

# THE CRESTONES – LEGENDARY PEAKS OF THE SANGRE DE CRISTO

By Michael O'Hanlon

“Inaccessible mountains” and “unsurveyed” were the terms which usually appeared on surveyors’ maps in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to mark the location of Crestone Needle, Crestone Peak, and Kit Carson Mountain in the Sangre de Cristo Range, southwest of Westcliffe. “Unclimbable” was the warning commonly passed, first among the mountain men and later the miners.

The three rugged peaks were the last of Colorado’s fifty-four fourteen-thousand foot mountains to be climbed, and then not until sixteen years into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. A formal United States Geological Survey of the Crestone region was not completed until 1967.

Although there is no documentation, Indians could have scaled any of the three. Arrowheads, knife blades, and walls of loose rock have been found to the 12,000 feet level on other peaks in the region. A structure of piled loose rock about eight feet across and two feet high on Blanca Peak, a nearby fourteener, is generally attributed to Indians.

However, circumstances probably mitigate against Indians ever standing atop Crestone Peak or Crestone Needle. The Indians usually sought the high country for practical reasons – utilizing a high pass between two hunting valleys, searching for game in the summer months, building an eagle trap to use the feathers in ceremonies or decorations, seeking a spiritual haven. The Crestones and Kit Carson may simply have been too rugged for such uses. In any event, there is no record of Indian activity on them.

The three dominant peaks were certainly seen by Europeans as early as 1779, when the Spanish governor of New Mexico, Juan Bautista de Anza, led a punitive expedition against raising Comanches. In the first documented penetration of the inner Rockies, De Anza marched up the San Luis Valley, directly beneath the dramatic uplift of the southern side of the Crestones.

Although who first named them is obscure, Crestone is a Spanish word variously translated as “top of a cock’s comb,” “the crest of a helmet,” or as a miner’s term, “an outcropping of ore.”

As the mountain men penetrated the Rockies in ever greater numbers, the Crestones came to be called the Trois Tetons, in recognition of a shared grandeur with the Grand Tetons of Wyoming. When Captain John Gunnison passed south of the Crestones in 1853 on his search for a transcontinental railroad route, he recorded the Trois Tetons in his journal.

Which three peaks constituted the Trois Tetons for the mountain men is not clear, although certainly they included Crestone Peak and Crestone Needle. Possibly the third “Teton” was Kit Carson if the observer was on the San Luis Valley side, or Broken Hand if the onlooker was standing in the Wet Mountain Valley.

Until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, different surveys placed the Crestones and Kit Carson in various locations, with interchangeable names. An 1882 map shows the Needle and the Peak as “Mount Celeste” and “Mount Julia.” They also appear as the Crestone Needles, the Needles, and the Spanish Crags. Kit Carson has been called Haystack Baldy and Frustrum.

Kit Carson is of course named for the famous mountain man and scout. Legend places Kit Carson’s cabins on Sand Creek in the Music Pass area southeast of the Crestones, and on South Crestone Creek, which drains from the massif west into the San Luis Valley. However, Kit Carson’s cabins in the Rockies may be something like places George Washington slept in the East.

In 1924, after famed British mountaineer George Herbert Leigh-Mallory disappeared in his attempt to be the first to climb Mt. Everest, Roger Toll of the Colorado Mountain Club suggested

that the Crestones be renamed Mallory and Irvine Peaks, the latter after Mallory's climbing companion, who also was never found.

In 1976, the Colorado Centennial Commission recommended that Crestone Needle become Centennial Peak, in honor of 100 years of Colorado statehood.

None of the proposed name changes caught the public imagination until 1986, when a movement was begun to name a 14,081 sub-peak of Kit Carson Challenger Point, in commemoration of the seven astronauts killed in the space shuttle explosion in January of that year. The sub-peak was officially designated Challenger Point by the USGS in 1987.

But what of the first ascents of the "unclimbable" peaks? In the summer of 1916, one of the most famous of all Colorado mountaineers, Albert Ellingwood, led a group of climbers into a camp on Willow Creek, directly north of Kit Carson. Ellingwood wrote he was "fed by tales of peaks unclimbed and unclimbable."

His party climbed a ridge of Kit Carson, picked its way over the sub-peak which later became Challenger Point, and made the first recorded ascent of the main summit.

Ellingwood, Eleanor Davis, Frances "Bee" Rogers, and Joe Deutchbein then moved their camp south, to the Spanish Creek drainage between Kit Carson and Crestone Peak. Davis was head of women's athletics at Colorado College, and on her way to becoming a noted mountaineer in her own right.

On July 24, 1916, the foursome left their Spanish Creek camp at 8:10 a.m., very late by climbing standards. They went up the north arête, or spur, of Crestone Peak, into the north couloir (gully), which they followed all the way to the 14,000 foot saddle between the twin summits of the peak. They built cairns on each summit.

The pair then began a traverse of the spiny ridge which connects Crestone Peak with Crestone Needle. Halfway across, Deutchbein became hampered by a bad knee. He and Rogers turned back for their camp.

