

TRAVEL

State events	2	J
Birnbaum	3	
Q&A	6	
Singapore	7	

Sunday, September 9, 1990

Richmond Times-Dispatch

High adventure in West Virginia

By Kevin Concannon
Special correspondent

All over the country, folks are climbing the walls. Indoor wall climbing, featured in dozens of mainstream magazines this past year, is one of the country's booming fitness crazes.

Why? Because it's there, of course, and very often the mountains are not. Previously found only in specialized "rock gyms" such as Seattle's Vertical Club or the Boston Rock Gym, these artificial climbing surfaces are popping up at fitness clubs and colleges all over the country. Students at Virginia Commonwealth University, the College of William and Mary and North Carolina State currently enjoy them, with others in the planning stages.

The artificial walls receiving so much attention, however, can't compare with the thrill and grandeur of real mountains. Climbing the old-fashioned way — on real cliffs and mountains in the great outdoors — is not surprisingly experiencing something of a boom itself.

Fortunately for Richmonders, some of the region's best outdoor climbing is within easy reach. West Virginia's Seneca Rocks National Recreation Area offers an exhilarating climbing adventure for those seeking an unusual summer escape.

Among the reasons for climbing's surge of popularity is Lynn Hill, one of the world's most accomplished competitive climbers. Ms. Hill has been featured in an avalanche of national news and women's magazines lately. On NBC's "Late Night with David Letterman," she talked about her phenomenal climbing career and demonstrated an artificial climbing wall.

Rock 'n' roll has them up against the wall, too. Fans of rock star David Lee Roth were introduced to their hero's favorite sport two years ago with breathtaking shots of him on the



Photos courtesy of the Gendarme collection

GOING UP — A climber seeks handholds at West Virginia's Seneca Rocks National Recreation Area (large photo). Maura Kistler of Roanoke (above) leads another climb there while her husband, Gene, waits below.

cover of his appropriately titled Sky-scraper album, climbing a frighteningly smooth rock face.

And if you watched the nightly news last summer, chances are you followed the daily progress of paraplegic climber Mark Wellman moving up the legendary El Capitan 6 inches at a time with specially rigged equipment. Gauged by retail sales of climbing equipment as reported in Climbing Magazine, the sport currently enjoys a growth rate of between 20 and 30 percent.

