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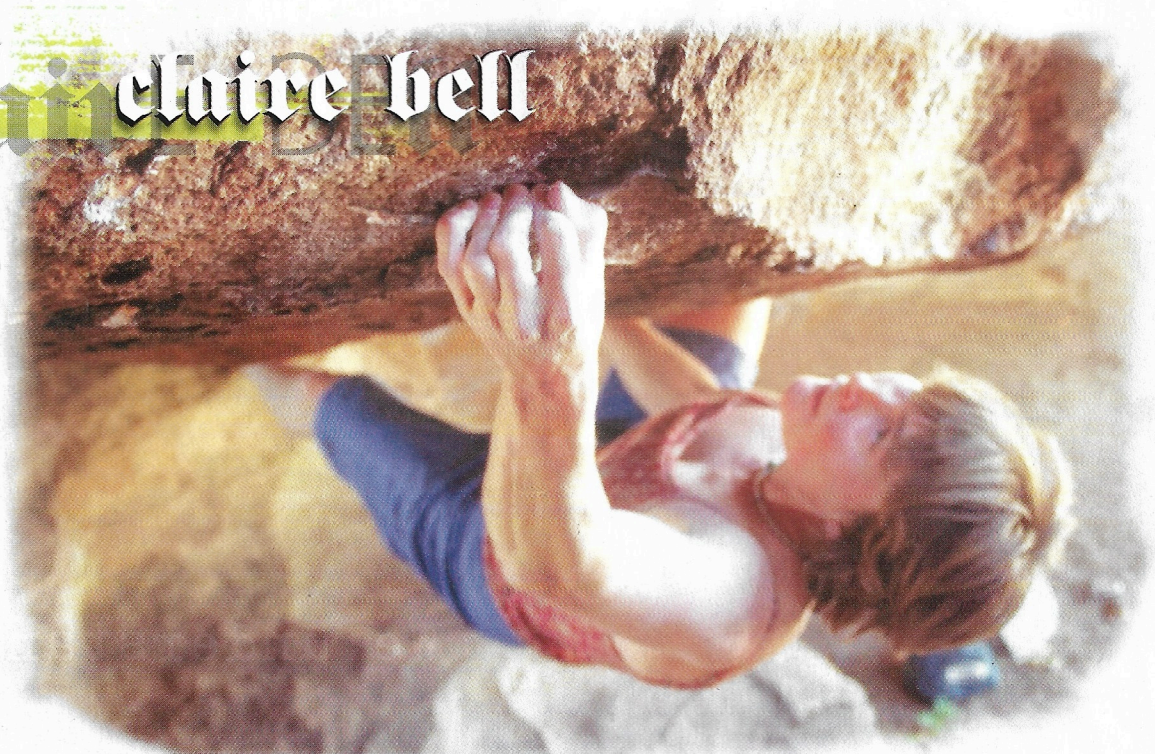


# THE WOMEN OF HUECO

BY  
MELISSA  
STRONG

**W**hen I asked John Sherman (AKA, the Verm), early Hueco local and V-scale namesake, about the history of women bouldering in the Tanks, he told me I could "write a longer piece on woman quarterbacks in the NFL than about women climbing in Hueco in the 1980s." In the 90s, however, some women began to show up on the scene, women like Bobbie Bensman, Annie Overland, Steph Davis, and Bronson MacDonald. Bronson first came to Hueco in 1992. In true dirt-bag style she converted her 1991 Honda Civic hatchback into a living space suitable for a five-foot-two-inch girl and hit the road. She was one of the first women of Hueco; since then many more have followed. After my first visit to Hueco I was intrigued by the strong, driven women who have made Hueco a lifestyle, so I interviewed five of them: Claire Bell, Ana Burgos, Jody Hanson, Heather Johnson, and Patti Newell. Unanimously, they cited the unmatched quantity (over 1,700 problems packed into 282 acres) and quality of climbing there as the main attractions, but there's more to it than that. These five have spent a combined 23 seasons hardening themselves on the rocks of Hueco Tanks State Historic Site and have also started families, earned degrees, traveled the world, and worked a bit along the way. The future women of Hueco will measure themselves against the standards these five have – and continue to – set.

