

Our National Parks

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1) *History*

Who could say in what state our national parks would be if the U.S. Military were still in charge of them as they were in early Yellowstone and Yosemite National Parks especially during the exigencies of war when natural resources might be needed. Could Yellowstone be drilled for oil or developed for geothermal energy? Suffice it to say that the creation of the National Park Service under President Woodrow Wilson one hundred years ago was clearly a wise choice.

But let us first look at the founding of some national parks before there was such a thing as the National Park Service. In fact, even twenty years before our first national park, Henry David Thoreau wrote in *The Maine Woods* well before Yellowstone: “*The kings of England formerly had their forests to hold the king’s game for sport or food, sometimes destroying villages to create or extend them, and I think that they were impelled by a true instinct. Why should not we, who have renounced the*

king's authority, have our national preserves, where no villages need be destroyed, in which the bear and panther, and some even of the hunter race, may not still exist, and not be 'civilized off the face of the earth'—our forests, not to hold the king's game merely...but for inspiration and our own true recreation."

Yellowstone is our nation's and the world's first national park (1872), unless you consider Hot Springs, Arkansas (1832) as the first, but it was really totally recreational for visitors to soak in the mineral-rich springs, something they wouldn't dare do in Yellowstone unless they were suicidal. Ever since John Colter, member of the Lewis and Clark Expedition of 1804, told seemingly wild tales about steam volcanoes and bubbling hot mud pots, Yellowstone symbolized the American equivalent to ancient mythology portraying a weird underworld, a veritable Hades. But this place seemed even more otherworldly. Yet more stories came from trappers and hunters who had wandered into this incredible terrain. At long last the government sponsored an exploratory expedition into Yellowstone led by Henry Washburn, Civil War veteran, and Nathaniel Langford in 1870. Cornelius Hedges, first U.S. Commissioner of the Montana Territory, and member of the Expedition, strongly believed that this area should

be set aside as a national park after he witnessed the upper and lower geyser basins. Hedges echoed a similar plea from the first Montana Territorial Governor, Thomas Francis Meagher.

Nathaniel Langford, writer and co-leader, knew Jay Cooke of the Northern Pacific Railroad and soon after the expedition, Cooke promoted this unique region for potential development of the railroad business. Cornelius Hedges and Nathaniel Langford described in newspaper and magazine articles the fantastic wonders of Yellowstone. Other members included James Stevenson, former member of the Hayden Expedition to the western territories including the Rocky Mountains and who served as an executive officer for U.S. geological surveys. Not to rely on word descriptions alone (scientific and otherwise), the Washburn Expedition brought along artists to record the strange beauty of this northwestern wilderness. While military private Charles Moore provided richly detailed sketches of features like the Upper and Lower Yellowstone Falls, Thomas Moran, famed landscape artist, composed marvelous paintings of the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, Index Peak, and Old Faithful Geyser. All of this fully convinced Congress to pass legislation to designate Yellowstone as a national park in 1872 just two years after the Expedition. The bill

provided for military protection from hunting and lumbering. A large fort with a contingency of soldiers was built in the northern part of the park at Mammoth Springs, parts of which still exist today. While the soldiers defended the park from poachers, they were not trained to interpret and explain the intricate geologic features of Yellowstone.

There were some thirty national parks and monuments established between 1872 and 1916 that include Yosemite National Park, Grand Canyon National Monument and our own Rocky Mountain National Park. Let us turn to Yosemite, former home of the Awahneechie Indians whose legends and stories of centuries earlier inspired a young John Muir who first came to the Yosemite region as a shepherd turned-geologist in the late 1860's. The energetic efforts of citizen-conservationist Galen Clark in the mid-nineteenth century helped lead to the spectacular Yosemite Valleys including Hetch Hetchy becoming a federal preserve or "grant" signed by President Abraham Lincoln in 1864 which set a precedent for Yellowstone becoming a national park eight years later. John Muir became deeply concerned by the logging of giant Sequoias and over grazing of sheep (hooved locusts) in Yosemite's lush meadows. After he met a famous visitor named Robert Underwood Johnson, Editor of *Century Magazine* (with the

largest readership of any magazine of the day), the two quickly became friends and ultimately forceful lobbyists in Washington for a congressional act to preserve a much larger area than the original grant to include such places as the Mariposa Grove of giant sequoias, Upper Toulomne Meadows and the high Sierra to become the 1.7 million square miles of Yosemite National Park guarded by the U.S. Cavalry. Of course, all during the lobbying period, Muir wrote richly descriptive articles on the beauty and wonders of Yosemite for *Century Magazine* read by tens of thousands of people throughout United States.

Another pre-park service park is the Grand Canyon National Monument, first established under President Theodore Roosevelt with the coaxing of John Muir and Gifford Pinchot. Just after the turn of the century, John Muir's friend, Robert Underwood Johnson, strongly urged the popular writer and Yosemite champion to write an article on the Grand Canyon of the Colorado River for *Century Magazine* in order to inspire general readers and conservationists alike to pressure politicians to set aside the Grand Canyon as a permanent preserve protected from mining and rim-top lumbering that were being encouraged by "Cowboy" Senators including George Shoup and Lee Mantle. Muir's article did the job well to inform readers of the

incredible, almost unearthly landscapes of this magnificent canyon.

Before Roosevelt's successful efforts to establish National Monument status, President Benjamin Harrison, having failed as a Senator to have a bill passed to establish the Grand Canyon as a national park in 1882, succeeded as President in proclaiming this canyon as a Forest Reserve eleven years later in 1893.

After Theodore Roosevelt took office in September 1901 immediately following the assassination of President William McKinley, he followed Muir's advice to protect this fantastic canyon of canyons and its rim forests. One extremely important factor in the designation of National Monument status for the Grand Canyon in 1908 was the President's four-day stay with John Muir in the wilds of Yosemite National Park in May, 1903. The President had a "bully" experience of camping under the stars in the Sequoias of Mariposa Grove and higher up in Yosemite Valley with its thundering waterfalls. The two talked about Nature despoilers and timber thieves while sitting around a sparkling campfire. Within five years the President designated by executive order the Grand Canyon of Arizona as a National Monument and eleven years later in 1919 the canyon became a National Park three years after the National Park Service was founded.

