

Tom Frost

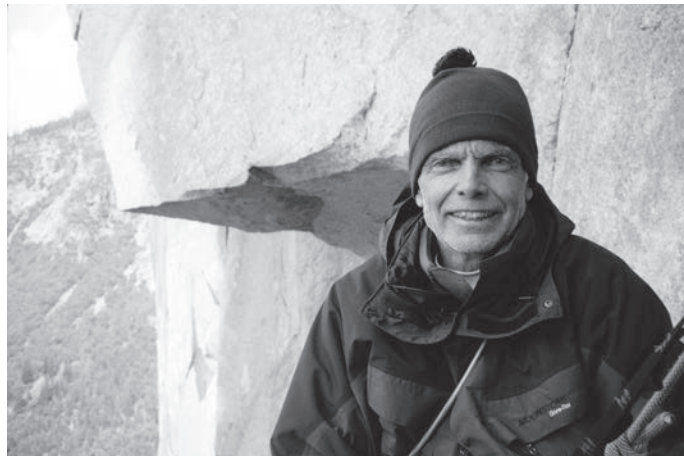
RELIVING THE GOLDEN AGE

BY CHUCK GRAHAM

“**Y**ou’re going to love talking with Tom Frost,” said Flatlander Films director Tom Seawell, who, along with editor Jeff Wiant and producer Craig Flax, is creating a documentary about the Golden Age of rock climbing. “I personally believe he would think photography is the link between climbing and the rest of his life.”

Without a doubt, Seawell was right. The early 1960s saw Frost, along with fellow Big Wall pioneers Royal Robbins, Chuck Pratt and Yvon Chouinard, tackle those daunting, sheer, granite faces with aplomb. Big Wall first ascents like The Nose and Salathé Wall set the standards for clean, leave-no-trace ascents on iconic El Cap — and the climbing world as a whole.

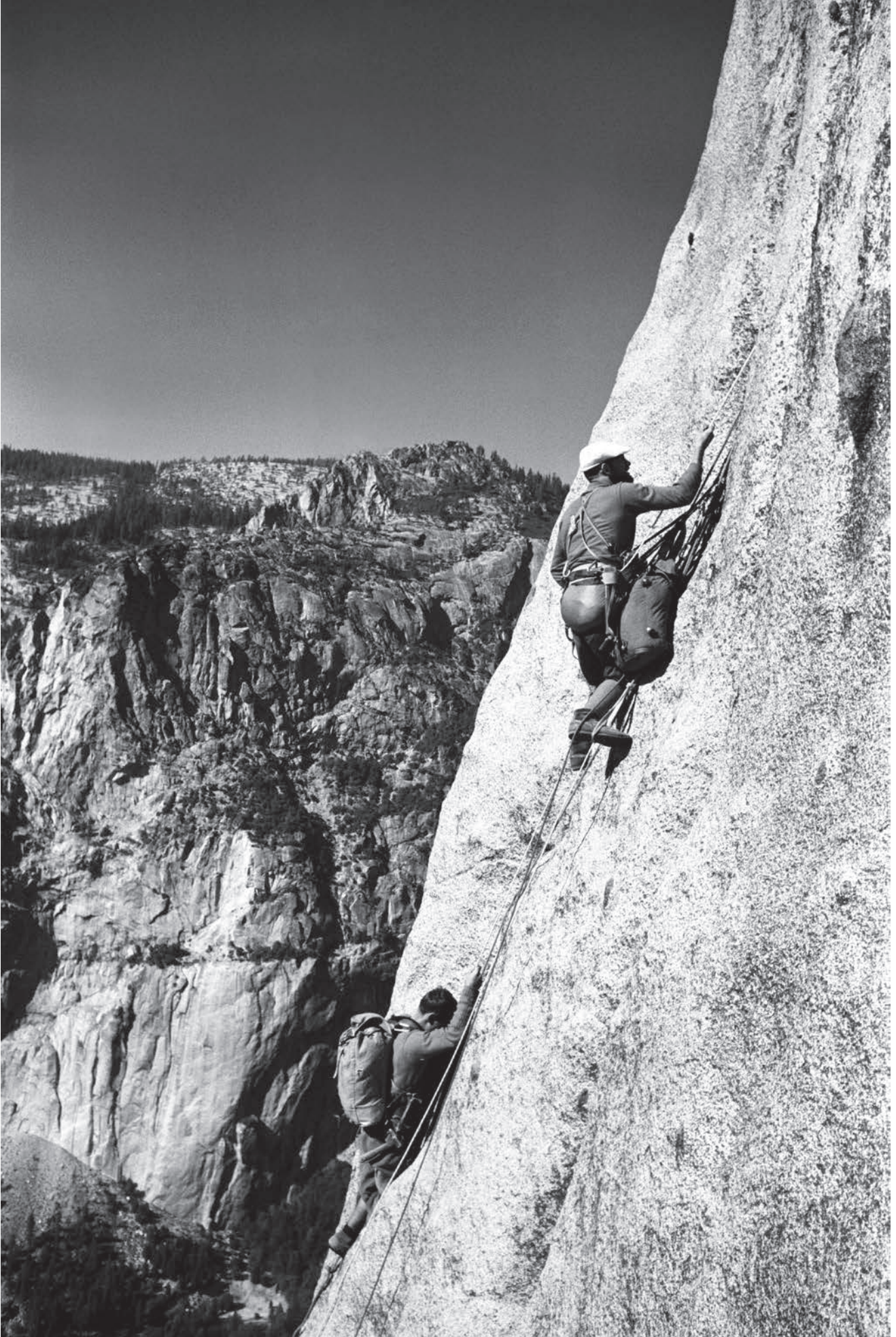
Frost was Seawell’s first interview for the documentary. After