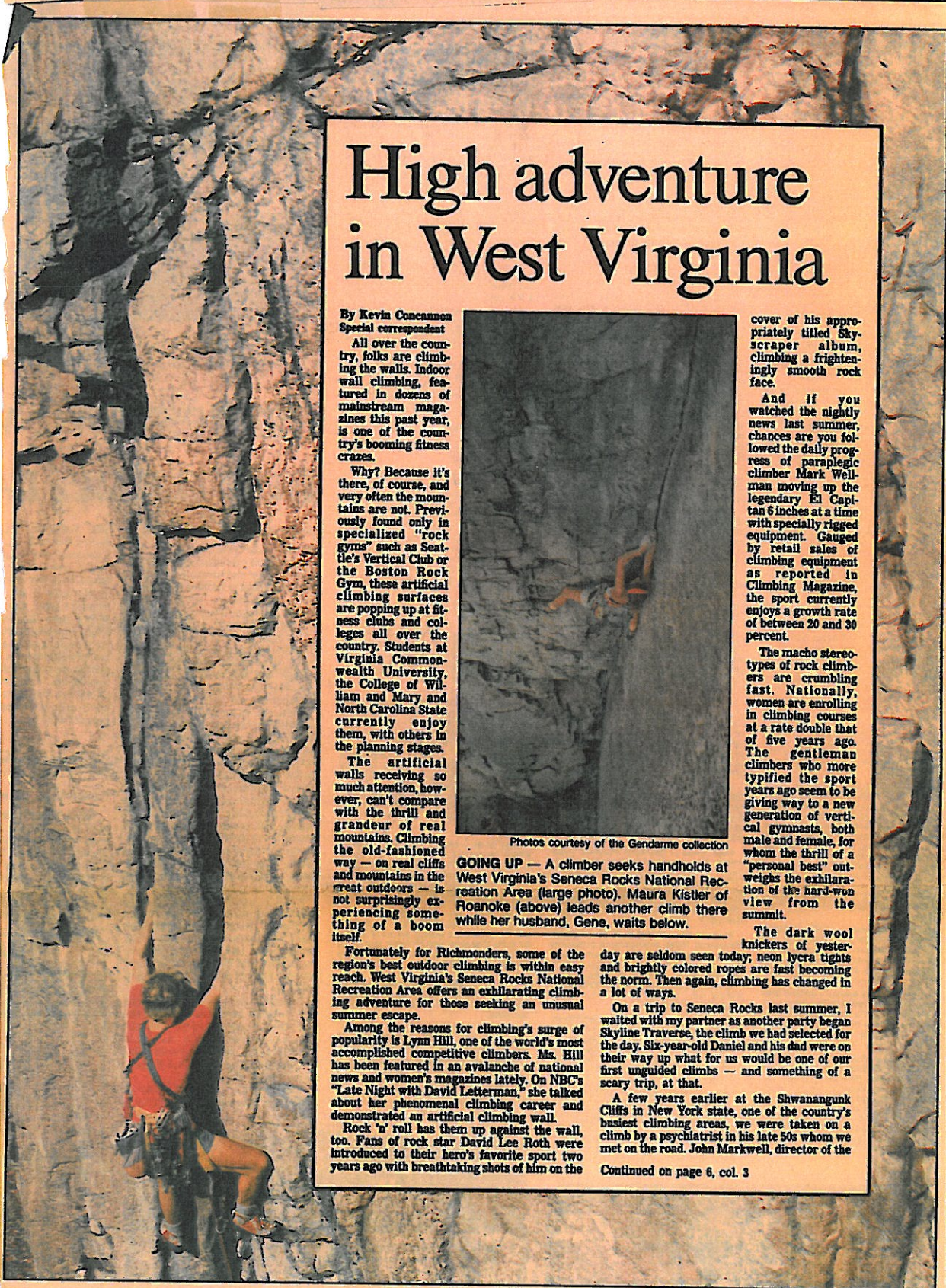
The macho stereotypes of rock climbers are crumbling fast. Nationally, women are enrolling in climbing courses at a rate double that of five years ago. The gentleman climbers who more typified the sport years ago seem to be giving way to a new generation of vertical gymnasts, both male and female, for whom the thrill of a "personal best" outweighs the exhilaration of the hard-won view from the summit.

The dark wool knickers of yesterday are seldom seen today; neon lycra tights and brightly colored ropes are fast becoming the norm. Then again, climbing has changed in a lot of ways.

On a trip to Seneca Rocks last summer, I waited with my partner as another party began Skyline Traverse, the climb we had selected for the day. Six-year-old Daniel and his dad were on their way up what for us would be one of our first unguided climbs — and something of a scary trip, at that.

A few years earlier at the Shwanangunk Cliffs in New York state, one of the country's busiest climbing areas, we were taken on a climb by a psychiatrist in his late 50s whom we met on the road. John Markwell, director of the

Continued on page 6, col. 3



High adventure in West Virginia

Continued from first page

Seneca Rocks Climbing School, attracts to the diversity of today's climbing students: "[Our clients are] people of all ages and occupations. Pick a job category and we probably have it, from mid-60s down to age 12. We try not to take anyone under 14, but occasionally we do."

Many people mistakenly assume that in modern climbing, the climber hoists himself up a system of ropes to reach the summit. Generally, this is not the case. In aid climbing, however, a specialized aspect of the sport, the ropes and other equipment function only as a safety net. The point of the sport is more in moving up difficult rock faces with a variety of hand and foot holds.

Mastering the different climbing techniques — edging or smearing the rock with the feet, and pinching or jamming with the hands, for example — often proves easier than learning to set dependable "protection," the system of ropes and devices that hold a climber's fall.

The idea of a "protection" system, of course, brings up the danger many outsiders associate with the sport. Certainly, part of the appeal of the sport for most people is that "edge" of risk that's part of the vertical playground. A thorough understanding of the "protection system" can make all the difference.

According to Markwell, "It's a lot less dangerous than driving a car. I don't know how many people in this area have been killed in automobile accidents, but people have been climbing here since I guess 1939, and there's only ever been seven fatalities."

