

The Ice of Agawa Canyon (Eastern Shore of Lake Superior)
Shaun Parent



Canyon Sign at Mile 113

My first trip into Agawa Canyon was some 25 years ago on December 27, 1986 when Chris Lloyd and I ventured into the area for a week long adventure of exploring and developing ice climbs.

Things have changed plenty since the mid 1980's when ice climbing was just beginning in the Canyon. Orient Bay to the north was known and climbers from the Midwest were flocking there on weekends due to the number of easily accessible routes. Here in Agawa Canyon, unlike Orient Bay, after 25 years I the Canyon sees less than 50 visitors a season, and most of them head into the during the annual Agawa Canyon Ice Festival. This March 2011 celebrates the 13th anniversary of the occasion.

The canyon is a 6 mile long north-south corridor between Miles 110 and 116 on the Algoma Central Railway which connects Sault Ste. Marie Ontario with Hearst Ontario at the end of the line at Mile 296. The line is used for hauling freight, but also has a passenger train service.



Southbound Train with the ice climb TRESTLE to the left.

The Canyon hosts over 135 ice climbs and each year between mid-December and mid-April ice formations hang off the 200 meter walls which cloak the east and west sides of the canyon.

One can catch the train northward from Sault Ste. Marie on Thursday, Saturday, Monday and heads back south on Friday, Sunday, Tuesday. The northbound ride is on average a 4 hour journey, while southbound ride is approximately 4 hours but it depends as anything or a combination of things could likely delay the train for hours.

Once in the canyon the Conductor and train personnel know exactly where climbers disembark. Climbers exit the train from the freight car where all the gear has been stored. The North of Superior Climbing Company base camp site is located on the west side of the tracks at Mile 112.



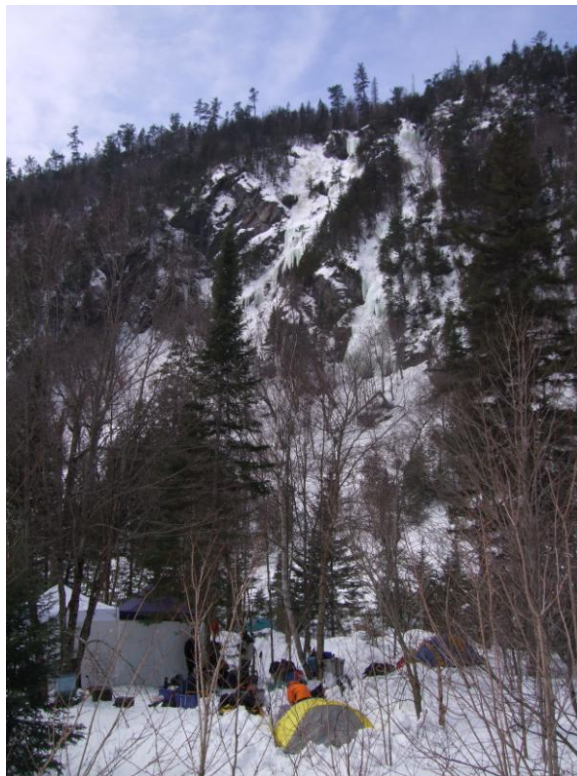
Unloading the train at the mile 112 Campsite

From this access site one will find the most classic climb of Agawa Canyon, named the "TRESTLE". At 100 meters, this steep slab of ice affords all styles of climbing on a 50 meter wide face of ice which varies in thickness from centimeters to meters in thickness.



Climbers on the Trestle with Train Below

Above camp and across the river are located 2 of the highest climbs in the region, "Salmon Run" Grade 2+ 200 meters and "Pins and Needles", Grade 4 at 210 meters.



Mile 112 Base camp with Victory Daze (left) and Pins and Needles (right) in background

Each year in early December, the staff of the North of Superior Climbing Company visits Agawa Canyon to search the side canyons for more ice climbs. Using Google earth computer technology they are able to get an interesting perspective on topography, and have utilized this to discover a side canyon in 2006. The “Mark Reisch Canyon” is named after an early Agawa Canyon Pioneer. Mark was one of the original members of a team of 4 climbers. These climbers began the first Agawa Ice Festival in 1998. Unfortunately, during the summer of 2004, Mark died of injuries during a descent of the Matterhorn. Six new ice climbs have been ascended in the “Mark Reisch Canyon” since 2006.

