**Mount Mitchell, NC, 6,684 ft. – May 19, 2001, HP #1: Assault on Mitchell**

As we left the Blue Ridge Parkway turning right on to NC-128 North, we were slowed down by what seemed like thousands of road-bikers in spandex with signs pinned to their backs announcing their “assault” on Mitchell. None of us had ever heard of the “Assault on Mitchell” bike race, and so we had a good laugh at what we deemed an absurd name.

At this time in my life I was living in Arlington Virginia, and working in the Washington DC area. I was fortunate to have a wonderful group of likeminded friends and together we enjoyed hiking in the nearby forests regularly. We spent many weekends, and the occasional “sick-in” (our word for calling in sick to work and then going out hiking for the day) in the George Washington Forest, as well as in and around Shenandoah National Park. The Old Rag Mountain hike and the hike from Shenandoah park boundary to White Oaks Falls were two regulars and favorites of ours.

Looking to broaden our hiking horizons Eric suggested we head down to North Carolina for a few days and tackle the then privately own Grandfather Mountain. It is over 400 miles from Northern Virginia to Boone North Carolina, and another 18 miles to Grandfather Mountain. Our group of three - namely Eric, Yenny, and I - made the drive on a Thursday evening after work. Outside of Boone we happened on a concealed, empty lot being prepared for construction, where we caught a few hours of sleep before carrying on to our destination the next morning.

A picture containing tree, outdoor, sky, forest

Description automatically generatedAt Grandfather Mountain we found stunning scenery along with marvelous ecological diversity, and we enjoyed a full day of hiking, which involved more than one peak, and even multiple ladders up the steepest sections. We also walked the mile high swinging bridge, America’s highest suspension footbridge, over to Linville Peak. The 228-foot suspension bridge has an elevation of 5,278 feet (just two feet shy of one mile) and crosses over an 80-foot-deep chasm.

That night we camped out in the surrounding mountains, and the following morning Eric suggested we drive to Mount Mitchell the state highpoint. We had not planned on it, but we had the time and so we all agreed.

Heading further away from Virginia we followed the Blue Ridge Parkway about fifty miles to the turn off to Mount Mitchell often scoffingly joking at the idea of driving to the top of a mountain, which we were nevertheless excited to see. As we made the hour and a half journey, we enjoyed the remarkable views the parkway offered, and I was impressed with the engineering of the road itself. Turning right on to NC-128 we encountered the assailants, who we incorrectly assumed where simply on a moderate bike ride up the four and half miles of NC-128 to the summit parking lot. Come to find out, the Assault on Mitchell bike race starts in Spartanburg, South Carolina and ends at the Mount Mitchell summit parking lot. A noteworthy, stout, century ride of 102 miles with over 11,000 vertical feet of climbing. According to Wikipedia, “most riders finish in less than 12 hours; the leaders finish in under 6 hours”.

A person and person standing on a wooden bench in the snow

Description automatically generated with low confidenceWeaving through the spandex clad attackers, eventually we drove past the park headquarters and on to the parking lot just below the summit passing the State Park restaurant on the way. Miraculously on what is probably the most congested day of the year on Mount Mitchell we managed to obtain parking.

From the parking lot to the summit is approximately a quarter of a mile stroll on a paved trail to a viewing platform. Reaching 6,684 feet above sea-level Mount Mitchell is not only North Carolina’s highest point but is also the highest peak east of the Mississippi river.

I have since visited Mount Mitchell a second time, camping on the mountain itself October 6, 2019, and hiking to the summit the next morning. Unimpeded by the crowd of bike racers, Mount Mitchell is an impressive mountain with spectacular 360-degree views.

On my first visit the summit platform was much taller and better looking, being bricked with natural rock, and topped with a square concrete platform, as compared to the shorter rounder platform of today with it disproportionally, and extra-long, curved and gently sloping accessibility ramp.

In the rushed and crowded conditions of my first visit, I had overlooked the grave site of Elisha Mitchell, a geologist, explorer, and Presbyterian minister for whom the mountain is named. The grave resides next to the viewing platform on its south side. In the 1830s, his measurements proved the 6,684-foot peak was the highest in the East, surpassing Grandfather Mountain sixty miles northeast. As a result of questions about the elevation measurements, Mitchell was on a return expedition in 1857 when tragically he fell to his death. Originally buried in nearby Asheville, his body was later interred in a tomb on the mountain in 1858.

Photo Album: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/Rt3uQ8MLbiYWvNWu6>

**Spruce Knob, WV, 4,863 ft. – September 3, 2001, HP #2: Internet Papers**

Our group of three had gotten up early Monday, Labor Day 2001, to begin the drive west from Arlington, Virginia to West Virginias most known natural landmark, Seneca Rocks. Spruce Knob was just a back-up plan in case we had extra time.

