter designations from A to O of the Black Creek valley were extended to include P through T for the Upper Slate valley peaks. These mountains and their locations became formally identified with the publication of Segerstrom's "Map of A Portion of the Gore Range" in the March 1935 issue of *Trail & Timberline*. Thus Peak T could be identified and located, but it was ignored by later mountaineers. When Dudley Smith led a CMC party during the 1934 July Fourth holiday, they concentrated on making the first ascent of Peak L and the second ascent of Peak Q.

The absence of evidence from the 1930s suggests that Peak T never was a prime mountaineering objective. In 1944, a decade after these initial climbs to the Upper Slate Lake region, Stan Midgely made the first recorded attempt on Peak T. He climbed Peak S for a first ascent, and then he began the ridge traverse towards T when a severe migraine forced him to descend before reaching the summit. The first recorded ascent was not made until August 19, 1961 by the CMC's Hugh Kingery, Clarice Weber, John Edgar, and Val Thompson. Kingery noted that there was no evidence of previous climbs and, most importantly, they didn't climb the actual top boulder of the summit ridge.

In 1983, I made what is perhaps the second recorded ascent of the summit ridge of Peak T. I noted that a precariously balanced 12-foot-high block was the topmost point on the summit ridge. Like the Kingery party before me, I considered my efforts as a climb of Peak T, but I had stopped before the true summit of the intimidating block. It

is highly probable, as the evidence suggests, that the same is true of others who have climbed Peak T, both because of the sheerness of the block or the fact that a rope would not be anticipated for such a climb.

In July of 2002, Stan Wagon, a professor of mathematics, climbed Peak T and realized the crux of the problem. One could not really claim an ascent of the peak until one had stood atop the balanced block. I was puzzled when Stan phoned me to ask if I was interested in making a possible first ascent of a lettered peak in the Gore Range, but when he mentioned Peak T, I knew exactly what he had in mind. In addition to climbing gear, I would bring a glass jar with paper and pencil for a summit register.

We began our adventure on the eight-mile trail to Upper Slate Lake in the darkness before dawn. We would end it sixteen hours later in the blackness of night. The trail became steeper as we approached Upper Slate Lake, and the ridge above suggested several points that might be the summit of Peak T. But we could not be sure. We ascended a wide grassy gully from the lake to the ridge between T and Peak 12,385' to the east. Peak T towered above us on a third-class ridge of rocky points, short knife edges, and easily climbable slabs. We finally wound our way to the alcove below the southeast side of the giant oblong-shaped summit block. Sheer and exposed on its north side, slightly overhanging to the east, and without a suitable stance on its south side, its route of ascent suggested the curved blade of rock that is its southwest corner.



Peak T with Stan Wagon on top

Jim set up some belay anchors on the east side while Stan climbed to the base on the west side to throw the rope over the top. It took a couple of tries, but soon the rope was in place. The chosen route had a few well-placed footholds and was more intimidating than difficult. We rated the moves about class 5.5. Stan topped out and placed the jar. I climbed next with some rocks in my pack for the summit cairn that would keep the jar in place. Jim wanted to climb the harder east side. His and Stan's success on this route suggested a 5.8 rating. We finished our two-hour summit time by climbing the easier southwest corner route— again without the rope.

We believe our climb of this block is possibly the first ascent of the exact summit of Peak T for a number of reasons. The remoteness of the peak coupled with so few ascents leads us to think that those who have climbed Peak T, like Kingery in 1961, myself in 1983, and Stan in 2002, have stopped short of the actual top block because of its foreboding appearance. In addition, casual mountaineers may not realize the usefulness of a rope for its ascent. There apparently has never been a visible cairn or summit register placed on the peak until we did so.

So while our claim is somewhat speculative, we believe the available evidence supports it. We know we will be slightly embarrassed if it turns out someone else has stood on the true summit before us. In that event, we would like to hear from them for any information about this peculiar bit of Colorado mountaineering history. P

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Read Stan Wagon's account [here](#).