## Claire Bell



CLAIRE BITING DOWN ON THE BEAUTIFUL, AND SHARP, PROBLEM KNOWN AS SARAH (V11/12). PHOTO: COREY DWAN

**I**t is a perfect bouldering experience," says Claire about Hueco. Claire is one of the first women to climb V11/12, and her sends of Full Service (V10) and The Flying Marcel (V10) are the first and, to date, only female ascents. Since her three remarkable seasons in Hueco, Claire has become a wife to Tim Bell and mother to Wiley – she now boulders mainly in the Southeast.

### Why do you love Hueco so much?

My first trip there marked my transition from primarily doing comps to realizing how fantastic climbing on rock is. In Hueco, there are always people to share amazing climbing days with.

### What keeps you coming back?

The boulder problems I have not yet done.

### What is the most difficult problem you have climbed in Hueco?

I climbed Chhbalanke (V11/12) a month before Power of Silence (V10). Still, Power of Silence is the most challenging climb I've done in Hueco so far.

### What is your favorite problem?

Right Martini (V12), I haven't done it, but I've tried to.

### Other than climbing, what else is important in your life and how do you find balance?

It is important that I love what I do in my life. Children need to see their parents living a full, rich, happy life. Teamwork is the balance. Tim is a great dad, loves climbing as much as I do, and does everything he can to help make climbing a huge part of our lifestyle. But,

when a child becomes part of the equation, you have to have more than just a climbing partner. You really have to work together as parents and make some sacrifices to accomplish your goals.

I have learned that when you factor in a kid, a marriage, climbing, yoga, and everything else, things run much more smoothly if you eliminate expectations.

### Do you intend to bring your family to Hueco?

Absolutely. We would love to camp host in the park again, ideally, for a full season in a nice RV. Tim and I are both guides. We were the camp hosts from January through March of 2004. We bought a Pop-up trailer from a little dealer in El Paso and moved in within the week. We really enjoyed the experience of living in the park and working with the park staff. It was good for climbers and for the administration.



# ana burgos

**A**na Burgos first visited Hueco during her high school senior year spring break. After sending her trip project, *Nobody Here Gets Out Alive* (V2), she knew she'd be back, and decided the best way to climb in Hueco was to make it home – so she attended school next door, at The University of Texas, El Paso. From 2002 through graduation, Ana spent her time in class earning her degree in Anthropology, on the rock, and acting as Camp Host – a non paying position requiring her to volunteer in the park's office and helping field campers' queries. Her reward was the comforts of the park's RV. During this time Ana also met and fell in love with fellow climber Sam Davis. After graduation they headed to her home state of Tennessee and got married. The couple has settled in Flagstaff, Arizona, but Hueco will always be their second home.

## **Why do you love Hueco so much?**

I love it because of the roofs that are everywhere. Also the weather is consistently good...and the fresh tortillas at the Vista Mercado.

## **What keeps you coming back?**

School and climbing kept me here, but since I have spent so much time in Hueco, I would like to explore some different areas. I will always return to Hueco because of the reasons why I was attracted to it in the first place – so many steep problems to keep trying. Also, I bought some property next to the park, and Sam and I are planning to build a home there.

## **What is the most difficult problem you have climbed in Hueco?**

Sarah (V11/12) and Theater of the Absurd (V10).

## **Other than climbing, what else is important in your life and how do you find balance?**

An education and family are both important. I wanted to spend a lot of time bouldering at Hueco, but also wanted to graduate, so I moved out to the Hueco Rock Ranch (HRR) and went to classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Family is also important to me, but I'm blessed because both because my and my husband's family live in killa' climbing towns, Chattanooga and Flagstaff.





# jody hansen

Jody's four seasons in Hueco started in 2001, when she left the cold Colorado winter in search of warmer climates. Over the course of a year, Jody makes a tick list of problems she wants to do in Hueco; "If the season is going well for me, I might send a third of the projects," she explains. She keeps the undone projects in a notebook and she reads the list throughout the summer as way to keep motivation up — "It helps me to remain the climbing zealot that I am."

## Why do you love Hueco so much?

The long-season, good rock and, most importantly, the motivated climbing community.

## What keeps you coming back?

I was glad to find so many like-minded climbers that had the same goals and lifestyle. Plus, it's good to have a crew to hang out with on those too-frequent rest days. In the last few years I have done away with the dirt-bag lifestyle, and Hueco has good alternatives to tent camping. I spent many seasons in a van and this winter I will be in my new Tiger RV that I am fixing up. No one needs to suffer those cold, dark nights and dirty, matted hair.