Route 66 took us seventy-five miles to where it meets I-81 and US-48, passing by Front Royal along the way. This three-way intersection at Strasburg requires about one-third of the three and a half hour, 180-mile drive. After another sixteen miles on US-48 we entered the state of West Virginia, and thirty miles into West Virginia we turned south onto route 220 following it, and eventually WV-28, to Seneca Rocks. The drive from the Virginia/West Virginia border twisted and turned like a slithering snake. So, upon arrival we were all very eager to get out of the car and begin hiking.

To reach the top of Seneca Rocks we used a less traveled route coming up from the back side of the nearly 900-foot-tall cliffs found on its face. The approach gained a significant amount of elevation over a short distance, often traveling up natural almost stair-like formations. Commenting on the natural steps, Eric mentioned we were climbing a “staircase of steps”, and Jim and I laughed and laughed, pointing out that obviously a staircase consists of steps!

Attaining the razor back ridge, we ventured past the sign warning “here ends the realm of the hiker” and informing us that to proceed we should have rock climbing ability. Approaching the south peak over the sheer drop of its face, we stopped to watch the rock climbers and to take in the impressive views.

To return to our parked car we back tracked. At the parking lot, after looking over some information one of us had printed from a website, we decided to ask some local looking guys about Smoke Hole Canyon to see if they could give us clearer directions. As the locals were approached, one of them in coveralls, nonetheless, noticed the papers in Jim’s hand, and before directions could be asked for, the local said “I know what them are, them are*Internet papers*!” As sharp as he was to recognize “Internet papers” he was unable to further enlighten us in our quest for Smoke Hole Canyon. Even to this day, I still get a smile on my face, and a chuckle when I think of “Internet papers” as odd as the name is for a printout from a website.

Striking out on Smoke Hole Canyon, we decided to head southwest twenty plus miles to Spruce Knob located in the Monongahela Forest. The state highpoint rises to 4,863 feet and is not only the highest point in West Virginia but also the highest point in the Allegheny Mountains. The area is known for its strong winds, and the one-sided red spruce trees around the peak bear testimony to that - deformed by constant exposure to strong westerly winds.

Spruce Knob is located along a huge ridge that is part of the Allegheny Front – an escarpment arising in south central Pennsylvania, cutting across western Maryland and into the eastern panhandle of West Virginia dividing it from the rest of that state. The southern end of the front is a series of ridges, one of which contains the Mountain State’s highest point. Part of the crest forms the Eastern Continental Divide. We were able to drive up to a sizable parking area at the terminus of route 104.

From the parking lot it is only 900 feet to a stone and steel observation deck. The observation deck positions visitors above the tree line offering views in all directions, with my favorite being looking toward the east as the crest drops rather sharply at that aspect. None of us packed around cameras (nor phones with cameras) in those days so I do not have any photos from my initial visit. By chance, shy of four years later, I was once again in the Monongahela forest vicinity and I revisited Spruce Knob. This time I was armed with a camera and took a few shots.

Photo Album\*: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/miu7QSWwafqky9TE7>

\*From 2005, trip, as no photos were taking on my original visit to Spruce Knob.

**Backbone Mountain, MD, 3,360 ft. – May 29, 2005, HP #3: No Long-Distance Views**

Friday May 27th, work surprised me when we were released early for the Memorial Day long weekend. As such I decided to get away on an outdoor adventure and I invited Yenny to join me. The last-minute plan involved visiting Blackwater Falls State Park in the Allegheny Mountains of West Virginia and also finding the highest point in Maryland.

Packing took some time, raising the concern of hitting Friday evening long weekend traffic. So, I called Yenny back and we decided to forego Friday night camping. Instead, early Saturday morning we met at my place - I had moved from Arlington to Herndon VA for a better paying job about thirteen months prior – and we headed west from there.

At Moorefield WV, with a whole day ahead of us, we detoured off the direct line to Blackwater Falls, and followed the same roads I had use when I visited Seneca Rocks and Spruce Knob almost four years earlier. Needing a break from the serpentine drive, spontaneously we decided to hike to the top of Seneca Rocks. This time I took some nice photos from within the “realm of the climber” area above the impressive cliff faces.

We also popped over to Spruce Knob, mimicking my West Virginia trip four years prior. After taking in the impressive views from the summit platform, and snapping a few photos, we headed north across the Canaan Valley - covering 55 miles from the West Virginia highpoint to Blackwater Falls State Park.

