

FLATLAND

MOUNTAINEERS

Boredom drives Nebraskans to mountains

Dave Johnson, a sociology professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, peers out of the rectangular window in his seventh floor office. The vertigo isn't as strong as it once was. But, Johnson admits, "I'm a person who could stand on a curb and be scared."

The bearded professor is Midwestern born and raised. He used to be happiest with his feet on the ground.

But his gray filing cabinet is plastered with snapshots of cliff-hangers — trips to volcanoes near Mexico City, Colorado's Rocky Mountain National Park, Wyoming's Gannett Peak, Washington's Mt. McKinley and Mt. Rainier. His closets at home are crammed with climbing ropes, climbing shoes and crampons — metal attachments for snow and ice climbing.

Johnson is one of a surprisingly common though bizarre, breed — the Flatland mountaineer.

About 200 UNL students and professors have learned to climb since the university's recreation department first began offering classes in 1976. Thousands of high school students have participated in climbing trips sponsored by Nebraska Outdoor Encounter, founded in 1974 by Lincoln climber and businessman Gary Gabelhouse.

And it's just a days drive from Lincoln to the headquarters of the world's largest climbing club. With 30,000 active members The Iowa (City) Mountaineers outnumbers clubs in even Colorado and Switzerland. Climbing clubs, like the Chicago Mountaineers and the Wisconsin Hoofers, thrive in other flat cities.

Lincoln has no organized club. Climbers here claim to be rugged individuals. Both the UNL recreation department and a local sporting goods store, The Moose's Tooth, sponsor biannual trips. In addition to regular jaunts to Colorado and South Dakota, university climbing groups have gone volcano scaling in Ecuador and Mexico City. The department coordinator, Mark Ebel, claims no other university department in the country has sponsored such exotic climbing trips — not even the University of Colorado.

The Flatland climbing phenomenon has no single explanation. Each climber has his story and his theory.

Gabelhouse, who was born in Lincoln and is probably the city's most active climber, says boredom drives many Nebraskans off the Plains and into the mountains.

"Nebraska, as far as I'm concerned, is a very boring place to live. A lot of people share that. To a lot of them, mountaineering is one answer."

It was the answer for 20-year-old Tom Cooper. Cooper, who's brother Mark, played for the Cornhusker football team, seeks unconventional challenges.

UNL Architecture student Phil Ramsay traces his early interest to family vacations in Colorado and youthful fascination with the Plain's highest altitude landmarks — TV towers.

Gabelhouse became fascinated with climbing

when he read Sir Edmund Hillary's "High in the Thin Cold Air" back in the fourth grade. Years later, Gabelhouse had the book along when he met Hillary at a New York convention.

"I had him autograph it and told him he was responsible for ruining my life."

Others, like UNL genetics professor John Osterman, moved from mountainous states and brought their obsession with them.

The Plains climbers may be everywhere, but none will deny that pursuit of mountaineering interests is a challenge in Nebraska. They'll even admit it's a little weird.

"It kind of raises some questions in your mind," Ebel says.

Especially since every other nearby state, including Missouri, Iowa, Oklahoma and South Dakota, have better climbing sites. In fact, Nebraska's natural rock is sedimentary — too soft for the sport.

But Nebraska climbers don't shy away from challenges. They tend to look at the one encouraging aspect of Nebraska's geography — it's closer to the Colorado Rockies than Missouri. Back when the speed limit was 70, it was just an eight-hour drive. Now, they lament, it takes 10. Johnson said he considered learning to fly so that he could spend less time on the road and more time in the mountains.

Gabelhouse, who spends much of his time flying to coastal meetings, often makes pit stops in the mountains. His vacations are often planned around long climbing expeditions in places like France, Mexico and Kenya. Most prairie climbers aren't able to get away that often. They average one or two trips a year. In the interim, they run and lift weights to stay in shape.

When some are away from the mountains too long they start climbing the walls — literally. Lincoln climbers have been known to scale limestone picnic shelters, the campus library, statues and crumbling sewer walls. The real challenge in these Spiderman-like feats, Ramsay says, is avoiding the police and ignoring the laughter.

Flatland climbers can't do much to stay conditioned to high altitudes, so they compensate by planning for adjustment time on climbing trips. Some, like Gabelhouse, learn basic physiology and first aid for emergencies.

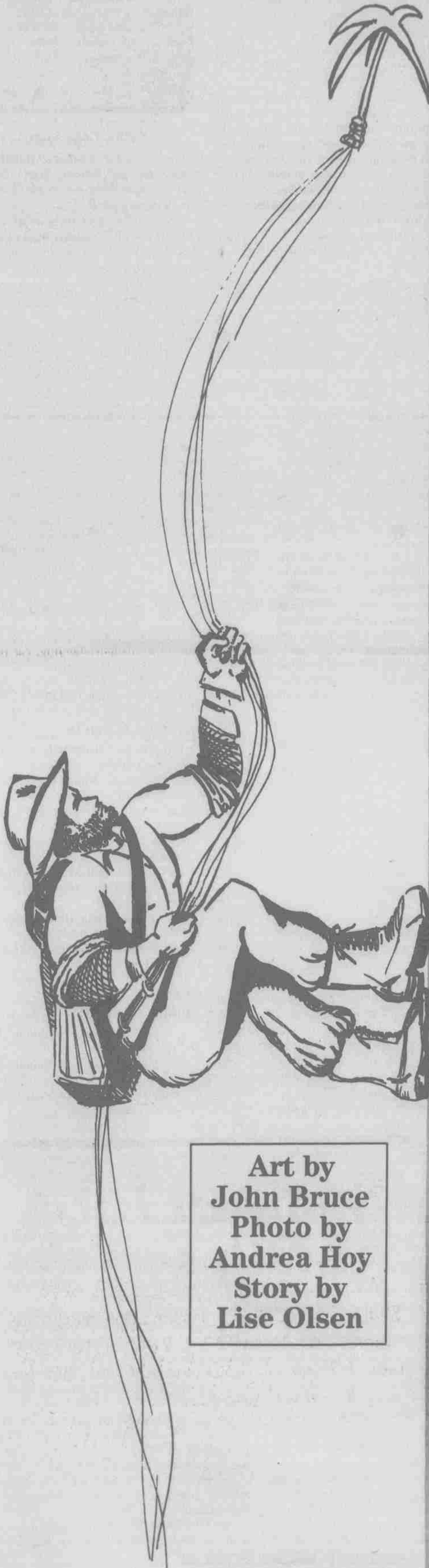
They prepare for climbs both physically and mentally, climbers say.

It's a man against mountain competition, explains Johnson, Director of UNL's Bureau of Sociological Research.

As a sociologist, Johnson naturally has developed some theories about the Flatland mountaineer, although he's never formally tested them.

There's an exclusiveness about successful climbers, he said. Each has seen and experienced things that nonclimbers simply can not.

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Johnson