

Climbing in the Gunks

By Russ Clune, Board Member, Land Stewardship Committee Chair

The Gunks are well known around the world for the excellent climbing they provide for climbers of all abilities. The area also has a very rich history of climbing lore and for many years was at the forefront of climbing with many breakthroughs in technical difficulty.

The Gunks were first “discovered” for climbers in 1935. A German immigrant living in New York City, Fritz Wiessner, was an extremely well traveled and accomplished climber when he made his way out to Millbrook Mountain and soon thereafter to Sky Top to establish the first climbing routes on the cliffs. Wiessner liked what he had found, and word of this Mid-Hudson Valley gem soon spread through the small climbing community of that era.

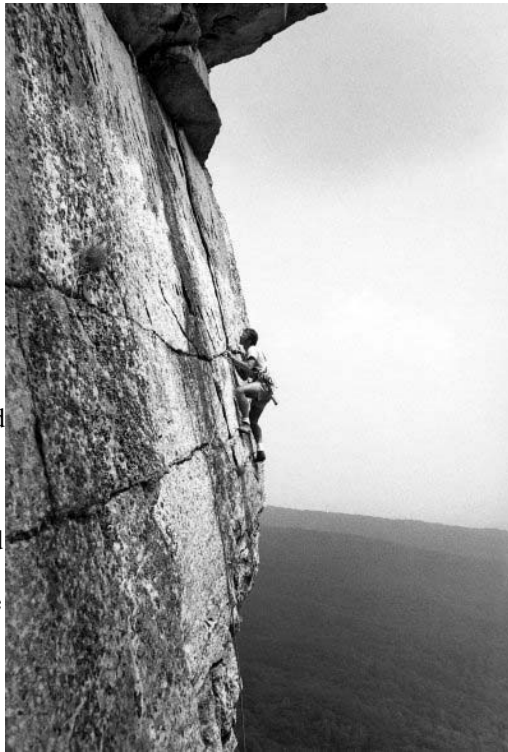
Rock climbing in those days was a very different endeavor than what modern climbers experience now, simply because of the primitive gear. Nylon was yet to be invented. That meant that the ropes were made of hemp which was unlikely to sustain a fall of any consequence.

Footwear was equally crude, being no better than a pair of today's stiff hiking boots.

The gear that the leader would use to protect him was not any better than the rest of the gear of the day. The harness was simply a loop of rope tied around the waist, certain to cause severe injury should the leader fall; that is, if the rope didn't break first! The leader was protected by his second with a simple hip belay, the rope being fed out to him

from behind the back of the belayer. This also could easily provide the belayer with rope burns on the hands and back in the event of a fall by the leader, if not outright loss of control resulting in a ground fall for the leader. What this all meant was the basic credo of the era: the leader must not fall! After World War II, the advent of nylon had a huge effect on climbing as on everything else. Ropes became trustworthy and safer. Harnesses could be crafted from webbing, making for a much more comfortable situation should the climber find himself dangling off the rock. The difficulty of routes rose, with climbers tackling more intimidating features along the cliffs, such as big overhangs. Climbing became more popular, and groups like the Appalachian Mountain Club began coming to the cliffs, teaching the basics of rock craft. The number of climbers began to rise and continued to do so.

At that time, the way the leader would protect himself from simply hitting the ground in the event of a fall was by clipping his rope into soft iron pitons



Historical Climbing timeline

1935 - First route done at Millbrook, "Old Route" by Fritz Wiessner and friends. Rated 5.5.

1940 - First route in the Near Trapps, "White Pillar" by Wiessner. Rated 5.7. First route in Trapps, "Easy Overhang" by Hans Kraus.

1941 - Kraus and Wiessner climb "High Exposure" rated 5.6 in Trapps, creating one of the most popular routes in the Gunks.

Post WWII - Nylon ropes, better gear make for more adventurous climbing. Climbers begin to ascend the more overhanging features at the cliffs.

1951 - Jim McCarthy arrives at the Gunks. He would be a dominant force at the cliffs, pushing standards for the next 15 years. Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC) is the active group at the cliffs.

1958 - Arrival of the "Vulgarians," a loose group of mostly college students from New York City. They would be a very active group of climbers for the next decade and have become lore in the climbing world for many activities, including climbing!

1972 - Chouinard Equipment, the leading gear manufacturer of the day in the U.S., prints a catalog praising the use of passive protection as a new ethic. Local leading

small spikes of iron hammered into cracks in the stone. Once placed, they were often hard to retrieve and left in place. In the late 1950s, chrome-moly pitons hit the market. Much harder, stronger and comparatively easy to remove, they could be used repeatedly as they could better withstand the blows from a hammer.

By the early 1970s, with more climbers than ever hammering pitons into the rock, it was becoming evident, not just in the Gunks but around the country, that pitons were damaging the very resource climbers treasured. Small cracks were becoming big cracks with the repeated placing and removing of pitons. Since many climbers at that time had a strong environmental ethic, there was a very quick acceptance of minimizing the use of pitons in favor of "passive" protection. This type of protection was simply placed in cracks by hand, without hammering, and could be removed in the same manner. The initial chocks, or nuts, as they are called, were pretty basic and it took a little time for climbers to completely trust them. As time went on, the shapes became more advanced and climbers saw them as a true advantage. It took a lot less time to place a nut than to hammer a piton, and it could easily be done with one hand. It was a real win-win situation. The rock was treated much more gently and climbers were able to climb even harder routes.

Today, there are more climbers than ever at the Gunks. The Preserve has recognized the changes in climbing and has implemented policies to allow climbers their freedom while protecting the cliff environment. One of these policies was the creation of fixed anchors at the top of certain very popular routes to allow for a quick and safe return to the ground. Funded by a grant from the American Alpine Club, the Preserve has been able to form a subcommittee to assess climber use and install these anchors in the most needed spots. This results in less impact at the top of the cliffs, fewer social trails, fewer nylon slings left behind by climbers descending, and a safer situation.

Climbing has expanded beyond the Mohonk Preserve to Minnewaska State Park Preserve as a result of the work of the Access Fund, a climbers' advocacy group, and with the advice of the Preserve. Climbing is now allowed in the Peterskill area of the Park. This is the first time New York State Parks has allowed climbing to be practiced on its property.

The rock climbing on the ridge is among the best in the world, and climbers will be here to enjoy it for a long time to come.

climber John Stannard leads the charge into the new era.

Early Mid-70s - John Stannard, Steve Wunsch and John Bragg, using the new gear establish a multitude of new routes, many among the most difficult in the world.

1980s - Standards continue to rise. The Gunks for the first half of this decade are on every climber's must-visit list of places to test oneself.

1990s - The Gunks become a premier "traditional" area to climb, as opposed to a "sport" climbing area which uses fixed expansion bolts as protection. The continued growth of the climbing community makes for crowded routes on nice weekends.