It was raining when we arrived and too late in the evening to visit the falls. So, we headed into the Monongahela Forest in search of campsite. With difficulty a suitable spot was eventually located. Auspiciously, the rain broke long enough for us to catch an amazing sunset as the sun settled behind the wooded mountains of Tucker county.

Sunday morning, we climbed Olsen’s tower and then drove into Davis WV for an early lunch. Following lunch, we made it to the beautiful Blackwater Falls, named for its amber waters tinted by red spruce needles and the tannic acid of fallen hemlocks. The falls are an impressive fifty-seven feet tall.

From Blackwater Falls we headed toward the West Virginia/Maryland state line and Backbone Mountain. From Highway 219, the trail to the Maryland highpoint is a rough logging type road just over a mile in length. Since my SUV was equipped with four-wheel drive, we drove up most of the way, walking only when the driving became extra rough.

The highpoint, at an elevation of 3,360 feet, is called Hoye-Crest and contains a large sign on a metal post. Hoye-Crest is named in remembrance of the First World War Captain Charles Hoye, a descendant of early settlers to the area, and founder of the Garrett county historical society. Hoye was also a veteran of the Spanish-American War.

~~A person standing on a log

Description automatically generated with low confidence~~Backbone Mountain crosses the border of Maryland and runs into West Virginia, earning its name because the thirty-nine-mile-long ridge which it spans is often rugged and rocky. Predictably, thick tree coverage on the summit did not allow long-distance views.

Attached to the post of the Hoye Crest sign was a mailbox with a logbook inside which we signed. At this point in time, the Highpointers Club had not yet installed one of their benches seen at many of the minor elevation highpoints today.

Heading back down, we encountered an obstruction - a car parked across the logging road. Luckily, my vehicle was able to barely squeeze by, gaining access to the highway. Seventy plus miles later we entered the George Washington Forest at Wardensville WV where we located the campsite we had turn down on Friday.

Memorial Day we enjoyed the peaceful solitude and remoteness of the area as we cooked on an open fire. Imagine our delight when a rafter of wild turkeys passed by! It was four o’clock in the afternoon when we drove into Herndon, wrapping up an eventful and enjoyable long weekend, with my third highpoint reached.

Photo Album: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/DDFXcuzsVF6pu1658>

**Mount Marcy, NY, 5,344 ft. – July 4, 2005, HP #4: Via South Meadows**

We had left the Washington DC area two days before on this, my first, trip to the Adirondacks – making today the third day of our trip, and the first day of our overnighter up Mount Marcy.

Following a drive through Lake Placid and a stroll down its main street, with the afternoon disappearing, it was soon time to locate the starting point of our hike. The plan was to begin the hike from South Meadows, where we would leave the car, and backpack 2.8 miles along an old fire road to Marcy Dam. We would camp near the dam, and then pick up the classic Van Hoevenberg Trail to the peak the following morning. The advantage of starting at South Meadow as compared to the Van Hoevenberg Trailhead at Adirondak Loj is free parking.

Curiously, “Adirondak Loj” is not a foreign language spelling, but just a peculiar spelling for “Adirondack Lodge”. As the story goes Melvil Dewey – the inventor of the Dewey Decimal System – was at one time the owner of the lodge. Dewey liked phonetic spellings, and so he named his lodge “Adirondak Loj”.

A lake surrounded by trees and mountains

Description automatically generated with low confidenceThe old fire road leading to Marcy Dam was basically flat, gaining only 100 feet, making the backpacking relatively easy. The mosquitoes, however, made the flat walk rather unpleasant. We took it slow and made it to the dam within an hour and a half. By the time we settled on a camping spot and got the tents set up it was dark. After a snack, we played a game of "tie the food bag up in the tree." Each of us was given two tries to throw a 5-50 cord, with a stick attached to one of its ends, 20-feet up and through a fork in some tree branches. Our laughter, at missed attempts, excited the dog camping across from us causing him to howl along with us. On the eighth throw we finally succeeded.

By 8:00 a.m. the next morning, July 4th, we set out on the Van Hoevenberg trail. After about one-mile the trail passed a turn off for Phelps Mountain, and another mile and a half further along it crossed Phelps Brook by means of the three-pole-bridge. Between those two landmarks we encountered the beautiful Indian Falls. Since the prior half mile had been quite rocky and steep, we decided to relax and take in the views. Once rested, on we went up a section of the trail resembling a stone staircase. At an elevation of 4,420 feet, and within a half mile of the peak, the trail passed the Hopkins trail to Keene Valley.