One last park of some thirty that I wish to mention as a pre-park service park is our own Rocky Mountain National Park created in 1915 largely through the efforts of conservationist, mountaineer (he climbed Longs Peak over 300 times) and wilderness enthusiast Enos Mills, a Kansan who fell under the spell of the Colorado Rockies. Mills had the good fortune of meeting John Muir in California who encouraged him to carry on with a great conservation cause of establishing Rocky Mountain National Park in the midst of a frenzy of gold and silver mining at the turn of the twentieth century. Mills wrote thousands of letters to newspapers and leading conservationists and lobbied Congress in Washington to set aside over four hundred square miles of the Rocky Mountain Front Range including Longs Peak, the Mummy and the Never Summer Ranges as a national park. After a convinced Congress passed a bill, President Woodrow Wilson signed it in 1915 to make Rocky Mountain National Park a reality not without strong opposition from ranching and mining interests.

Let us turn to the establishment of the National Park Service that had to address the needs of thousands, even tens of thousands of tourists' varied interests whether in natural history, human history, geology, or archeology, or wilderness preservation. The service had also

to serve as law enforcement dealing with poaching, theft, mountain rescue, and even the serious crime of murder.

The idea of a national park service as an independent agency was spearheaded by a businessman and conservationist Stephen Mather, often called “Father of our National Parks,” and J. Horace McFarland, and a noted journalist Robert Sterling Yard. All lobbied and wrote a series of articles for leading journals that praised the scenic, historic, educational, inspirational, and recreational potentials of our thirty or so national parks and monuments that required a central administration with a staff that was well trained in the previously mentioned features of the parks. Their strong efforts eventually led to Congress passing a bill to create a National Park Service in January, 1916 that was signed by President Woodrow Wilson. Such a movement help create an agency that met the high standards required to administer these parks and future parks rather than relying solely on such diverse units of U.S. Cavalry, U.S. Forest Service, private organizations such as the Estes Park Protective and Improvement Association and a host of others. The bill that President Wilson signed, mandates this new agency *“to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and wildlife therein, and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and*

by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.” It was appropriate that Stephen Mather became its first Director. The goal of “leaving them unimpaired” has recently been scrutinized in a new book by Michael Frome entitled *Rediscovering National Parks in the spirit of John Muir* (University of Utah Press, 2015). His conclusions are sobering in that many parks have not been left unimpaired.

My own experiences as a seasonal park ranger naturalist in Rocky Mountain National Park in the late 1950’s and early 1960’s were somewhat colored by President Eisenhower’s “Mission 66” that upgraded our parks for modern visitors, many of whom were car travelers rather than back-country hikers hoofing across the Continental Divide. Our basic training in Rocky Mountain National Park included being updated on three years into Mission 66 (1956-1966) including modernization of several large campgrounds (such as Glacier Basin) with flush toilets, wash basins, large projection screens for campfire programs and a few heavily used trails (such as Bear Lake) being covered with asphalt for the ease of tourists. 1959 had not quite gotten to the point of shopping marts with cheap trinket gifts in places like Yosemite and Yellowstone.

Major training for all rangers consisted of some forest fire fighting if need be, of informing visitors of safety precautions including proper disposal of cigarette butts and trash and of not picking flowers, chopping down trees for firewood (I actually had to stop a tourist from chopping down a lodgepole pine who claimed the tree belonged to him as a loyal tax-paying citizen), shooting animals for sport and what not. Then we divided up into various groups depending on whether we were naturalists, historians, patrol rangers etc. We were trained thoroughly on the flora and fauna of each life zone of the park from the ponderosa pine-clad Montane zone to the lodgepole forests of the Canadian zone to the sub-alpine fir and Engleman spruce forests of the Hudsonian zone to the bent, twisted and dwarfed trees of the Krumholz or treeline zone to the delicate flower blossoms of the alpine tundra. We were briefed on Native American and early settler history of the park and very importantly on successful ways of conducting evening campfire talks. We accompanied seasoned rangers on their nature walks and hikes as on-the-job training. After two or three weeks of intensive training, I confidently led my very first hike with perhaps a dozen tourists (some of whom were French-speaking whom I could cater to with my B.A. in

French from Rutgers). I met them at Milner Pass to lead them up Specimen Mountain. Specimen Mountain

2) Rocky Mountain National Park

After greeting my people, who varied in age from ten to seventy and in professions from college professors to businessmen, I explained that we would be climbing up 12,482 foot Specimen Mountain, an extinct volcano whose crater had been gashed in half by ancient glaciers. Before proceeding up the trail through a spruce-fir forest at 10,800 feet, I made sure each person had a lunch and sufficient water for the hike that would last for three quarters of a day. I explained that because this volcano had been ripped open ten thousand years ago while it was still steaming, many volcanic minerals and salts constitute the soils of the inner crater. It now (2016) serves as a gigantic, undisturbed salt-lick for Bighorn Sheep. Even though the volcano has been long extinct, Enos Mills, father of this national park, writes in his books that nineteenth-century Ute Indians of the area still had legends of this mountain's puffing smoke.

One man of the group had recently returned from Korea and remarked how similar this national park is to the mountainous terrain

of Central Korea which had been denuded of forest by thousands of bombs dropped by American planes. Much later in life, I would see the very terrain he described north of Pusan.

We started up the trail through a lush sub-alpine meadow covered with rosy and red Indian paintbrush, pearly everlasting, and bright yellow marsh marigolds. There was a slight chill in the air but our steady hiking ever upward kept us warm. Just as my group was getting broken in and walking at a steady pace, a one hundred-fifty pound black bear suddenly appeared just forty yards ahead of us. Seeing that there was no reaction from the French –speaking visitors after I almost shouted, “See the black bear over there,” I quickly said “Faites attention, voila un ourse noir tout a droit.” They smiled in delight, but a Chicago businessman excused himself and returned to his car even though the bear lumbered up into the forest away from us. The remaining people seemed all the more determined to move on and experience all they could as they seemed to be thoroughly enjoying their national park experience. A young child picked up a beautiful arrow-point, chocolate brown in color with perfect symmetry. I didn’t have to remind him to return the point to the ground for others to enjoy in the

future. Since this was Ute hunting grounds, my best guess was that the arrow point was from this tribe.