If you plan to meet these challenges yourself, a climbing school can have you on top of things (at least literally) in as little time as two or three days. Seneca Rocks Climbing School, in Seneca Rocks, W.Va., offers quality instruction from top climbers in an exceptional setting.

The 900-foot Seneca Rocks summit, an awesome sight from the

valley below for those who reach it. Seneca Rocks also offers the advantage of "routes" to its summit in a wide range of difficulty levels.

These "routes," cataloged in climbing guidebooks, are rated with a numbering system according to difficulty, presently from 5.0 (easy) to 5.14 (extremely difficult).

The 19-year-old school offers a three-day comprehensive basic rock class geared to those with little or no previous climbing experience. Classes are limited to three people, and cost depends upon the number in the class.

Private instruction costs \$125 per day. A booking of three students costs \$80 per person per day. The school's telephone number is (304) 567-2600; classes are offered from April through October.

At the end of your three-day course, you should be prepared to competently climb as a second on a multipitch climb. Basic knots, equipment, belaying and rappelling techniques, self rescue, basic anchors, and the setting up of top-roping situations are covered in the course.

The course also provides the student with an understanding of the whole climbing system by progressing from short to multipitch climbs. Instructors tailor classes to the individual groups.

It's easy to become totally immersed in the climbing world at Seneca. Dominated by the spectacular rocks, the small village features The Gendarme, a climbing shop where classes begin and where most evenings climbers can be found sitting around on the porch discussing the day's adventures.

The shop is home base to most climbers visiting the area, and features one of the region's first artificial climbing walls, built in 1983, on its rear outside wall.

The shop is named after a 30-foot vertical blade of rock in a dramatic depression, called the Gunsight, that stood between the two peaks of the Rocks. After 300 million years, in October 1987 the Gendarme came

nacle, rated 5.4, had become one of the area's most famous climbs.

If you go

To reach Seneca Rocks from Richmond, take 64 west to 81 north. At Harrisonburg, take 33 west to "downtown" Seneca Rocks.

What if I fall?

Advances in equipment, while making the sport a great deal more technical, have made climbs that were considered impossible 10 years ago within the reach of a climber of moderate skill today. The steel pitons hammered into the rock by yesterday's vertical adventurers have been largely replaced with new gear, ranging from nuts the climbers fit with their fingers into smaller cracks to spring-loaded devices called friends intended for bigger cracks.

To all of these special devices, the climber attaches clips called carabiners, or biners (bean-ers) for short. As climbers move up the cliff, they clip ropes into the biners secured to the rock with the nuts, friends, and other pieces of "protection." A partner below feeds the rope attached to the climber a little bit at a time as the partner on the "sharp end" of the rope moves up.

If the climber falls, the biners clipped around the rope at close intervals along the way are hopefully secure enough to catch the rope — and the climber attached to it — before the climber hits the ground.

Where to learn

Climbing schools, especially those accredited by the American Mountain Guides Association, are the best way to learn the intricacies of the sport. Outdoor clubs, university courses, and learning with experienced friends are also popular ways to begin a climbing career. For in-

formation on such opportunities in the area, try an outdoor shop that sells climbing gear such as Richmond's Alpine Outfitters (794-4172).

Virginia Commonwealth University and the College of William and Mary offer instruction programs for their students only, and also boast some of the few artificial walls in the area.

If you're not in school, a good local bet for beginner instruction is one of the courses offered by the Chestersfield Parks and Recreation Department. The courses are offered four times a year.

Beginner classes are limited to eight participants. A two-day session that costs \$35 includes an evening of ground school and a day on the rocks at Northern Virginia's Great Falls National Park or another nearby area. For more information, call 748-1623.

Adventure Sport, recently relocated to Richmond after three years in Virginia Beach, offers smaller beginner classes as well as intermediate, advanced, and customized instruction for groups or individuals. A two-day beginner class is \$110; a winter ice-climbing class is also available. For more information, call (800) 982-7238.

Great Falls National Park, where many of the locally available beginner classes are conducted, features 30- to 70-foot cliffs on the Great Falls of the Potomac. Typically, top ropes are used on these smaller cliffs, allowing an added sense of security for beginners. Both ends of the rope are lowered from the top, and the belayer is on the ground with the rope above the climber.

Free-lance writer Kevin Concannon is based in Richmond.