Majka Burhardt (leading) and Caroline Gleich approach the top as the weather closes in. On a rare day a climbing team can pack tools away here and hike for the summit. More often, however, in cresting the top of the ravine, you are met with Mount Washington's crippling combination of arctic cold and wind gusts from the northwest, forcing an immediate descent.

Pinnacle Gully is an aesthetic and technical focal point of winter climbing on Mount Washington, first climbed in 1929 by Samuel A. Scoville and Julian Whitteley. The first ascent without the painstaking task of cutting steps was completed in 1970 by Jim McCarthy, Rick Wilcox, Rob Wallace and Carl Brandon, with the party spending just five hours on the route. Both ascents were historic, ushering in a higher standard of climbing not just for the wind-stripped landscape of New England’s highest peak, but nationally. “Jim led fearlessly,” says Wilcox, “having borrowed my new axes, which he retrieved from my pack at the base of the route and returned to me after we topped out.”
Hjördis Rickert contemplates the ever-steepening Black Dike from the first of its three pitches.

Anyone who has ventured onto Cannon in winter (or summer, for that matter) knows it’s a fickle creature. Many have heard the story of 18-year-old John Bouchard soloing the first ascent of the Black Dike, in 1971, dropping his mitten, ice tool and eventually, when it got stuck, the rope with which he’d self-belayed, before he topped out in a full-on blizzard. Few people remember that this all took place in mid-December before the official start of winter! Just over a year later, John Bragg, Rick Wilcox and Henry Barber marched to the base of the climb and followed Bouchard on the second ascent, confirming the ascent and the quality and severity of the route, the first Grade 5 in the region. As Wilcox says, “That was the first route of John’s triple crown on Cannon.” The others were Fafnir and Omega.

Adam Bidwell enjoys prime conditions in early morning light on a rare April ascent. A preceding cold rain had cascaded over colder granite to form the route in roughly 48 hours. Magical.

Brilliantly gold and ever a prize when caught in condition, Omega is 400 rope-stretching feet, bottom to top. First climbed by John Bouchard and Rainford Rouner in 1976, Omega epitomizes the word ephemeral—here one day and gone the next, or even on the same day! Due to the route’s easterly exposure, many suitors have seen this route fall apart in the hour it takes to approach from the car. Even in the best of conditions the climb calls for confidence, skill and a cool head.

PHOTO: Peter Doucette
Majka Burhardt makes the all-important stab above the old fracture on The Promenade’s crux second-pitch curtain. The first ascent of The Promenade, in 1977, by Peter Cole and the Rouner brothers, Rainsford and Tim, stands as a testament to the kind of steep, no-holds-barred ice climbing at “The Lake” in the late 1970s when progress could include aiding off a tool or screw, and ascents might be sieges requiring fixed ropes and a second day. In the early 1980s, though, these grade 5 and 5+ routes were climbed quickly and all free using the secret weapons of the day—Simond Chacal tools and Lowe Footflats.

Today bashing your knuckles with straight-shafted tools is no longer a part of the game. Each evolution of equipment continues to shape the experience of climbing ice and mixed ground. But the medium is still as fragile and exposed as it was 40 years ago. The sensation of committing to a feature that has a seasonal lifespan is alive and undiminished.
Majka Burhardt stretches out the rope mid-Chasm to escape the deep freeze. This alpine-ice objective, established in 1989 by Kurt Winkler and Peter Gamache, has a ski-mountaineering option when snow conditions cooperate. You enter the Green Chasm after a 1,400-foot approach and an unmistakable rock step that goes at snow-plastered 5.6. Inside of its confines, the Chasm feels like the wildest meat locker you will ever walk through. At times it is less than 20 feet across with walls over 150 feet high on either side. You’ll gain 2,000 feet in total and likely have this hidden gem to yourself. Indeed, the Green Chasm absorbs the climber like few other routes in the White Mountains. It’s easy to forget the car is only a mile away.

Crawford Notch, the southern terminus of the Presidential Range, is home to ice climbs of all lengths and grades. It includes a diverse selection from 2,500-foot gullies on the western aspect of Mount Webster, to Mount Willard’s satisfying, mostly moderate offerings; to the well-loved “cragging” atmosphere of Frankenstein Cliffs. Whether you’re looking for M8 testpieces or lengthy Grade 2 classics, you can find them here.

When they are in condition, the ice climbs on Cathedral Ledge are where it’s at, rewarding a rock-climber’s eye and acute sense of movement. Repentance is a case in point. Climbing the storied classic is a precise act, made in many small moves, often in tight spaces. In lean conditions, much of the important protection is rock gear.

John Bragg and Rick Wilcox made the first ascent in 1973 and instantly knew they’d climbed something special. When Bragg revealed his intended climb on the day of the FA, Wilcox thought, “We’re either going to die, or this is going to be great!” Wilcox also recalls that Bragg broke the picks on two of the six axes they carried. “We practically had a golf bag of tools up there with us,” he says. “John would break a tool and I’d send him up another one.”

Repentance went in four pitches using Chouinard Zeros, with North Wall hammers as third tools. It didn’t take long for other climbers to recognize the quality of the line. Yvon Chouinard and Henry Barber claimed the route’s third ascent, a feat nearly three decades ahead of its time—they did it without leashes. Here, Bernd Zeugswetter finds the route in anemic conditions sure to make the off-balance entrance to pitch two a strenuous, sequential endeavor.

PHOTO: Hjördis Rickert