The last section to the summit, about 900 vertical feet, is quite steep. So, before tackling it we stopped at some big rocks, and ate our lunches, deciding to leave our day packs there to be picked up on the descent. Just shy of the peak we passed a large cairn, and soon there was nowhere higher to go.

The so-called Summit Steward (a young college student whose summer job it was to ensure no one walked on roped-off fragile artic vegetation areas) greeted us and informed us that we were the 16th, 17th, 18th, and 19th peak-baggers of the day. With our moderate pace, it had taken us four hours from the dam to cover the five miles up to the 5,344-foot summit - gaining over 3,200 vertical feet in the process.

Staying out of the taboo areas we located a geological survey reference marker, and made our way to a plaque, mounted into a rock, commemorating the 100-year anniversary of the first recorded ascent in 1837. We asked someone to take a photograph of our group of Eric, Yenny, Jason and I standing in front of it.

The descent to Marcy Dam required about as much time as the ascent, however we did take a much longer rest at Indian Falls where we dared a dip in the ice-cold water only to be foiled by the clouds covering the sun as soon as we got in. While at the falls a guy and his girlfriend offered to filter some water for us. The unfortunate fellow had a big red circle on his shoulder indicating a tick was under his skin.

By the time we got back to camp we were rather tired and hungry and not looking forward to mosquito-thirty (the time of day the mosquitoes attack). Plus, we realized we had another 2.8 miles of hiking to do with the added weight of our camping gear. We ate, relaxed, and rested before packing up. On the bright-side, Eric had by now used up most of the 11 liters of water he had packed in. At 2.2 pounds per liter, he had packed in 24 pounds of water.

Retracing the fire road back to South Meadows we found the mosquitoes to be even thicker than the day before. So, despite our heavy packs and ignoring our tiredness we hurried hoping, albeit in vain, to avoid them. We did however cover the distance a half hour quicker than on the approach.

It was a long day, having covered almost thirteen miles, which climbed over 3,200 vertical feet. Tired or not, we felt pleased having "bagged" the highest peak in New York!

Photo Album: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/GCqhzLEBQDZG5PrA9>

**Kings Peak, UT, 13,528 ft. – September 2, 2006, HP #5: I Met My First Highpointer**

I first heard about Kings Peak in August 2005 when I was climbing Chief Mountain in Glacier National Park. I was told it was a multiple day hike and the tallest mountain in Utah. Since I was moving to Utah later that month, I decided I would climb it. A little over one-year later, on a wind-free and sunny September day, I found myself at 13,528 feet overlooking the spectacular Henrys Fork basin from the highpoint of the Beehive State.

I had trouble falling asleep the night of Thursday August 31, 2006 as I anticipated, with both concern and excitement, what I was about to set out alone to do the following morning. Sleep finally came, and before I knew it morning had arrived, and I was leaving Orem and on my way to the Henrys Fork trailhead in the High Uintas. The 130-mile drive took me up Provo Canyon, through Heber, and past Park City where I joined I-80 and continued into Wyoming.

In Wyoming I drove past Evanston and exited at Fort Bridger traveling through Mountain View, and into the Wasatch Cache National Forest of Utah. Around 11:30 a.m., after three hours of driving I arrived at the Henrys Fork trailhead from where the thirty-mile round-trip adventure would begin. No concerns remained as I ate a light lunch and double checked my loaded backpack. By 12:15 p.m. I was ready to go, and I asked a family, who were preparing for the same hike, to snap a hiking-opening picture of me. Then off, alone, I went on my three-day adventure.

Most of the information I had read suggested walking in about seven miles the first day and camping near Dollar Lake. I knew the trail was relatively flat up to Dollar Lake and even a mile or two further to the base of Gunsight Pass where it would leave the basin and begin climbing.

Anticipating a strenuous day two, when I would summit, I thought it wise to cover as much of the flat ground on the first day as possible. As such, I hoped to find both water and suitable camping at the mouth of Gunsight Pass. I mentioned this idea to a couple of return hikers I encountered in the Henrys Fork parking lot, and a second time to two return hikers I chanced upon on the trail. Both times I was given the good news that water, and tolerable camping could be found at the base of Gunsight Pass.

Studying the trail map, I had broken my first day of hiking into three segments or landmarks. The first landmark would be an intersecting trail to Alligator Lake about three miles into the hike. The next landmark would be another two and a half miles further along where I would encounter the Elkhorn stream crossing. The final landmark of day one would be the base of Gunsight Pass about nine miles into the trek. Imagine my pleasant surprise when only about two hours into my hike I crossed paths with a return hiker who informed me I was almost at the Elkhorn stream crossing. The going was so quick I had disregarded the first intersecting trail as my initial landmark.