The record of climbers in Agawa Canyon since 1997 was well preserved on the walls of a canvas prospector’s tent which served as base camp home, kitchen tent, social activity tent and shelter at Mile 112. On its walls were the names and comments from visitors to the canyon. Graffiti such as “Too Cold to Climb”, “Ice is Nice”, “Airtime History” and records of ascents were written throughout. A more modern tent with wood floor, bunks, and insulated walls and oil stove was erected in the fall of 2010, and acts as an emergency warm up shelter.



Long time Agawa Ice fest participants at the Mile 112 Basecamp. Left to Right are John Ryll, Shaun Parent, Peter Gailbraith and D’arcy O’Neil

There have been three guidebooks published on the Ice of the Agawa Canyon; (1) Agawa Canyon Ice Climbing Map 1998; (2) Superior Ice 2000; and (3) Second Edition of the Agawa Canyon Ice Climbing Map in 2007. There is no shortage of new frozen waterfalls in the canyon. Since 2007 another 12 routes have been added in the canyon.

There is a tourist train called the Snow Train that takes tourists on a 7 hour rail journey from the Sault Ste. Marie to the canyon. It advertises that “Ice climbers”

can be seen scaling the frozen wall of ice called Bridalveil Falls across the Agawa River near Mile 113.



Bridalveil Falls from the air with the Agawqa River Below

During a Saturday in mid March 2005, the Snow Tour train held over 1500 passengers and stopped across from Bridalveil Falls to show the tourists the climbers. Ice Climbers that day had turned a section of the frozen waterfall into a rainbow using over 25 bottles of food coloring mixed with river water.



Ice Climbers on Bridalveil Falls. Photo taken from the railway tracks.

Tourist feedback to this rainbow creation gave a positive impression of the climbers with the Algoma Central Railway tour department.

Such was not the case in the early years when the railway was hesitant to let climbers off the train in fear they might “risk their lives”, “freeze to death” or “fall to the ground”.

In the mid 90’s climbers boarding the train had to sign a waiver releasing the railway service from any liabilities associated with ice climbing. But that was in the early years before the first guidebook, and ice climbers heading to the canyon were recognized as source of income for the passenger train service.

For many years now climbers are a welcome addition to the passenger train. On some weekends, the passenger train is empty rolling out of Sault Ste. Marie and only ice climbers are occupying the passenger cars. On other weekends, ice climbing is the “talk of the 4 hour ride” as passengers on the train make requests to see the equipment and discuss the sport of ice climbing. On some trips such that gear is spread along the aisle between the rows of seats, and demonstrations are done in the art of belaying, setting protection and rappelling. Some passengers have at times actually assisted climbers with unloading and loading gear from the freight car where it is stored during the train ride to the canyon.



Ice climbing discussion on the Passenger Train

In the past 5 years snowmobiles have been used to access the southern section of the canyon via the power line corridor. This gives climbers access to within 20 meters of the track at Mile 110.5. From here it is a short snowshoe to several climbs including a canyon favorite "SKUKUM", Grade.3 at 70 meters which was one of the first climbs completed in 1987.



Snowmachine driving out of the canyon along the power line at Mile 110.6

This winter 2011 climbers will celebrate the 13th Annual Agawa Canyon Ice Festival between March 9th and 13th. Ice Climbers will meet in Sault Ste. Marie on Wednesday March 9, 2011 for an evening Ice Breakers celebration. Climbers will then board the train on Thursday morning the 10th at 9:00 am and enjoy the scenery during the 4 hour ride to Mile 112.

At “base camp” a mere 100 feet from the tracks, climbers erect tents around the main Social Activity Tent.

The train allows 100 pounds of gear per person, and in the past climbers have brought with them barbecues and propane heaters.

A generator supplies the power for lights and stereo, while wood that was cut in the previous fall season supplies the heat for the evening activities that take place around an open campfire. From the main staging point at Mile 112 climbers will spend Thursday afternoon through Sunday morning climbing immense waterfalls of various grades.



Climber leading the right side of Trestle at Mile 112



Climbers on the multi pitch Huayhuash Mile 112.7



Ice Climbers waiting for the southbound train on the final day of Icefest 12.

On Sunday the 13th at approximately 1:00 pm the southbound train stops and climbers board the train for the return to Sault Ste. Marie. A final group supper at

a local Italian eatery ends the festival before heading home to their towns throughout the Midwest.

For more information on the festival contact

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For information and scheduling of the ACR train contact

www.agawacanyontourtrain.com or call 1-800-242-9287

For a copy of the Agawa Canyon Ice Climbing Map contact.

<https://orders.climbingcentral.com>