

# High on Ice

*A UNI instructor invents a new extreme sport in Cedar Falls and invites everyone to give it a try.*

STORY AND PHOTOS BY DAN WEEKS



**T**here it stands: a shimmering, crystal tower. A frozen waterfall. A spire of ice.

That's if you look at it from the north side. From the south, it's just a grain silo.

Eighty-five feet tall, built of concrete blocks with reinforcing steel hoops and a domed roof, it resembles any of tens of thousands of Midwestern feed towers—except for the feathery blue-white ice on the shady side. The frozen water is four feet thick at the base, tapering off to just a trace at the tower's top. Its surface is roiled like whitewater.

Today, the ice is this silo's reason for being. Like most such structures, this grain tower has outlived its original purpose. There are no animals left to feed here in this

barnyard of a rural Cedar Falls farm as the cattle and pig operations were shut down years ago. The grain raised here is now stored in low, tin-can-like corrugated metal bins. Other than for decorating the horizon, the silo is now useless. Or is it?

One fall evening 10 years or so ago, Don Briggs, an instructor in physical education at the University of Northern Iowa, was plowing a cornfield for his friend Jim Budlong. Running back and forth in the tractor, he kept looking at the silo, lit bright orange by the setting sun. "You know, I bet I could climb that thing," he thought during one pass.

Briggs is an experienced technical climber who has scaled mountain peaks on several continents. In the past, he occasionally lamented that the highest you could get



An ice axe in each hand and crampons on her boots, Sarah Hoy, age 9, surveys her progress up the silo's sheer ice wall on a crystalline February day. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Belayers, each tethered to a robust metal stake in the frozen ground, crane their necks to watch their climbing partners ascend the silo.



This unused grain tower turns some of the world's most unlikely ice climbing terrain into a world-class challenge. "If you can climb here," says Don Briggs, the inventor of silo ice climbing, "you can climb anywhere." **OPPOSITE PAGE;** **LEFT TO RIGHT:** Don Briggs sweeps up the ice chips dislodged by climbers' ice axes and crampons during the day's dozens of ascents and rappels. A nearly 85-foot frozen waterfall climbs straight to the sky. The roiled texture of the ice offers climbers an infinite number of ways to get to the top; no two climbs are the same.



Don Briggs



Climbing guide Cliff Roy of Cedar Falls



off the ground in Iowa was the top of a silo. He was about to turn that lament into a brainstorm.

"It's going to get cold here pretty soon," he thought on his next pass with the tractor.

"Hey!" he wondered. "What if we iced it down?"

He called some friends in Ouray, Colo., an area that was then in the process of becoming what some call "the ice climbing capital of the world" in spite of its dry winters. Climbers "farm" ice by spraying down the sheer sides of a rocky canyon with sprinklers and climb on the result—with ice-gripping cramponed boots, ice axes and a lot of nerve.

"They told me we needed two ingredients to farm ice," says Briggs. "Temperature and water. Well, we've got those."

Briggs mentioned his idea to Budlong. "Yeah, lets get some hoses and try it!" was the farmer's response. Don rallied some others to help, including Bob Lee, who also teaches physical education at UNI.

"One of Don's favorite phrases is 'Here's what we're gonna do,'" says Lee. "When he says that you want to turn and run, because you're about to be enlisted in some form of adventure. Briggs got me into rock climbing, then skydiving. When he started icing down silos, I thought 'Briggy, you're doing it to me again!'"

Fast forward a decade. Up to 50 people a weekend now show up at a barnyard in rural Cedar Falls to climb some of the most difficult ice you'll find anywhere. Unlike frozen waterfalls and icy cliffs that generally have some

slope, the silo goes straight up. Every inch of the climb is vertical, testing climber's technique, gear, strength, stamina, and nerve.

"The first time I climbed a silo, I remembered it as being really tough," Briggs recalls. "I'd climbed natural ice before, and I got on this and I went 'Wow!' If you can climb a silo, you can climb almost anywhere."

Briggs wasn't going to the trouble of hauling out hoses and spray heads in subfreezing weather, hoisting them several stories up in the air with a series of ropes and pulleys, and getting up in the middle of a winter's night to adjust their position so the ice would build just right purely for his own curiosity and entertainment. He envisioned adding ice climbing to UNI's outdoor recreation course offerings, and training a first crop of Iowa ice climbers how to hold their own with winter mountaineers anywhere—all without leaving their home state.