As I crossed the stream at my second landmark, I caught up to a group of five - four young men, two of who appeared to be in the military, and one young woman. At this same time, I noticed a solo hiker who was attempting to ford the creek rather than cross on the bridge lower downstream. I hurried on hoping to stay ahead, and out of sight, of the other hikers. After a while I decided to rest in a camping area which on the return trip, I learned was in sight of Dollar Lake. While I rested the lone hiker passed by seeming not to notice me. Shortly after I continued, I encountered him as he rested. We chatted, and I asked him if we were near Dollar Lake, but he was not sure. Kings Peak, however, was visible in the distance so I troubled him to snap a picture of me with it in the background.

Meanwhile the group of five passed by us, only to also rest just a few yards further up the trail. As I approached them, they asked me if I knew where Henrys Fork Lake was. All I could offer was my best guess that we were near Dollar Lake, and this seemed to be confirmed as we noticed a man and a woman leave the trees opposite us. We were at the base of an incline so I decided I would climb up it to see if I could see the lake. On my way I passed two older men returning from the peak, and I asked them if we were close to Dollar Lake, but they also were unsure. However, they did confirm a small lake existed at the bottom of Gunsight Pass.

Near the top of the incline, I left the trail and headed left hoping to spot the Dollar Lake but what I saw instead where some domestic sheep roaming around. Deciding I could find it on the return trip, I returned to the trail and headed toward Gunsight Pass, soon catching up with, and unintentionally surprising the lone hiker. As we again chatted, I learned he too was planning to camp at the base of Gunsight Pass, and I recognized him as the owner of a white pick-up I had over-taken on the gravel road leading to the trailhead.

Soon after, around 5:00 p.m., I caught a glimpse of the lake near Gunsight pass and pointed it out to my fellow hiker who was now trailing me. I remained on the main trail planning to approach the lake on its south side while my fellow hiker began bushwhacking through the shrubs and marshy ground to the north-side of the unnamed lake.

Exploring the south side, I found the ground to be too marshy for camping, so I headed over to the opposite side. There the ground was dry, and so I asked my fellow hiker if he minded if I also camped on this side of the lake and he seemed almost glad that I might do so. At this point we finally exchanged names with his being Charlie whom I guessed was in his sixties. I ended up setting up my tent next to a rock about 30 yards from where had his bivy bag laid out.

Next, I turned my attention to cooking, excited to try out the new Jetboil stove I had purchased the day before. I had brought along a couple of freeze-dried dinners, instant oatmeal, and instant noodles, all of which could be quickly prepared by adding only boiling water. I had just poured the boiling water into the freeze-dried beef stroganoff when Charlie stopped by. He had already eaten and was happy to chat as I ate. I learned he was on a highpointing trip and had just come from the Idaho highpoint with 38 of the 50 US states checked off. He was the first Highpointer I had ever met, and perhaps he planted the seed in me to one day also reach the highest point in each US state. Close to 7:00 p.m., we watched a party of two set up east of “our” lake and right next to the trail. We expected they would come to the lake for water, but we never noticed if they did.

Just before dark we climbed a hill west of our camps to look over the Henrys Fork basin. From the vantage point we watched a cowboy on horseback, and his three dogs, round-up and drive a herd of domestic sheep toward the toilet bowl. The toilet bowl is a 1,000 feet high and quarter mile long scree covered chute next to Anderson Pass which is often used as a return trip shortcut by hikers who camp at Dollar Lake.

Soon the sun began to disappear below the horizon with each of us returning to his own camp. I sat on the big rock next to my tent for a while and watched two hikers with flashlights walk by, losing them as they entered Gunsight Pass. Around 9:00 p.m., I entered my tent, but sleep eluded me and, in its place, came sickness. Likely the 11,000-foot elevation was to blame for my headache, and on top of that the freeze-dried meal was not agreeing with my stomach. It was not until after 1:00 a.m. when I finally fell asleep only to awake a couple of hours later due to wind and below freezing temperatures.

Slightly before sunrise, around 6:00 a.m., I woke-up, still with the headache and upset stomach. I opted to skip breakfast and began hiking the five remaining miles to the top of Utah. At around 7:00 a.m., as I started up Gunsight Pass, I looked back toward camp and waved good-bye to Charlie who had emerged from his bivy. At the top of the pass, I rested and looked for a cairn marked shortcut I had heard about. Spotting it I followed it up and over two ridges where I observed, from north to south, the top of the toilet bowl, Anderson Pass, and Kings Peak, below all of which was a basin that reminded me of pictures I had seen of Everest. Descending the second ridge I followed the shortcut into the basin, where it joined the main trail and head up in a westerly direction toward Anderson Pass. Here I noticed four other hikers converging on to the main trail, and I directed my path to intersect with theirs.