When we arrived at an altitude of around 11,500 feet, I pointed out the dwarf spruce trees, no larger than a thumb, growing close to the ground. If one were to do a tree ring count, he would be surprised to learn that this dwarf could be a hundred or more years old with very compressed rings. Arriving on the high tundra, the Korean War veteran had to excuse himself and return to the car safely away from the Korea of his mind. Unfortunately, he missed seeing a large snowfield fringed with bright yellow snow buttercups growing right up through the shallow edges of snow. All the while we examined snow buttercups, a white-crowned sparrow serenaded us with his plaintive notes. The remaining thirteen people had developed an esprit de corps as each and every one of them started to get a feel for the high tundra of the Rockies that reminded my French people of the Pas de Faucille between France and Switzerland. After we reached the saddle of Specimen Mountain (Crater View) at 11,700 feet, we stopped to listen to the whistling of a hoary marmot in the lichen-coated rocks nearby. Spreading beyond us lay the vast ever-so-white Never Summer Range or Ni-Chebe-Chii in Arapaho literally meaning Never-No-Summer. They rose high above the

valley of the Colorado River that has its beginning in Rocky Mountain National Park at Thunder Pass. Directly below us lay the ashes and vents of the gashed out crater where Bighorn Sheep peacefully fed on grasses and salts.

As time fled by and summer thunderheads built up, I suggested pushing on to the summit of Specimen Mountain. The trail sharpened steeply, but all members of the party kept chugging along. Some of us began to breathe quite deeply in the thin air above 12,000 feet. However, one spry lady in her early seventies set the pace for the whole group. Because I had become winded by speaking about this feature and that, I remained silent for the last three hundred vertical feet. The gashed-out volcano's features became more and more distinct the higher we climbed until we stood, at last, on the windy summit. Up here we could see for a hundred miles to the distant Gore and Mosquito Ranges to the south. To the north we could make out the Snowy Range of southern Wyoming. We ate our sandwiches and drank hot coffee as the sky darkened with an approaching storm. We had no other choice than to descend quickly. I had grown to really like these people even though they were complete strangers only hours ago. It was hard to say goodbye back at Milner Pass and Poudre Lake where it had already

started to rain. But, it was great to share the national park experience with these folks.

After many days of my leading short nature walks and of answering tourists' questions in information trailers on the west side of the park, and several evenings of giving campfire talks at Timber Creek Campground on the park's life zones, several of us rangers decided that we would make a nighttime ascent of Longs Peak on our two days off.

Three fellow rangers (Bob Barbee, Dick DeLong and Jim Jewell) and I planned a midnight climb of Longs Peak at 14, 256 feet, the highest peak in the Front Range of the Colorado Rockies during the second weekend in July. Bob lent me a paperback copy of Isabella Bird's *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains* (first published in 1879) to read as mental preparation for our climb. There could be no better place to read this book at nighttime than my cabin in the sky at Milner Pass just over two miles above sea level overlooking an Englemann spruce forest glowing in moonlight. She prepared me well by opening my mind and spirit to the mystical glories of 14,000 feet, my first of many such peaks. Her description in the aforementioned book of the lower valleys and distant mountain views is both poetic and painterly:

From this we ascended into the purple gloom of great forests which clothe the skirts of the mountains up to a height of about 11,000 feet, and from these chill and solitary depths we had glimpses of golden atmosphere and rose-lit summits, not of the land very far off, but of the land nearer now in all its grandeur, gaining in sublimity by nearness glimpses, too, through a broken vista of purple gorges, of illimitable plains lying idealized in late summer, their baked, brown expanse transfigured into the likeness of a sunset sea rilling infinitely in a wave of misty gold.

Higher up, her climb turned into something different—she was tugged nearly all the way from the 12,000 foot Boulder Field to the summit by a one-eyed guide named Mountain Jim. She writes:

The intense dryness of the day and the rarefaction of the air, at a height of nearly 15,000 feet, made respiration painful. There is always water on the peak, but it was frozen hard as rock, and the sucking of ice and snow increases thirst. We all suffered severely from want of water, and the gasping for breath made our mouths and tongues so dry that articulation was difficult, and the speech of all unnatural.

How strange it must have been for Isabella Bird, a Victorian lady, to be standing atop lumpy, frozen ground so far removed from the lush green gardens of England.

Our turn came for Longs Peak. Stars shone with absolute brilliance as I drove across Trail Ridge Road to meet my fellow rangers. We signed in at the register at 10 o'clock p.m. to begin a spectacular nighttime ascent of the peak that the Arapaho Indians call *Nestoaieux* or "two guides" that includes both Longs and Mount Meeker. Our plan was to arrive at the Boulder Field by midnight, the cables above 13,000 feet by 3 a.m. and the summit itself just before sunrise. We would experience two heavenly phenomena that night, the Northern Lights and the total eclipse of a full moon. The Northern Lights proved to be a complete surprise.

The trail leveled out a bit, allowing us to proceed at an easier pace until we reached the Boulder Field at 12,600 feet. This is where the walk ends and the climb begins, as Isabella Bird discovered. The moon illuminated numerous scrubby evergreens growing here and there under the icy masses of Mount Meeker (13,911 feet) and Longs Peak. Gnarled, twisted limber pines, crinkly monument plants, and dwarf willows looked extraterrestrial. At the upper end of the Boulder Field,

we all caught sight of the fairy-blinking array of the city lights of Denver some 7,000 feet lower. We stood amid the true alpine tundra zone, with its delicate mosses and flowers barely visible in the black shadows of the mountains. At that time, we did not know about the Boulder Field resting upon a glacier. Only recently, in the late 1990's, scientists discovered that this entire field of boulders spreading over a ten acres rests on a six-foot thick layer of black ice that moves, inches per year, causing the boulders to shift in position. For this reason, it has been determined that there is another glacier (or glacierette) in Rocky Mountain National Park, namely the Boulder Field Glacier which is in addition to the Taylor, Tyndall, Andrews and Rowe glaciers.

Slithering over loose and slowly shifting rocks, we inched our way up Longs Peak flanked by horizontal strips of luminescent white snow. As we rested on a huge boulder, we nervously chatted about the upcoming event—the total eclipse of the full moon, our only sufficient source of light. The eclipse would occur around 3 a.m., and we knew it would take longer than two hours to complete our ascent. We hoped to get past the tricky hundred yards or so of cable (*no longer in existence*) that aid climbers over a very sheer part of the north face. On went our gloves, as we plodded toward Chasm View, some 13,200 feet high. At

this altitude, breathing can be a bit of a problem; our sleepless minds became drowsy and our feet didn't seem to function properly. It seemed as if sheer desire rather than physical prowess pushed us on toward Chasm View.