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Tom Frost, 1997, El Capitan, end of the great roof. Photo shot by Ryan Frost. Opposite: Tom Frost leads under the headwall roof on the first ascent of the Salathé Wall, 1961. Photo shot by Royal Robbins.





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— Tom Frost

they finished, Seawell asked him, “What’s next?” Frost handed him a long list of climbers.

While the Flatlander filmmakers — Seawell, Wiant and Flax — were in the middle of one of their marathon editing sessions in Lake Tahoe, I reached Tom Frost at his home in Oakdale, California. It was amazing listening to him reflect on his legacy, left on the big walls of El Capitan in Yosemite Valley, and the world-class climbers he teamed up with to accomplish those feats.

As extraordinary as his ability to climb those routes cleanly was, equally impressive was how Frost was able to capture on-camera and document, for the first time, the throng of first ascents on El Cap — initially with his Leica screw mount camera, a collapsible 50mm Elmar lens and a healthy bag of black-and-white film.



Chuck Graham: What was it like on El Capitan? How were you able to both climb and shoot?

Tom Frost: I was comfortable up there. I wasn’t bothered by the exposure, for the most part. So when I saw a photo opp, I stopped and took advantage of it. I didn’t have any training. I was lucky that in general the stuff came out as good as it did. Most of it was at least usable.

CG: Do you miss the Golden Age of rock climbing?

TF: Normally, I would say no to that. Even for the stuff we were doing back then, making the early ascents on El Cap . . . those were big experiences, particularly for me. When I stopped in the mid-60s, got married, had a family and all that it requires, I said, “Well, that’s the end of that.”

There’s no way to come back to that kind of stuff because of the level of commitment it requires. After moving to Boulder, Colorado, I stayed out of climbing. But I recently walked into a shop, and on the wall was a topo map of El Cap showing close to 100 routes. When I left climbing, you could count them all on one hand. I didn’t realize such big changes were taking place.

During the making of the documentary, I’ve gotten re-immersed in it while looking back on it and sifting through my black-and-whites to recapture and discover what it was all about for me. I’ve actually relived it all without climbing.

CG: Have you enjoyed that?