They were not very chatty, so I followed a bit behind them. At places, a tiny stream shared the trail, and it was still frozen solid at this time of the day. Close to Anderson Pass, around 8:30 a.m., I paused as they continued up. I was still feeling nauseated, but I knew I needed to eat and drink, so I braved down a granola bar and some beef jerky, followed by a drink of water.

It is worth noting that the water of the lakes and streams around Kings Peak must be purified before consuming it. This is a side effect of the public land being used to graze domestic animals, such as the sheep I had seen. Water filter pumps are used by many hikers, but I prefer the ease of iodine tablets. When cooking I boil the water for a little extra time to kill off any harmful microorganisms. Since dinner the day before, I was now drinking iodine treated water. Its taste is a bit strange, but it does not upset my stomach.

As I continued hiking, I watched four more hikers emerge to my right having climbed up the toilet bowl. Before I reached the top of Anderson Pass, they crossed it, and started up the remaining 900 vertical feet climb to the peak; it seemed they were trying to catch the other four hikers I had encountered earlier.

With my upset stomach, and throbbing headache I made my own push to the top. At this point there was no trail to follow, only boulders and broken pieces of rock to hop to and from. I was unsure where my exact destination lay so I tried to keep an eye on my predecessors, but they soon disappeared behind one of the several false summits. At one point I was so surprised I could not see them that I called out “hello” hoping they would hear and answer, but to no avail.

As I continued up, my headache increased with the altitude, and I felt a blister developing on my foot. At around 10:00 a.m. on a big boulder, which turned out to be only 200 vertical feet below my goal, I paused to check my foot and ate a bit more. With the pause my stomach finally settled, and I was able to eat and drink even more, while I applied moleskin to my tender foot.

During this break two older men approached, and we discussed how further away the peak was. I mentioned that the four hikers, I had encountered in the basin, had estimated reaching the peak by 11:00 a.m., meaning we likely had another 45 minutes ahead of us. As I was ready to continue up, down came the two groups of four, as one group, and from them I learned how close the highpoint actually was – just 10 minutes away.

A picture containing outdoor, sky, rock, nature

Description automatically generatedUp and on I went arriving at 13,528 feet at 10:30 a.m. I was greeted by the two older gentlemen and we all agreed what a welcome surprise it was to have reached the top much sooner than anticipated. I asked one to snap a few pictures of me then off they went, leaving me alone on top.

Not long after two other climbers joined me staying only for a few minutes. Left alone again I searched the top for an elevation marker, in vain, when along came a man and women whom I recognized as the couple I had seen leaving the trees, the day before, where I had looked for Dollar Lake. They asked me to snap a couple of pictures of them, and I had them take another of me.

I was in no hurry to descend so I relaxed and took in the views. To the east, large Lake Atwood was seen. To the south, South Kings Peak at 13,308 feet (once believe to be Utah’s highest natural point), and on the horizon endless mountains. To the west a sheer drop-off, a large basin, more mountains, and a few high-altitude lakes. To the north, the Henrys Fork basin, in which I finally saw Dollar Lake much more to the right of where I had assumed it to be, with Henrys Lake to the west.

After a sunny and windless hour on the summit some teenagers arrived and I learned they were part of a larger group, so I decided to descend. Almost immediately I encountered several people on their way up, and one woman asked me where I was camped and then informed me she had seen sheep stampeding toward my camp.

It took less than an hour to descend to Anderson Pass which now was cluttered with hikers. In the basin east of Anderson Pass I felt another blister coming on, so I stopped to examine it. When along came the two hikers who camped near the trail across from my camp. I informed them of the shortcut to Gunsight Pass and they decided to use it by following me. Arriving at Gunsight Pass, a bit before 2:00 p.m., I paused to rest as my followers continued down. As I started down the pass, I crossed trails with a young man from Seattle who was hiking with a dog carrying some of his gear. He pointed out to me the clouds forming over the peaks and I warned him of the potential for lightning. Near the bottom of the pass, I encountered a woman Forest Ranger on horseback with a pack horse. I asked her about the sheep, but she was not aware of them.

By 2:15 p.m., I was back at my camp, and relived to find the sheep had not been around after all. First thing I did was treat some water, then retire to my tent giving the iodine time to do its job. Around 3:00 p.m., with the water ready, I ate a late lunch. Then returned to my tent for a bit more rest. In the meantime, two other groups set up camps in the area. I did not mind as I was planning to leave soon. By 5:30 p.m., well rested, I had my gear packed up, and started down headed to Elkhorn Crossing where I planned to spend the night.