## What is the most difficult problem you have climbed in Hueco?

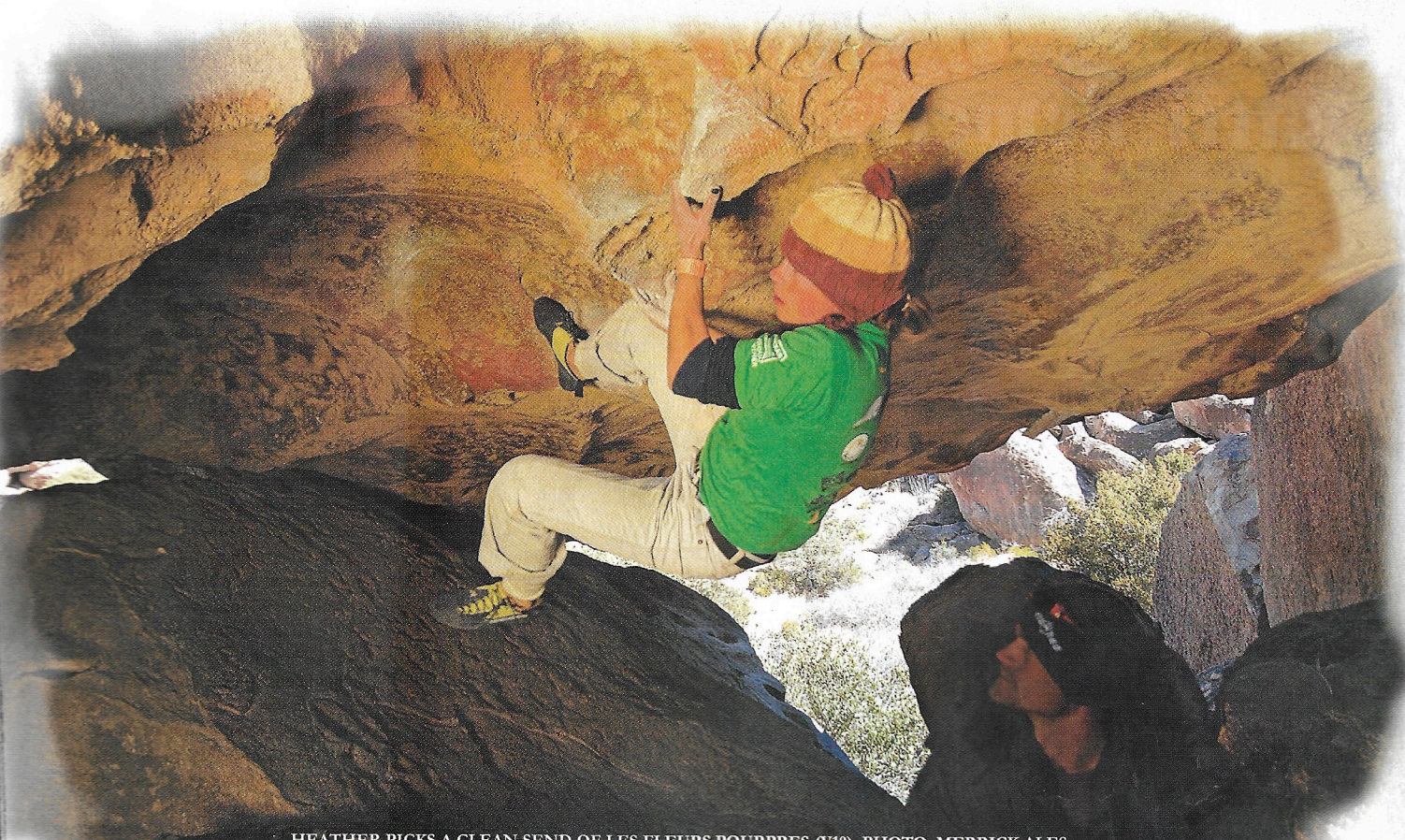
El Chupacabra (V10), for the first female ascent.

## Other than climbing, what else is important in your life and how do you find balance?

Although most of my goals lay in climbing, I could say that a general goal I have is to be the best I can be at everything I do. I'm in the molecular biology program at Colorado University, Boulder, and am dedicating my time to graduating with honors. Currently I work seasonally, which works perfectly with climbing. I have summers in Rocky Mountain National Park and winters in Hueco. It can be difficult balancing climbing, school, work, and socializing. If I don't send my project on my day off, I sometimes have to wait a whole week to try again. Also, I often miss birthdays and other special events. Fortunately my birthday is in the winter!