TF: It’s been great. I realize looking at my images that I really was so at home on the big walls. I’m a big cheerleader for [Flatlander Films’] project and try to help wherever I can.

CG: When you were climbing, what was more challenging for you, a first ascent or setting up and positioning yourself for a proper composition?

TF: None of it was hard. I enjoyed climbing. I really liked the first ascents. I had the advantage of climbing with the best climbers on the planet: Royal Robbins, Chuck Pratt and Yvon Chouinard. When I climbed with Royal, I didn’t have any worries going up. What made the climbing great was the commitment to style. Royal set the standard for big wall climbing — still basically the world standard. It was also about raising ourselves to the level of the climb. It was about leaving no trace — pretty simple stuff — so trying to do as good a job as we could. We were partnering with nature and aware we were setting the standard for generations that would follow. It was our first priority to climb in style. That made it enjoyable for us. We were really solid as a team.

As a photographer, I was an amateur snap-shooter. You look at the modern work and you see how they set up a shot. That’s not at all what I was doing. I was just doing documentary work as a member of the team. I just happened to be the only guy doing it during those critical climbs — Robbins’s first big wall climbs. I was the guy who brought the camera along. It was 99 percent being in the right place at the right time. We never set up for a photo. We were just climbing. I had a leather camera case with a strong shoulder strap so I could wear it at all times unless I was leading. I really enjoyed film. There’s something a little more natural about that in my mind.

CG: So, no adjustment for going from climbing to then implementing photography?

TF: When I started climbing Yosemite — and obviously, I was thinking this was awesome — I was working at North American Aviation in Los Angeles. I went into the photo department and said I wanted to learn how to shoot film. They told me to shoot still photography, but I didn’t have a camera. Then the second ascent of The Nose came up, and the day before we started at Camp 4, I was handed a Leica camera. I learned how to use it, use the light meter. We went up on the climb shooting about one roll a day for seven days. Those were basically the best seven rolls of film that I have. So that’s why I say it was 99 percent being in the right place, because the environment is so photogenic, unless you completely screw it up, you’re coming away with okay stuff. Another plus was being influenced by Ansel Adams. I much preferred black-and-white film, so darn good for Yosemite.

Opposite: Yosemite climbing pioneer Royal Robbins belaying Yvon Chouinard from above on the West Face of Sentinel Rock on El Capitan, Fall 1964



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The North America Wall summit group (Tom Frost, Royal Robbins, Chuck Pratt and Yvon Chouinard), on a snowy October day. Photo taken with a self-timer, 1964

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CG: When you were climbing and shooting, did you have favorite angles or compositions you worked toward?

TF: I suppose, but in my mind, it was “take what you can get” because I had a 50mm collapsible lens and that was it. Just be where the climber was. That was the shot.

CG: Do you still have your first camera?

TF: No. I wish I did. People ask me all the time. I turned it in. Dollars were scarce back then. I upgraded to something else and got rid of it.

CG: Do you still shoot today or are you retired from it?

TF: I’ve got a box of cameras and a refrigerator full of film. The truth of it is I really only shot when I was climbing. So, if I happen to go to Yosemite, I’ll take a camera.

CG: I understand you were instrumental in the development of the documentary. Tell me about that.

TF: I gave Tom the names of all the top guys. I mean the tip-top of the tiptop guys, higher up than me on the ladder of topness. I said to myself, “Oh boy, he’s kind of a flatlander and he’s going out there to interview these guys?” So far he’s interviewed about 50 people and he’s made 50 lifelong friends. Everybody



Yosemite climbing pioneer Yvonne Chouinard checking out the view from Big Sur ledge on the first ascent of the North America Wall on El Capitan. End of pitch 11, Fall 1964

loves him. This guy has the magic. He doesn't have to know what he's talking about. He just follows his nose. He's asked all the right questions.

THE DOCUMENTARY

All It Took Were Some Flatlanders

They are holed up in a cabin somewhere in Lake Tahoe, dedicated to editing some of the 60-plus hours of interviews surrounding climber, photographer, engineer, business owner and conservationist Tom Frost and the Golden Age of rock climbing in Yosemite Valley in the 1960s.