After about an hour of walking, the blisters on my feet began to hurt and I was forced to stop and apply more moleskin. In bearable pain, on I went, arriving at Elkhorn Crossing before sunset at 7:40 p.m., relived to find the camp spot I had in mind was vacant. I quickly set up camp, tied my food up in a tree, noticing another tent hidden behind a group of trees.

By 8:30 p.m., I was in my mummy bag and surprised that in the trees, and at a lower elevation, the temperature seemed colder than the previous night. For the most part I slept soundly for twelve hours, waking up only a couple of times, once as a flashlight passed my tent, and another time as the wind or an animal brushed my tent.

I spent the morning of the third day relaxing, airing out my tent and sleeping bag, organizing my things, and preparing food. Initially no one else seemed to be around, and I supposed the occupants of the other tent had headed for the peak early believing it to be their flashlight that passed my tent in the darkness. Perhaps around 11:00 a.m., I noticed a man fishing in the creek, and I approached him to find he was a fellow I had briefly talked to just above Anderson’s Pass on my descent. He did not seem to remember me. He had caught a trout and had it in a plastic bag with water.

By half past noon, with my feet patched up, I began the remaining 5.5 miles back to my truck. About 45 minutes later, my blistered feet began to hurt, and I soon had to stop to give them a rest. I was hoping I was within an hour of my vehicle, but I had not yet past the Alligator Lake trail. Around 2:30 p.m., I crossed trails with my fifth group of hikers of the day, and they asked me where I had been and if I was alone, following my replies they told me I had only a half mile left. Physically I felt great, having no sore muscles and lots of energy but the blisters were a genuine hindrance, and so I was again forced to rest.

At 3:00 p.m., I was extremely glad to remove my shoes and socks and to put on my Birkenstock sandals having reached the end of my 30-mile adventure. Before driving home, I looked in the logbook at the trailhead to see how many groups had logged in the same day as me. I counted 15 groups which amounted to 36 people.

Despite pushing through sickness, and having to deal with blisters, the adventure was a wonderful experience. I could not have had better weather. Henrys Fork basin is a beautiful, peaceful area, and reaching the highest point of Utah was a magnificent accomplishment.

Photo Album: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/ggFyuqn41rvmRapc6>

**Gannett Peak, WY, 13,804 ft. – August 19, 2009, HP #6: The Most Beautiful Natural Place**

I had been living in Utah for four years, when I climbed Gannett Peak. Over those years most of my leisure time had been spent in the mountains. In fact, by then, I had completed a 150 mountain climbs, spanning all four seasons. Through my frequent excursions into the mountains, I had started rubbing shoulders with a few members of the Salt Lake City based Wasatch Mountain Club and had skied the Trinity Chutes of California’s Mount Shasta with a couple of them in May 2009. Outside of their club, a few of my newfound friends had plans to tackle Wyoming’s tallest mountain, and I was invited to join them.

The trip was planned for the end of August trusting the summer bugs would be on the decline by then. August 16 the seven of us - Dave, Lana, Brent, Anne, Jans, Rich, and myself - met up in a suburb of Salt Lake City, loaded into three cars and drove northwest 240 miles to the small Wyoming town of Pinedale. From Pinedale a fifteen mile drive along the eastern shore of Freemont Lake took us to Elkhart Park where Skyline Drive ends. A campground and a parking area are located there, as is the Pole Creek trail trailhead which is the first of a series of trails which combined take trekkers into the breathtaking Titcomb Basin. We arrived in the evening and spent the night at the campground at an elevation of 9,280 feet with temperatures dropping below freezing.

It is close to 23 miles, one-way, from Elkhart Park to the top of Wyoming, with over 9,000 feet of elevation gain. We did not want to overexert ourselves so we budgeted two days to backpack into upper Titcomb Lake, where we would set up our basecamp.

Our first day of hiking, August 17, we assumed a leisurely pace starting out after nine o’clock. Four and a half miles later, at around lunch time, we reached Photographer Point at 10,350 feet. After snapping a few photos, I decided to eat lunch, only to find the rest of the group suddenly in a hurry and on their way. Being comfortable in the outdoors alone, I was not at all concern about it, but upon catching up with them it seemed some felt I should not have been separated from the group.