We all had slight headaches when we sat down on the overhanging ledges at Chasm View. We stared in wonderment at the awesome heights of the famed Diamond Face looming above and at the black waters of Chasm Lake 2,000 feet below. Surely such a place manifests what John Muir meant by the spiritual magnetism of mountains. Despite weariness of body, the spirit seems to ramble out on its own into the cosmos of granite, stars, and moon.

We remained in a trance as Dick DeLong suffered a bit from vertigo; I suppose we all did just a bit. Jim Jewell suggested we climb on toward the summit. Just as we were about to arrive at the point where the cable begins, the moon slowly disappeared. Now, only the stars glimmered above a dark frame of cold rock. Suddenly I shouted, "Look to the north!" Way up toward the Wyoming line, pulsing low in the sky, threads of northern lights began to shimmer as though we stood on some glacier north of Reykjavik, Iceland; it seemed strange that we had

to look *down* at them through crags and notches of dark cliff. Were we on the moon itself? Is that why it disappeared?

We missed the cable. In spite of searching for an eternity of minutes in pitch blackness (save for the deem glimmer of our flashlights), we failed to find our iron guide. Worming our way up a narrow chimney in the cliff, we struggled to reach a ledge for a rest. Lo and behold, the cable! The four of us unfortunately had taken the most difficult route to the beginning of the cables, shining so dimly in the granite overhead. Each of us grabbed the cable, took steps, and pulled upward, sluggishly repeating the process many times, like brutes in slow motion. Reaching the top of the cable, we crossed over some slippery, ice-crusting rocks at a snail's pace that tired us to our limits. The moon slowly reappeared. Oh, for a warm sleeping bag to curl up in and doze for a half century.

Since neither food nor drink appealed to us so much as sleep, we stretched out on flat boulders. But only fifteen minutes passed before the chattering of our own teeth awakened us. By this time, while we ate Swedish meatball sandwiches, a faint reddish hue became visible in the frosty air. The dull-green, lake-studded prairie gradually assumed a more realistic appearance. As the sun bobbed up over the rim of the

Earth, we all squinted like blind bats at midday. The whole Front Range, all the way down to Pikes Peak, glowed in a golden light, while the narrow valleys far below remained dim and gray. We felt like Ute warriors standing there, arms folded, staring out at the space of snowfield and mountain in the crisp morning air. The distant Never Summer Range glowed in the rising sun; my mind drifted back to the previous summer when I watched a Never Summer flock of bighorn ewes taking turns guarding their lambs. Up here on the summit of Longs Peak something began to happen—the Brocken Specter (to which John Muir refers in *The Mountains of California*). The Vast, block-shaped shadow of Longs Peak spread and stretched at the speed of Earth's rotation westward for some sixty miles. We stood in absolute silence. Only once more in my life up to now would I witness such a phenomenon—on top of Mount Fuji, Japan.

3) Grand Canyon National Park

In early June before my second season as a ranger in Rocky Mountain National Park, I decided to familiarize myself with a totally different national park, namely the Grand Canyon of Arizona. After

finding a campsite in the dark Kaibab forest of the North Rim, I knew that I had to see this vast chasm of the Grand Canyon even if it was dark. The moon appeared just over the rim, and I could sense a vast openness before me even though I could not see anything. A prehistoric silence permeated the air and the very smell of rock and cliff abounded. By chance I caught sight of a tiny flickering campfire thousands of feet below me. It was then that I began to sense the magnitude of the Grand Canyon. Back at the campsite, I crawled into my sleeping bag and tried to catch some shut eye even though I grew impatient for the coming daylight and my hike down the Kaibab Trail. Though I didn't think that I slept much that night, the pink hue of dawn seemed to come in minutes. I got up in the chilly air and soon had my Coleman stove hissing with a blue flame that sizzled a pan of eggs and bacon. With the last gulp of instant coffee and my lunch packed, I made sure I had plenty of water in my two Army canteens.

I trotted to the rim. Distant reds and whites showed through the spruce trees. Brushing past the last dewy ferns, I beheld a view that turned me into a small child on Christmas morning. The Grand Canyon spread before me some ten miles wide and well over two hundred fifty

miles long. Through it carved the chocolate brown torrent of the mighty Colorado River, still making the Grand Canyon even deeper.

As I started my descent into the Grand Canyon, my eyes gazed over endless gorges and ravines framed by the jagged South Rim and the distant pure white San Francisco Peaks. I was half tempted to abandon my hike and pick a spot along the North Rim to sit all day long and stare out into space as though I were a Hindu mystic. Truly the world of the rim is a world of its own.

But as park rangers continually suggest, in order to experience the Grand Canyon, one must descend below the rim to the lower, deserty realms and look back up. The descent into the Grand Canyon is the closest physical experience that I can imagine that corresponds to Dante's metaphysical depiction of a descent from a dark wood into the bolga of the Inferno. I started the North Kaibab Trail of the North Rim to descend into geologic infinity. The forested rim with its Kaibab squirrels (a black squirrel with a bushy white tail), coyotes, deer, and mountain lions became the past; the descending trail my present; the shimmering red-green depths below, my future. It was a bracing forty degrees up in the spruce forests, but as I dropped below the spruce into yellow pines, the temperature rose considerably. The towering white

cliffs loomed above me, but seemed insignificant compared to the dizzy space still below. The orange trail zig-zagged below me, deeper still, until it disappeared into sunken depths. Along the side of the trail grew pinkish-red-flowered pincushion cactus bordered with white-flowered prickly poppies.

Lower still and there were no more Canadian conifers; they were slowly replaced with scaly-barked cottonwood trees. A graceful golden eagle swooped over my head and glided lower into shimmering heat. Now I began to feel layers of heat rising up from the Colorado River Basin. After descending some two thousand vertical feet below the eight-thousand-foot high North Rim, I looked back up at the sandstone and limestone heights. It was beginning to feel like I was beneath some ancient sea and that I had morphed into a slithering starfish.