And so he has. Briggs teaches a UNI phys ed course that covers basic ice climbing technique and equipment use. Class starts in the barnyard at the foot of the silo and goes up from there. One of the most important skills he teaches is belaying: every climber wears a safety harness fastened to a stout rope that runs through a pulley in the top of the silo and down to a belayer. The belayer is a climber's partner on the ground. His or her job is to keep the line taut and arrest it should a climber fall off the ice. Each belayer is in turn tied in to a stout



Ice axes, crampon-equipped climbing boots and high-tensile nylon climbing lines are all provided, fitted, maintained, and deployed by Don Briggs and his fellow climbing guides. All visiting climbers need to bring are warm weather clothing and a sense of adventure.

iron stake driven deep into the barnyard's hard packed soil, so a light person can belay a heavier climber without being hauled up the silo if the heavier partner falls. Briggs has rigged three belaying lines so that three climbers can ascend simultaneously, each following a different route up the ice.

Eventually, Briggs accumulated enough climbing equipment and trained enough climbers and belayers that he was able to open silo climbing to the public. Now, for a modest \$25 fee to cover the rental of climbing equipment, anyone with the inclination can show up at the ice climbing class' second location. That's at Rusty Leymaster's farm north of Cedar Falls between mid-December and late February, temperatures permitting. There, Don Briggs and his crew will teach you how to ice climb. It has to be the best and most exotic winter-recreation deal in Iowa—and a real thrill to boot.

First, visitors are ushered into the climber's lounge, a toasty, kerosene-heated shed just a few yards from the silo and equipped with snacks and lots of beat-up but comfy couches. There, volunteers help you don stiff-soled ice climbing boots fitted with tempered-steel crampons, a nylon safety harness, a hard hat to protect against falling ice fragments, and a pair of radically-shaped ice axes that look like the pincers of an extremely large and aggressive insect. Clothes are your own responsibility: most climbers

outfit themselves with long underwear, a very warm parka, and a wind shell and wind pants. If it's cold on the ground, it's choose-your-expetive cold when you get above rooftop level and feel the full effect of the prairie wind.

Then it's out to the silo, where your belayer will check your gear and clip you in to the climbing line. Not only will your belayer keep you from going "splat" if you start to fall, he or she also serves as your coach, advisor and lead cheerleader during your climb. (If you do come unstuck from the ice during your ascent, you may drop a foot or two before you hover in mid-air beside the silo. Then you can decide whether you want to get another purchase on the ice and climb on, or get lowered gracefully to the ground.)

You use your ice axes to keep yourself vertical, but rely mostly on the power of your legs to push you up the ice—they're lots stronger than your arms, and tire less easily. You climb the ice like a ladder, looking for knobs and holes and ripples in the ice that can serve as a toe-hold or an ice-axe purchase.

Every climb is different, because the ice changes shape and feel by the day, thanks to nightly spray-downs and changes in wind and temperature that shape the column. Cold ice is brittle, and shatters with a spray of fragments when struck with an ice axe. Closer to freezing, the ice is soft and "sticky."

Cold or "warm," the ice is incredibly strong: you can hang

The only experience more fun than climbing to the top is rappelling down: climbers hang their ice axes from safety harnesses, push off from the ice with their feet, holler "Dirt me!" to their belayer, and float down the side of the silo on a safety line. With rate of descent regulated by the belayer, they drop lightly to the ground in a shower of ice chips.



Climber Hannah Lang of Des Moines raises her ice axes in triumph after reaching the head of the silo's manufactured ice flow. No matter how many times they ascend, climbers say, the rush of topping out never loses its thrill. **OPPOSITE:** A long way down: Eighty-five feet up and clinging to the side of a sheet of ice by a few spikes of tempered steel gives climbers a whole different perspective on their altitude. Climbing partners and spectators are reduced to brightly colored specks and shadows on the frozen barnyard. Climbers Sara Hoy and Omar Padilla take a break from climbing to watch others ascend. Jorge Padilla, a first-time climber, seems to levitate halfway up the tower as he contemplates where to plant the point of his ice axe before taking his next step.