JODY HUNTING DOWN THE MYTHICAL "GOAT SUCKER," EL CHUPACABRA (V10). PHOTO: MERRICK ALES





HEATHER PICKS A CLEAN SEND OF LES FLEURS POURPRES (V10). PHOTO: MERRICK ALES

# Heather Johnson

For Heather, two short weeks was all it took to get her back to Hueco for six seasons in a row. On the last day of her first trip, she and boyfriend Glenn (now husband) celebrated victories on Local Flakes (V2) and Mushroom Roof (V8), respectively, over beers with new friends. "After that I fell in love with bouldering and Hueco."

## Why do you love Hueco so much?

The many classic problems are one thing. Also the different beta options; since I'm short I typically must find other beta than what's standard. In Hueco there is usually a different foot or an intermediate. Also the people are wonderful. I've spent most of my seasons camping at the HRR.

## What keeps you coming back?

Hueco will never stop challenging me mentally and physically. There is always another boulder problem to test you in Hueco.

## What is the most difficult problem you have climbed in Hueco?

Grade wise, Eckstein (V10), but I spent 3 seasons on Revenge of the Choir Boys (V9), so that one felt like it was my hardest.

## Other than climbing, what else is important in your life and how do you find balance?

Yoga, Pilates, running, traveling, spending time with my husband, Glenn, and Sugar, our dog. Ultimately my husband and I would like to have our own business when we finally decide to settle down. We have not figured out exactly what that will be, but we have a lot of spare time on the road to research our interests. Even when we accomplish our future goals we will still make time for climbing and travel.

We make all of this happen by working summers in Estes Park, saving money, and being frugal. We work from four to six months. This is when I spend time training for climbing. Once the work season is over we start traveling to climb. We try to go somewhere before and after the Hueco season. Last year we went to Europe in the spring and Rocktown, Georgia, in the fall. This spring went to the Rocklands, in South Africa. A lot of people wonder how so much traveling is possible. If you don't have the typical expenses most Americans have, like a mortgage, car payments, etc., it is not too bad. Also, when I'm in Hueco, I work at the HRR doing various jobs. Now I mostly guide.



## patti newell

**B**irding brought Patti Newell to Texas for the first time in 2001.

At that point, she was “ready to quit climbing altogether and become a full-time birdwatcher.” Instead, Hueco drew her in. “We were passing by and I had always heard about it, so we decided to stop for a week.” The week, however, lengthened. “I kept saying we’d stay for one more week. That one week turned into six. I was addicted to bouldering in Hueco from then on.” That addiction has brought Patti back for seven seasons.

**Why do you love Hueco so much?**

I have since my first trip. After that, I wondered what would be possible if I had the whole winter to spend there, like Claire [Bell] and Ana [Burgos]. The following year, my boyfriend and I became camp hosts for six months. We made a complete inventory of all the graffiti on North Mountain, which they use for prioritizing graffiti removal.

**What keeps you coming back?**

Initially it was because I was obsessed with climbing the Mushroom Roof. I always said I could quit climbing when I did that problem. But when I did it I realized that anything is possible, however out of reach it might seem - now my new Mushroom Roof is Nagual (V13/14). Hueco is full of dreams, aspirations and good memories. When I’m there, it feels like I’m home. It feels like I belong to something, and that everyone understands why I’m such a weirdo - because everyone else in Hueco is just as obsessed about climbing as I am.

**What is the most difficult problem you have climbed in Hueco?**

I did my most difficult grades this year, a handful of V9s. For me the most difficult was Dirty Martini (V9).

**Other than climbing, what else is important in your life and how do you find balance?**

My boyfriend, my family and the birds are important. My boyfriend is not a climber, but he is accepting that I am crazy about it. It is hard being away from my family but we get together a few times a year. My parents are my biggest supporters in everything I do. And the birds, I love working with them. I am doing my masters degree with Pileated Woodpeckers. They are the big forest bird that makes monkey calls. The thing is, boulder problems are always on my mind. I daydream about them all of the time until I can get back to Hueco. **ne**

PATTI CLEANING UP KIM WITH A BATHTUB IN HER HEAD (V9). PHOTO: MERRICK ALES