Sharp-pointed yucca with black-podded seeds bordered the rocky trail which, every now and then, hugged the very side of the cliff wall, affording a direct view some thousand feet below. I gulped down canteen water to quickly realize that I should sip water in order to conserve it. But, boy did it taste good! In the distance I saw the pump house which is some three thousand feet below the rim, and after bouncing ever downward along the trail, I finally reached the building

to refill my canteens and to see that the temperature was recorded at a Dante-like 120 degrees Fahrenheit! I could not believe that there could be that much difference in 3000 vertical feet. A sign indicated that Ribbon Falls was but a quarter mile away around the bend, a great spot for lunch. Those grey-green canyon walls looked so aged, and their barrenness added to a timeless quality. Down here, and looking back up at those towering mountains of rock, I felt as though the rim was a figment of my imagination.

The white torrent of Ribbon Falls proved to be a pleasant thing to see in such a thirsty country. It was even more pleasant after those salty-tasting sandwiches I had packed. Huge thunderheads started developing over the canyon, and in such vast space, I mysteriously developed a sense of claustrophobia. But, on I trod downward, ever downward perhaps another thousand vertical feet to a spot where I could see the Colorado River looking like gleaming silver in the distance. As thunderheads began to boom endlessly echoing back and forth, I thought I had better turn around and return to my cool forest campsite so high above. But I had to pause to admire four-foot tall prickly pear cactus with bright golden flowers scenting the air. However, the heat had become almost unbearable. Another loud boom of thunder

awakened me from a heat daze and I slowly headed back up the canyon (the reverse of mountain climbing).

Soon I arrived back at Ribbon Falls (where I should have simply camped for the night) and dropped to my hands and knees to scoop up cool water and drink and drink. By the time I reached the pump house I felt a bit weak and refilled my canteens. It is one thing to descend a canyon this size and quite another to climb back out. I burnt up a whole canteen of water within a mile or so and was already working on my second and last canteen. Slowly I climbed higher and the once entirely azure sky turned to dark-grey and thankfully the temperature eased. About ten switchbacks ahead of me, clumped a mule team winding its way upward between canyon walls. Every time I stopped to rest and drink a dwindling supply of water, the mule team kept forging ahead slowly distancing itself from me. Those trail mules were surely a lot stronger than I! Now I was out of water and slowly crept toward the beckoning conifers. But I was weary—I knew I was beginning to suffer from heat exhaustion. But I was lucky! The ancient Kachina Spirits coming from the San Francisco Peaks sent down to me torrents of hailstones as lightning flashed in prehistoric fury. I ate gobs of hail and began to regain my strength—enough strength to get me up to the

North Rim! Nothing felt better than brushing past dripping-wet ferns in a driving rain.

By the time I had reached my campsite with *no* giant prickly pear cactus gleaming in a desert sun, I lost all sense of perspective. It seemed as if I had journeyed to some other planet. I wasn't even hungry as I watched a full moon set into the canyon:

Through the rim-spruce branches

A full moon set to the west

Casting shadows from spire

To spire turning the Grand Canyon

Into the very moon itself!

4) Great Sand Dunes National Park

Throughout the years, the Great Sand Dunes of southern Colorado had always magnetically allured me as a kind of spiritual home. I never quite figured out why, until a visit in the late 1980's, they, of all places, satisfy my inner being some much. I've flown over them at 30,000 feet to see all thirty-six square miles of them at once, camped by them with my family in cold and blustery sleet, ambled to the top of them in one

hundred degree heat. But this time during cool, dry, windy weather, I've come to understand them in ways unknown to me before. I realized it is not just their size that makes them "great."

My head ached from a long drive from Laramie, Wyoming in heavy interstate traffic through Denver, and I was weary of a year's worth of seemingly non-stop teaching at the university. But I just had to ramble out onto the dunes and wade through an ice cold, pulsing river of melting mountain snow. One of the pulses, created by sand rhythmically letting loose all it can momentarily absorb, almost knocked me over before I regained balance. My sharp headache vanished like a mound of wind-blown sand. The wind gusted to thirty miles per hour and blew stinging, multi-colored and multi-mineral particles of sand against my skin. Million-year old volcanic debris from the San Juan Mountains across the San Luis Valley felt good stinging my face and hands and gritting the enamel of my teeth. shapes before my eyes. I had the dunes to myself and proceeded through strands of Indian rice-grass up into the dry tan mounds rising 700 feet above my head. Despite the wind, the sun, in a blue turquoise sky, felt refreshing.

I followed a narrow ridge at the crest of a dune angling upward at thirty degrees. Sand blew over the edge of the crest suspending my

shadow in mid air giving me an eerie feeling. At the very crest, the sand seemed firmer than to the windward side where softer piles of fresh sand formed continually, as though the Greek god Proteus were at play. Henry David Thoreau wrote in his essay “Natural History of Massachusetts” that “Nature is mythical and mystical always, and works with license and extravagance of genius.” The Great Sand Dunes had become for me clear evidence mythical and mystical Nature. Deep, dark pits below me seemed to be another world, especially viewed through a veil of windblown sand. As I hoofed along the crest, unbelievably jagged and snow-laced spires of Crestone Peak inched their way into the horizon growing larger and larger until I stood at the top of a protean world spreading in waves and merging with a mountain-studded sky.

Back at the campground, after an exhilarating trot downslope and splashing through icy waters, I set up camp and cooked a modest meal of rice and beans while leafing through a paperback edition of Ralph Waldo Emerson that I had brought along with me. He confirmed my beliefs about the human relationship to the land. In his poem “Hamatreya” the spirit of Earth says,

“Who so controlled me,

*Yet every one
Wished to stay, and is gone,
How am I theirs,
If they cannot hold me,
But I hold them?"*

This 700-foot, million year-old wall of shifting sand belongs to Hamatreya. Indeed it *is* the Earth who holds us—even our sand-particled shadow up in the dunes.

Returning to my camp, I unloaded some juniper wood brought down from our home in Laramie from the car to build a campfire under brightening stars of the Big Dipper and other constellations. It was the sweetest smelling campfire possible. As Edward Abbey wrote in *Desert Solitaire*, juniper smoke evokes all of the magic and power of the American West. Juniper smoke is like incense, like a prayer puffing out of Thoreau's chimney at Walden Pond. I got out my bedroll, found a soft spot in the sandy soil and crawled in to stargaze. A bright star rose over the dunes, while the moon hid behind the hissing and creaking branches of a pinyon pine. The Big Dipper floated directly above my head, and only desert breezes and a distant stream broke the silence. Silver threads of clouds illuminated by the moon were the last thing I saw until I dozed off. I dreamed of my many earlier trips I had taken

with my wife Maura and the kids that blended with my need to experience this unique place by myself the next day.