Davis and Ellingwood continued on the traverse, reaching the summit of Crestone Needle as darkness approached. They hurriedly constructed a cairn atop the last of the fourteeners to be climbed, then scurried down the southeast ridge of the Needle, which would eventually become its standard non-technical climbing route.

Ellingwood and Davis dripped to South Colony Lake, then crossed a high saddle to reach their camp exhausted at 11:15 that night. On the same expedition, Ellingwood and Davis somehow found time and energy to make the first ascent of nearby Mt. Adams, 13,931 feet.

The intrepid pair returned to the Crestones in 1925, along with Stephen Hart and Marion Wagner, to pioneer the famed Ellingwood Arete on the dramatic face of the Needle which towers directly above Lower South Colony Lake. Ellingwood is also remembered through a fourteener named for him in the Sangres, and by Ellingwood Ridge on LaPlata Peak in the Sawatch Range. Davis is nearly forgotten.

As late as 1925, there were only five recorded ascents of Crestone Needle and Crestone Peak. The fifth documented ascent of Kit Carson was not until 1929. The first winter ascents of the three were not made until the 1960's.

Today, all three are scaled regularly by possibly as many as several hundred climbers each summer. Their reputation attracts mountaineers from all over the world.

However, increased accessibility has brought with it increased risk. In 1979, four climbers were killed in a single accident on Kit Carson. The 1982 toll on Crestone Needle was also four, in four separate accidents. The Ellingwood Arete claimed the life of a young Colorado man on the Fourth of July weekend, 1987.

The two cardinal rules of time and weather apply on all Colorado mountains, and certainly more so on the Crestones. Both peaks may be climbed safely by someone without technical climbing knowledge, but it is essential to pay close attention to the time and weather.

All four 1982 fatalities were weather-related. Climbers were able to get high on Crestone Needle, then were put in danger when the rock below them became slick from rain or snow.

The rock on the south-facing climbing routes is a stable conglomerate. In good weather, it can be navigated carefully. When it is wet, it is treacherous.

To ascend Crestone Needle without rope, the climber should proceed to Lower South Colony Lake. For those wishing a close-up view of the Crestones but not wanting to climb, the lake is also the best spot. It is reached by following Highway 69 south from Westcliffe 4.6 miles to Colfax Lane. Follow Colfax Lane 5.6 miles south to a T junction. Turn right. How far a person may drive from this fork toward the lake depends upon type of vehicle and nerve. Four-wheel drive vehicles routinely go to the end of the road, and intrepid owners of VW bugs and other high-clearance vehicles have been known to drive a long way up. However, there is also a legacy of high-centerings and torn mufflers.

There are two trails to Lower South Colony Lake from the road, one from its end, and another from just before the road crosses the creek for the second time. Both trails are easy to follow and are not difficult.

From the lake, those wishing to see the magnificent headwall between the Needle and the Peak should walk the extra half mile to Upper South Colony Lake. Topographic maps are available at Westwind Books and Stones, Valley Hardware, and Colorado Adventuring, all on Main Street in Westcliffe.

The non-technical climber should head for the lowest point on the left hand ridge of Crestone Needle as it is viewed from Lower South Colony Lake. However, time is critical. It is advisable to camp in the vicinity of the lake to ensure an early morning start.

From the low point on the ridge, a clearly marked trail leads to the right along the ridge to the base of Crestone Needle. From its base, the route all the way to the summit is clearly marked by cairns, or rock piles. By following the cairns, the climber has a relatively safe route, provided he or she keeps a close eye on both time and weather. If the summit cannot be reached by noon, or if the weather is at all threatening, turn around.

If caught high on the Needle by wet weather, wait it out rather than try to descend over slick rock. Take along a wool shirt and wool hat, or synthetic which retain heat when wet. Carry rain gear and some extra food.

The traverse between the Needle and the Peak has been done without rope. However, the pitch coming down from the Needle to the connecting ridge is very exposed, and the route difficult to find. Two Texas men became stranded at this point in 1987. They spent thirty-six hours on the rock, before being taken off in a dramatic 2:00 a.m. rescue which involved rescues groups from a hundred miles away and a helicopter from New Mexico. The effort cost \$15,000.

A safer route for Crestone Peak for those not familiar with the traverse is via Cottonwood Lake and the long south couloir on Crestone Peak. From Lower South Colony Lake, this route entails climbing into the same saddle as for Crestone Needle. Descend to Cottonwood Lake on the west side. Skirt the lake, and aim for the south-facing couloir, which leads all the way to the saddle between the two summits of Crestone Peak.

The point a short distance to the left is the actual summit, although Albert Ellingwood mistook the right summit as the higher one seventy-two years ago.

The Crestones have provided a source of great joy to many people over the years. There have also been tragedies on their rugged flanks. Enjoyment and respect need always be close companions on these mountains. Persons without experience on easier mountains should not attempt to climb them unless accompanied by experienced mountaineers.

To Albert Ellingwood, who went where others literally feared to tread, perhaps belongs the last word on the Crestones. “No other mountains in our State are ... quite so like the idealized representations of what mountains ought to be.”