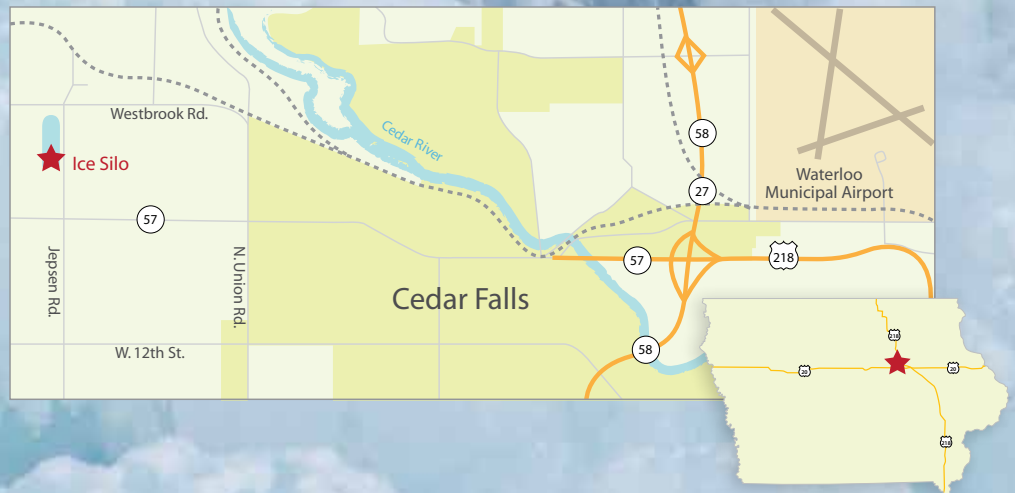


## GET OUTSIDE

Climbs begin when temps are consistently below 26 degrees. Heated facility gives climbers a place to gear-up and relax with hot drinks. Gear provided. To arrange group climbs or check for climbing conditions call **319-277-6426**. Visit [www.siloiceclimbing.com](http://www.siloiceclimbing.com)

**HOURS:** Saturday 8:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m.  
Sunday 11:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m.

**COST:** Daily pass \$25  
Student daily pass \$10  
Season pass \$150





a human body off a well-placed, 1/8" divot in the ice formed by an ice axe. It takes a bit to trust the ice; to relax, look around for a good purchase, and kick and pull your way up.

As the ground recedes, you tend to focus with increasing intensity on the ice, on where your next move will take you, on the encouraging voice of your belayer growing ever more distant and the whistle and roar of the wind growing gradually stronger. The challenge is as much mental as physical.

Eighty-five feet may not seem that high, but the silo is as tall as a seven-story building. Out on the prairie, it's higher than everything else: barns, trees, old windmills. Nearing the top, the upturned faces of fellow climbers watching your progress are just specks on the snow-covered barnyard. There's a view that sweeps to the horizon in every direction. The view, and the accomplishment of attaining it can be quite a rush. Climbers raise their ice axes and cheer.

"Growing up as a farm girl, I never expected to scale a silo," says Andi Vongert, a massage therapist from Bluegrass. "I skydive in the summer, and this is the same atmosphere: everyone wants to help everyone out, and when you do something good, they all cheer. They really want to see you succeed. And \$25 for a day? You can't beat it!"

Hannah Lang, an outdoor recreation and therapeutic recreation major at UNI, agrees. "You really focus. You're looking for that perfect spot to plant your axe. Your

body movements become graceful, smooth, purposeful. I wouldn't say I love the cold, but out here you don't notice it. Wear enough layers, head back into the warming hut every once in a while for some hot coffee and cookies and you're good to go.

"I really enjoy belaying," she continues. "You have a special connection with your climbing partner because you literally have their life in your hands. As a belayer, I offer encouragement and help spot footholds. Seeing your climber get to the top is as rewarding as getting there yourself. I've gotten a lot of thank-yous for encouraging someone to keep going. There's a real feeling of shared accomplishment here."

You don't have to be an adrenaline junkie or even an athlete to enjoy ice climbing here: first-timers, while rarely reaching the top, typically make more progress than they expect, and rappel back down to terra firma elated. Farmer Rusty Leymaster's 86-year-old father who grew up on this spread, suited up just for the heck of it last year. He made it halfway up the tower. He's coming back this season with reaching the top in mind.

Sara Hoy, age nine, climbed past several adults and reached the ¾ mark on her first day ice climbing. "I just listened to the belayers telling people to put their weight on their legs, not on their arms. I was pretty high. It wasn't scary." Any advice for other newbies? "Don't look down!" she says with a big grin. 🐾