Dawn at the dunes! No words can do it justice. The shrill whistle of “pearl-dip, pearl dip, made by a circling hawk, awakened me. Ten mule deer fed on new pine branches within a few feet of my sleeping bag. A chorus of robins, western meadowlarks, and warblers picked up in tempo as light increased to the east and a reddish-golden moon set to the west. I raised myself up on one elbow to have sand particles flick past my eyes; my eyebrows and hair had become laden with sand much like those phantom pinyon pines of last evening. Then it dawned on me why these dunes mean so much to me, to my inner spirit. They literally, as well as figuratively, made me become part of them.

Becoming one with the land is the central message of contemporary Native American literature. It is through becoming one with the land again after the horrors of fighting in World War II that Tayo of Leslie Marmon Silko’s novel *Ceremony* arrives at psychic wholeness. When Tayo, part Pueblo Indian, part Euro-American, watches a mountain lion high on a ridge in western New Mexico, wholeness, at long last, enters his war-torn soul. He speaks to the lion: “Mountain lion...mountain lion, becoming what you are with each

breath, your substance changing with earth and sky.” I left the dunes with sand in my hair and even sand inside the Emerson paperback where these tiny particles of sand further punctuated “Hamatreya.”

5) Guadalupe Mountains National Park

Years after we moved from Laramie down to Denver, I met many people with similar interests—especially hiking and camping. John Sullivan and I planned to climb the highest peak in Texas in Guadalupe Mountains National Park. After leaving a cold and windy Denver to fly to a supposedly much warmer Texas, we became a bit concerned looking out the aircraft window over southern New Mexico, blanketed with deeply rippled March snow. Surely Texas would be warmer where we would climb Guadalupe Peak rising to 8,749 feet. But, as we approached El Paso Airport, we noticed wrinkled and glistening snow on the north-facing sides of otherwise bare mountains. However, El Paso itself basked in a warm sun with a temperature hovering in the mid-sixties, some thirty degrees warmer than Denver.

John and I drove our rental car with light camping gear east for eighty miles or so to Guadalupe Mountains National Park established in

1972. As we came up to a great white stretch of land, we thought how strange that ground snow should be this far south at a mere 3000 feet elevation. But our fears vanished into thin air when we realized this whiteness proved to be a vast salt flat, the remains of a prehistoric seabed. Gradually El Capitan of the Guadalupe Range took shape with remarkable limestone cliffs. We stopped to take photographs of El Capitan framed with a bright green Soap tree Yucca. Far above rose triangular Guadalupe Peak itself. The terrain ahead of us appeared to be snow-free. Just maybe we would make our climb.

The next day, we shouldered our camel-packs filled with water, snacks, skull caps and sweaters should they come in handy. Ambling upwards past Madrone (ma-drun) trees with bright red trunks, we listened all the while to the shrill notes of a canyon wren. Switching back and forth along the trail toward a higher sandstone cliff, we noticed that the cliff walls oozed with blackish-red desert varnish caused by leaching iron oxides. Below spread mesquite bushes (whose beans provide food for desert dwellers) and junipers. Prickly pear cactus gleamed in the sun like desert candles and sharp and podded yucca punctuated the mountainside. Guadalupe Peak remained hidden from our view but not a circling hawk's. The higher we climbed, the

chillier the air temperature became. As we approached the top of a higher, looming limestone ridge, we spotted a girl pulling on a sweater as her hair streamed out in the fierce wind. By the time we reached her, sharp gusts blew through the branches of bending pinyon pines that lent a needled voice to the wind. No wonder the girl added on a heavy sweater. We spoke with her briefly to discover she hailed from Bavaria and was intent on climbing a summit so different from the wetter, densely vegetated Bavarian Alps.

As she left us, she bade farewell, and we slipped on sweaters, zipped up our jackets and donned woolen skull caps. We proceeded along the trail laced with ankle-deep snow perhaps a few hundred yards behind her. A sudden gust of wind almost flattened me and as I staggered to stand up straight, a young man scantily clad passed by us saying that strong winds forced him to turn around. Years ago a Shoshone elder named Rupert Weeks had prophesied that a great wind would howl across all of North America for one year straight. Had it started now? I no longer felt sure that we could make it; besides, my tired bones would turn seventy years in just a few months. But younger John pointed to the ascending trail that entered the woodlands where we would be protected from the howling wind. True enough, after a few

hundred yards farther, the strong winds abated as we entered the cover of a sweet-smelling pinyon-juniper forest.

I felt re-assured until I spotted fresh mountain lion tracks with deep claw prints! John reminded me that we had a stout walking stick each for defense. Within a quarter mile or so, there were no longer any lion tracks and no bright yellow eyes lurked above us, at least none that we could see. I knew, however, that a mountain lion sees you an hour before you see him. I was relieved to see ahead of us an open and unusually lush meadow at a thirty-degree angle beneath a false summit a little over halfway on the four-mile trail. Sparrows fluttered among deep blue-green agave plants (the source of tequila, a shot of which we sure could use) and green lechaguilla spines along with some very large Spanish Bayonets, all gleaming in a bright Texas sun in deep-blue skies, all looking like a Paul Cezanne painting. A distant coyote's yelp echoed in the valleys below. At last we reached the top of the false summit to gain a magnificent view of Guadalupe Peak rising still higher like a Mayan pyramid. Our trail ascended the lea side of the peak out of the gusty winds, but for now, we had to descend into a ravine between the peaks and cross a bridge built over a very steep gap. Shortly thereafter,

we resumed our ascent of eight hundred vertical feet to the bleak summit rising far above distant El Capitan.

Somewhere just shy of the summit, we looked out at the vast salt flats five thousand feet lower and each gust of wind brought the taste of ancient sea salt to our lips. We paused for some water and trail snacks to revive our energy and spirits. All we had left to climb were several thick layers of crumbly limestone so typical of the Guadalupe Mountain Range. Melting snow seeps through this honey-combed limestone to form a series of caves deep underneath. John raced ahead of me to photograph a full 360 degree sweep and meet up with the Bavarian girl who sat huddled in the rocks as she ate her lunch in the gale-force winds.