Tom Seawell and Jeff Wiant, graduates of the Brooks Institute of Photography, along with Craig Flax, have pooled their talents. They are a trio of flatlanders (non-climbers) devoted to telling this incredible story about the ever-humble Frost, the climbers with whom he scaled those first ascents on El Capitan some 50 years ago, and the astounding athletes who have followed since those glory days on the Big Wall at the iconic national park.

But this documentary goes way beyond those big granite walls.

It encompasses everything good that nature has to offer, while respecting something extremely fragile that needs to be protected.

Seawell first met Frost 28 years ago when Frost owned Chimera Lighting company, which grew out of his Boulder, Colorado garage in 1980. Since then the company has remained a mainstay in the photography and motion-picture world. Seawell photographed for Chimera Lighting and its catalogs for 20 years and easily bonded with Frost.

"I had no clue who he was. It took me 15 years to discover what a badass he was in the climbing world," says Seawell, regarding the always-humble Frost. "There was this feeling there, though, in the office with his employees. It was an amazing feeling."

Seawell and Frost have long shared a photographic connection, and Frost always appreciated the hard work and commitment Seawell put into each catalog. Before Seawell knew it, Frost had granted him the rights to produce a documentary about the iconic age of big wall climbing in Yosemite. And, with the backing of Seawell's and Wiant's Flatlander Films' brand, this documentary suddenly had legs, albeit shaky ones to begin with.

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But one thing was clear. Frost wouldn't agree to a documentary just about his amazing exploits on El Cap and beyond. No, he wouldn't have it.

“He fired us after the first weekend of interviews,” recalls Seawell, director of the documentary. “He felt it was too much

to come out in your story. I will try to honor that the whole way.’ And he said, ‘By golly, if your mom thinks it's important then let's get back on it.’”

Producing a documentary of such magnitude is a huge commitment. Telling a story like this might be bigger than scaling El Cap itself, especially considering that this documentary is 100-percent community funded, which potentially raises a lot of other issues concerning sponsorships and brands tied to the outdoor industry and their athletes.

No one is making a dime on this effort. Seawell, Wiant, Flax, their family members and other volunteers believe in this project, and so does everyone who's been interviewed for it. It's a feel-good film told by a bunch of flatlanders skilled behind the lens and in the editing room, destined to tell the story of the Golden Age.

“This project had remained a mystery to me,” recalls Flax, a producer for the documentary. “I really wasn't aware of it until, one day, I stumbled across the interview my friend [Seawell] had done with Tommy Caldwell. I saw that and was really moved. I said, ‘I want in. How can I help?’ I was the foolish one who dove in,” he laughs. “I came to them.”

Flax has essentially become the jack-of-all-trades for the project. His biggest responsibility, however, is fundraising for the documentary. Since he came onboard, Flatlander Films has gone from 0 to 100 with their outdoor industry contacts, but when you're producing a film with multiple sponsored athletes, keeping the documentary from becoming a Patagonia or North Face production and keeping it community-oriented is a challenge.

“On an individual basis, everyone supports the film and wants to help in any way they can,” says Flax. “When it comes to their company's putting their money where their mouths are, that has been a real struggle. The work Frost did really resonates through the entire industry. The project belongs to the community. It's a pretty different ask.”

As the old adage goes, the more money you can raise, the faster the film will get done. Less money, and, well . . . you get the idea. Collectively, Flatlander Films sees the light at the end of the tunnel, and Flax will continue to wear lots of hats to see the project through.

“That's sort of what happens in the documentary world,” he continues. “This allows Tom and Jeff to be creative. What's been rewarding is the trust they've placed in me. It's still Tom and Jeff's



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Tom Seawell, Tom Frost, Jeff Wiant, Yosemite, 2016

about him and not about the Golden Age. He said he didn't feel comfortable with the direction we were going.”

