Editorial Note: Shiprock, that awesome volcanic spire adjacent to the Four Corners, virtually dominates the San Juan Basin country. Those who have passed by it or worked near it have, in most cases, been greatly impressed by the ruggedness of the Rock. It seems possible that some have wondered if the great cliffs could ever be climbed by man. It is doubtful if any of the working geologists in the San Juan Basin at the present time have attempted to climb it, although this has not been determined. In any event, the following account is by one of a group who climbed the rock in 1955. The article is a general essay describing the route and the techniques that are used. It also suggests caution to those who may wish to climb Shiprock and indicates the perfection of techniques that is necessary prior to any attempt.

Prior to 1939 Shiprock was considered one of America's toughest rock climbing problems. Consider the fact that it rises only a little short of 2,000 feet above the plains of the western part of the San Juan Basin and that the cliffs, the so-called exposures, are exceedingly precipitous. In addition there are rigor of heat and cold that must be experienced while engaged in the climb and the fact that sufficient supplies have to be taken to provide meager comforts for at least two days and nights.

Several attempts were made to climb Shiprock prior to the first successful ascent in 1939. Probably the best known of these early attempts was the one during which Robert Ormes, author of "Guide to Colorado Mountains," suffered a 40-foot fall. Ormes was not injured because the fall was completely free, that is, in the air and without contact with the adjacent cliff and his belay and piton held securely. His fall was on a rib or spine-like feature which has since then been referred to by mountain climbers as Ormes Rib. This rib which links the north and middle summit remains today unclimbed. The route now used bypasses this feature. Ormes' group, as well as several others, was unsuccessful inasmuch as they failed to find a route that was feasible for ascent.

In October 1939 four climbers from the Sierra Club of California discovered that if one descends from a position on Ormes Rib and traverses the north tower, the peak or actual summit which is the middle tower can be climbed. Following this route the team made the climb with one night on the Rock, although four days were necessary for the ascent and descent. Each day, in fact, except for the last parts of the climb they descended to the desert.

Shiprock was next climbed in April 1952 when a group of five men from the Colorado Mountain Club made the ascent. Most of these were students at the University of Colorado.

Additional ascents followed rapidly. Thus the climb that the author's group undertook and was successful in was the fifteenth ascent, although it was made in the spring of 1955 only three years after the second recorded ascent of the Rock. As of April 1957 Shiprock had been climbed by 29 parties and in spite of the hazards there have been no deaths among the climbers. The precise number of people who made the ascent is unknown to the author, but it seems likely that it is three or four times the number of parties inasmuch as the average party consists of three to four men.

The route is most complex and very difficult to describe. The accompanying sketch map perhaps illustrates some of the features and can be used for general orientation. The route begins at the bottom of a huge bowl on the west side. The rock is dark, breaks readily into loose fragments, and is difficult to maneuver on. Black Bowl, as the feature is referred to by climbers, is a huge upsweep of black cliffs.

SKETCH MAP OF SHIPROCK SHOWING CLIMBING ROUTE