I arrived at the top (marked with an aluminum triangle six feet high that hummed in the wind) five minutes later and joined in a three-way conversation, or should I say shouting match, in fierce winds with a low forty-degree range in temperature. I asked the German girl what interested her most about America—“American literature she said, particularly Native American literature. Did I have any suggestions for her reading?” I named some novels of leading Native American writers including those of N. Scott Momaday, Louise Erdrich, Leslie Marmon Silko and James Welch. “What themes should I be looking for,” she

asked. “A connection with the land,” I shouted in a constant wind. She mused how could we not remember our strong connection with the land especially with the taste of prehistoric salt on our lips?

6) Navajo National Monument

Ever since John Sullivan and I had passed a warning sign on our way to Betatikin Ruins in Navajo National Monument, Arizona, we knew we must make the nine mile-hike into Keet Seel Ruins. The warning read, “This arduous trail to Keet Seel is open only to seasoned hikers who register in advance.” Once back at the visitor center, we received an instruction booklet on the Keet Seel hike. The trail is closed during the winter months and registration is absolutely required for hikers who are in good shape. Each hiker is required to bring two gallons of water (that’s seventeen pounds of extra weight!), because Navajo cattle graze streamside all along the canyons up to Keet Seel. Nonetheless both John and I registered for a hike to Keet Seel the following April before the intense heat of summer. We were also required, on the evening before our hike, to take a one-hour orientation class at the visitor center.

That winter we did some brainstorming on how to deal with two gallons of water each. A lightbulb suddenly lit up! We decided to put water in plastic quart jugs that would be spray-painted, each with a bright orange stripe. Instead of lugging seventeen pounds of water all the way to Keet Seel campground, we would each drop a quart bottle every two miles in an easily seen spot so that our weight would gradually disappear every two miles on the way in. We would still have sufficient water along the way and at our final destination. But we would have no water to carry on the way back! Every two miles we would have a quart of cool water each. For food, we would carry dehydrated meals and fruit/nut snacks.

We met our Keet Seel guide, Patrick Joshevama, a Hopi ranger, at the visitor center the evening before our hike. He explained one other difficulty that we would encounter on our hike; the well-marked trail (with white posts) crisscrosses a very muddy stream perhaps forty or fifty times. Be aware of quicksand that gathers around the base of large boulders. It is simply best to avoid going anywhere near these boulders. Make sure, he said, to get an early start before 5 or 6 am in order to arrive before the heat of the afternoon sun. He mentioned that he would be leaving for his post at Keet Seel around 5 am. We were to be the first

hikers of the season and we would be among a group of less than eight hundred hikers per year from the entire planet!

We woke up from our tents just a little too late to catch Patrick on his hike into Keet Seel. We left an extra gallon jug of water in the car for our return the next day and trekked off to Tsegi Point (where the warning sign is) at 7, 280 feet. It was precisely 6 am on a pleasantly cool morning in late April that we began our descent of 1,000 vertical feet into Tsegi Canyon past juniper, pinyon pines, Gambel oaks, and box elders. The scant forest had a few April flowers growing here and there including Rocky Mountain Bee plant, scarlet gillia, and rosy Indian paintbrush barely budding out. With the steepness of this zigzagging trail, we thought it best to place an orange striped bottle beneath an old juniper tree halfway down. Red and tan sandstone cliffs on both sides of Tsegi Canyon (Meaning “Rocky Canyon” in Navajo) dominated the desert landscapes.

Once down in a much warmer Tsegi Canyon, we had to cross Tsegi Creek and faithfully took off our boots and waded across. We followed the trail for about a mile and finally located the white post marking the entrance to Keet Seel Canyon; we had about six miles to go and six hundred vertical feet to gain up to the ruins themselves. Shortly

after passing the junction we placed two more quart bottles of water in a cool recess off the trail. But I'll be darned if the trail didn't come up to an abrupt canyon wall forcing us to cross muddy Keet Seel Creek. We noticed cattle tracks up to the creek's edge on the other side where we put our boots back on. After about the third time, though, we said to ourselves, what the heck; we may as well keep on the boots (mine were brand new) to cross and re-cross this stream. Sometimes our feet got stuck in deep, gooey mud, and it was all we could do to get out of the mud trap. Each time we crossed, our boots got muddier and muddier and wetter and wetter and heavier and heavier. Patrick Joshevama was right about having to cross and re-cross this stream some fifty times one way. Reg Saner had it right in his book *Reaching Keet Seel: The* adventure of reaching Keet Seel is just that, reaching it. Everett Ruess (who perished in the canyons of the Southwest) worked on an archaeological excavation at Keet Seel in the early 1930's. He mentions in his letters that he, too, became bogged down in quicksand on a "bad trail" to Keet Seel.

By the time we arrived at the first of three waterfalls, the desert had begun to enter deep into our minds. Turquoise-blue skies with puffs of creamy clouds, rising red sandstone walls, the bellowing of an

occasional Navajo cow, gliding hawks high above, the sound of a shallow gurgling stream, the rising temperature all added a touch of desert to the inner being whether the hiker is trail-weary or not. The first waterfall tumbled about fifty feet with the trail skirting up and around the edge of the white water with its soothing mist. At the third set of falls, we somehow lost the trail and hoofed a half mile up into a box canyon before we realized our mistake. Back down we came weaving our way through stands of rabbitbrush until we found our trail that had been obscured by a large rock. We just had two more round-trip water bottles to place along the trail side and where huge black, square chunks of boulders came to the creek's very edge is exactly the spot where we each dropped a bottle to the ground. We were within two miles of Keet Seel campsite and on a broad stretch of the Upper Keet Seel stream is where we placed our last return bottle. Up here we would have several bottles left in our packs for use at the campsite and for hiking up into the ruins with Patrick.