The boys had done two full interview days with Frost, now 84, about a subject he hadn't touched on in 50 years. Seawell says he and Wiant had to give Frost some space and not inundate him with a subject that was certainly emotional for him, but it was Seawell's mother — who was helping with the original transcripts — whose keen insight pointed them in the right direction.

She called and told her son he really needed to do this documentary, that Frost was a fascinating man and that his love for nature and the outdoors was so inspiring. She told Seawell that she wished she had raised him more in nature. With that, Seawell and Wiant went back to Frost with a sales pitch.

“I learned a valuable lesson,” says Seawell. “I told him my mom's message and asked for another shot. I told him, ‘This is coming from my mom. I think it's important. Obviously, Jeff thinks it's important. I think the spirit of the Golden Age is going

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movie, but I definitely feel like I’m an important part of the team.”

Maybe the biggest challenge producing this documentary is cutting down 60 hours of transcripts into a 90-minute final edit. If you ask Wiant, the editor, writer and art director of the film, that question, he barely blinks. In fact, he seems to relish it. Wiant will watch an interview directed by Seawell and magically orches-

(www.flatlanderfilms.com/donate).

This sense of shared ownership reflects the spirit in which the film has been made. “We’ve taken the hard road,” explains Seawell. “It’d be great to have a massive company like Patagonia sponsor the whole thing. But then what happens when you get Alex Honnold — who in 2017 just made the first free-solo (without ropes) ascent of El Capitan, and who has multiple sponsors, including The North Face — on camera for 10 minutes?” It’s what the boys have battled with since they began production. “To me, politically, having everybody’s support is kind of a giant group industry hug,” Seawell continues. “These guys deserve it. The athletes understand it and the brands understand it. Every one of the over 30 brands on our website has helped in one way or another.”

Seawell and Wiant agreed that the most pleasant surprise throughout this entire six-year project has been the involvement of the climbing community. The Flatlander Film team has had to take a crash course in rock climbing, educating themselves about the community.

“A project like this ... we were novices,” admits Wiant. “We didn’t know how tight the rock climbing community was. We just started interviewing everyone. It gained momentum — Chouinard, bigger names fell into place. It’s taken a lot of elbow grease.”

“We went from thinking, ‘These guys are totally crazy’ to ‘They have the right mind-set to save the world,’” says Seawell. “The climbing community as a whole has been so awesome, and I don’t want to stop.”

Nevertheless, it’s been a long and winding road, marked with sacrifices made while juggling work that pays the bills and balancing their family commitments. So after it’s all said and done, what are the hopes of the Flatlander Films team as audiences eventually view their documentary?

“It’s not how you get to the top that matters but how you do life,” says Seawell. “It’s not that you summited. It’s how you got there. Frost has lived his life in that manner. It’s changed my life. I want to live my life the right way instead of through shortcuts. That’s what people will be inspired by.” ▲

Chuck Graham has freelanced for Outdoor Photographer, Shutterbug, BBC Wildlife, Natural History, Canoe & Kayak and Backpacker Magazine National Geographic for Kids. www.chuck-grahamphoto.com. Instagram: @chuckgrahamphoto.



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Tom with Alex Honnold in 2017

trate the piece into a tightly sewn edit.

“Everyone has given us such great content, but I can home in on things and separate it out pretty quickly,” says Wiant. “I can’t be frustrated with it. I just have to let it take me in different directions. Sometimes they don’t work and I back up and modify the path. To me it’s very enjoyable. I love watching stories unfold.”

Once the go-ahead was granted, Seawell soon realized that Frost had touched pretty much every outdoor brand in some way. And every climber associated with a brand agreed to appear on-camera outside of the particular brand that sponsors them.

Seawell noted that when Frost, Robbins, Chouinard and Pratt were climbing, they didn’t have sponsors. Flatlander Films has leaned into that philosophy to avoid any of that clutter and the potential issues that could arise with single-brand ownership of the film. As such, anyone who donates even a single \$1 to the making of the documentary receives credit at the end of the film