Before meeting up with our guide, we hoofed up a steep side trail to a small campsite deep in a grove of rustling oak trees. After setting up our tents, each of us stretched out to doze off for thirty winks. Since it was now late afternoon, we went up to Patrick's summer Hogan to let

him know we were ready for the short, guided hike up into Keet Seel at last. Patrick soon led us through some oak woods to the base of the hollow cliff that housed the ruins. We learned that Keet Seel is a Navajo term for “broken pottery,” and, indeed, broken pottery lay scattered all around the base of the cliff; some of the larger shards were eye-catching with fantastic patterns of black on white. We then proceeded up a seventy-five foot ladder into an ancient small city that spreads over 120 yards with living quarters, ceremonial kivas, storage chambers, and meat-smoking rooms. Keet Seel housed 150 people between AD 950 and 1300 when a serious drought forced them to evacuate. Standing up there, we stared in wonder at the fine masonry of sandstone slabs and incredibly intricate, woven willow-branch ceilings. Patrick showed us the painstaking method they used to weave together their ceilings with yucca fiber reinforced with turkey feather quills pinned inside of the fiber! Having recently visited Chaco Canyon, I asked our guide if the people of Keet Seel spread turquoise powder on the ground before they placed sandstones on top to construct walls with spiritual assurance. Patrick simply said that has not yet been determined. We walked past Anasazi (ancestral Puebloan) pots lining the earthen walls along with grinding stones used for making corn mash bread or making hot gruel

to drink on a cold winter's day. We caught the strong scent of 700 years-old smoke wherever we stood listening to Patrick.

He showed us several turkey pens (similar to those in the Grand Gulch of Utah) to reiterate the source of turkey quills for ceiling construction. Their feathers and eggs were of most importance. He pointed down to their springs which, up until the drought, furnished them with fresh cold water. The spring, along with rainwater, helped create muddy seeps where corn, beans, and squash grew in abundance. They used the "three sisters" method of growing crops with tall corn stalks in the middle, beans beneath, and prickly-vine squash at the outer edges that kept away harmful insects (not like our chemical pesticides). What the corn took out of the soil, beans put back in. Patrick became quiet for a moment and then shared with us the fact that these ancient ones were his ancestors. His group of Hopi came up from Mexico to settle in Arizona and he felt that, as with his people, clans were of extreme importance. In fact, some sets of living quarters here at Keet Seel were walled off from others indicating the division of clans such as the bear clan, the coyote clan, and the fire clan. Patrick believed that the fire clan (keepers of the fire) had a strong presence in Keet Seel as they do today with the Hopi at Shongopovi.

He further mentioned that these ancient ones were far from being vegetarian as they supplemented their diet with elk and deer meat often made into jerky for the winter months. They were herbalists and made use of many different plants for human ailments. For instance, if an ancient one accidentally cut himself, he would get sap or pitch from a pine tree to place it on his wound and stop the bleeding. He could make delicious wild tea from such things as serviceberry and the green stalks of Mormon tea (long before Mormons) that contained ephedrine. As we descended the ladder to the valley below, hawks circled the sky and an owl hooted in the distance.

That night, I decided to sleep out of my tent under the brilliant array of stars seen through swaying oak branches as if the tree had tiny blossoms. I felt kinship with the ancient ones as I, too, deeply appreciated stars over the desert. After a nice, peaceful sleep, we left bright and early the next (morning gnawing on breakfast bars) to retrieve our cool untouched water bottles every two miles on the way back up a long, tiring, dusty trail to Tsegi Point and our car just beyond.

7) Yellowstone National Park

Of the two dozen times we have visited Yellowstone National Park, mostly while we lived in Wyoming, the one time we visited it with friends from Connecticut (who had never been there before) when we lived in Denver may have been the most memorable because we enjoyed our friends joy and genuine enthusiasm of being in Yellowstone for the first time.

Gordon and Jean and Maura and I had taken the trail to Cascade Lake north of Canyon Village the day before. The trail wound its way through lodgepole pine forests and open meadows laced with light green and very aromatic sagebrush and bright blue larkspur flowers. We even saw some mule deer grazing in the distance as we approached the shoreline of Cascade Lake with Observation Peak rising high to the north. Chickadees chirped in the shoreline trees. On our way back to the car, we paused briefly at a picnic area that we thought would make a grand place for tomorrow morning's breakfast. Before we returned to our cabins at Canyon Village, we drove up to Dunraven Pass to take a short hike and to be surprised to witness under clear skies an early

evening total eclipse of the moon that had been shining so brightly over the heights of Mount Washburn (10,243 feet). We, along with dozens of others, watched the moon gradually darken to a slightly reddish ball that dominated the nighttime sky.

As coyotes yelped in the valleys before, we ambled slowly up the Mount Washburn trail to smell the rich scents of the spruce/fir forest lit up by the stars and a slowly returning moon. We arrived at open meadows to look over perhaps a third of the national park with distant Lake Yellowstone forty miles southward. Hunger getting the better of us, we ambled back to our car and drove back to Canyon Village for a late dinner of stuffed zucchini squash smothered in a tasty tomato-onion sauce along with a glass of fine red wine. Our friends from New England suggested, after dinner, that we really should plan on cooking a nice breakfast outside at that Cascade Lake trailhead the next morning away from the crowds. Agreed! Maura and I suggested blueberry pancakes and bacon along with Wyoming cowboy coffee.

My friend Gordon and I got up early as our wives slept a bit later, and we brewed up some coffee on my camp-stove. It was quite chilly as we could see our breaths in the frosty air of late August. At last my wife Maura came to the cabin porch and she said that she, too, would like

some coffee. Our talking awakened Jean and we soon packed some blueberry pancake mix, a package of bacon and my camp-stove into the car. Shortly thereafter we arrived at an empty picnic area. I lit up the stove and Maura mixed the batter to pour in circles near the sizzling bacon on the griddle.

No sooner had the bacon and cakes had cooked on the griddle than some people drove up to take another table. As we ate our pancakes and bacon and swilled some more coffee, about ten more cars pulled up. “Boy. I’m glad we came when we did,” I said. Then a busload of people pulled up and crowded into the meadow below our table. “What’s going on here?” Gordon asked. Jean suddenly shouted, “Oh, look!” And there in the meadow stood a small herd of moose, one bull, five cows and several calves all grazing on the lush grasses of the meadow graced with a touch of morning mist. We had a prime viewing spot to sit and enjoy one of many delightful surprises of Yellowstone National Park. Who knows what we would see during our breakfast the next day! Such serendipitous surprises are very much part of the national park experience!

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