By 1:40 p.m. we had covered seven and a half miles having reached the Seneca Lake outlet. About halfway between the outlet and the lakes’ northern end we encountered a bloated horse carcass, and we hoped someone would soon return to dynamite it into small compostable pieces as there was little chance it was going to be removed from the area. Upon reaching the north end of Seneca Lake we stopped for the day and set up camp. The time was 3:00 p.m. and we had hiked nine and half miles.

August 18, we broke camp, again at a leisurely pace, heading north on the Seneca Lake trail by ten o’clock. After just one mile our route put us on the Indian Pass trail still traveling north. The scenery of granite mountains like Freemont Peak, along with boulders everywhere and multiple lakes, was incredible. On the rise above Island Lake, we caught a glimpse of our goal, Gannett Peak, and the pass, Bonney Pass, we would have to traverse to reach it. A half an hour later we were at the south end of Island Lake, and we continued around its east side traversing its sandy beaches. Leaving the lake, we followed the Titcomb Basin trail. At noon we paused for lunch. Half an hour later we encountered our first section of snow, but not enough to warrant crampons. Less than three hours into the day’s journey we reached the lower Titcomb Lake, and from there continued to the Upper Titcomb Lake. The entire hike I was enchanted with the spectacular backdrop, ranking it as the most beautiful I had come across in the United States of America.

Northeast of the Upper Titcomb Lake at around 10,600 feet we selected a spot for our basecamp, located two and a half miles from 12,800-foot Bonney Pass, and approximately seven miles from the 13,804-foot summit of Gannett Peak. We had covered six and a half miles for the day. When the comfortable breeze would stop, we were inundated by mosquitoes. We arrived in the early afternoon, so to pass the time we relaxed in our tents, filtered water, and prepared for the next day’s summit bid. After dinner some played cards until dark. Layered clothing, and even ski hats, were needed to stay warm.

Day three was summit day and we got a moderately early start leaving camp at six o’clock. At the bottom of the snow-covered Bonney Pass, with the sun starting to come up, we donned our gaiters, strapped on our crampons, and pulled out our ice axes. From this point on we would travel on snow. We scaled the 2,200 vertical feet to the top of Bonney Pass in two hours, next dropping down to 11,580 feet and on to the Dinwoody Glacier with its absurdly deep moot by 9:00 a.m.

Crossing from the Dinwoody Glacier over to Gooseneck Glacier required locating a thin band of snow that leads to Gooseneck Ridge. This strip of snow would have been very hard to find without Brent’s knowledge of the route. He was the only member of our group who had climbed the peak before, and his familiarity was appreciated.

Within an hour and a half from the Dinwoody Glacier we reached what we hoped was not going to be a major obstacle, namely the notorious bergschrund. We had taken a bit of a calculated risk when we elected to leave behind pickets, harnesses, and ropes; gambling we would not need them to cross it. Fortunately, with care the “schrund” (as Mountaineers often shorten the name to) was passable without gear. The crux of the climb proved to be the steep slope above the “schrund” often exceeding 40 degrees.

By 10:45 a.m. our entire party had safely navigated the crux. Within another 15 minutes we reached the point where the Gooseneck Ridge turns from west to north and overlooks what we called Glacier Pass. From there we soon reached the Gooseneck Pinnacle, and before noon all seven of us stood upon the rooftop of Wyoming with blue skies all around and breath-taking views in all directions.

Lana had brought along a cloth banner on which she had written Gannett and below that 13,804’ - we took turns posing for pictures while holding it. We relaxed on the top soaking in the sun and the views, found and signed the summit registry, and within an hour began the return trip to basecamp climbing over the seemingly bottomless bergschrund by 1:30 p.m. We retrace our steps to the top of Bonney Pass arriving by 4:30 p.m.

I was the first of our group to start down the 2,000 plus vertical feet of Bonney Pass, and after some time a commotion caused me to pause and look back up, only to see Brent uncontrollably sliding on his belly, feet first, rapidly gaining speed as he plummeted toward me. I could see he had lost his ice axe, and so I yelled at him to spread out his arms and legs, hoping that would slow him enough so he could regain control. It was a frightening scene to witness, but mercifully he heard my instructions, followed them, and recovered control. He suffered only scrapes, along with some bumps and bruises, being blessed to have not snagged a crampon and to have stopped when he did. He told me that as he started down, he stopped to get something out of his pack and in doing so released the leash of his axe from the waist band strap, only to next slip with his axe left above stuck in the snow. On a steep slope like we were descending, self-arresting without an axe was an unlikely affair which he pulled off. Had he not, he would have been badly hurt and we all would have been in serious trouble. I for one thanked my Heavenly Father for his protection.

It was a twelve-hour day by the time we all securely returned to basecamp, and we were exhausted having covered fourteen miles and climbed just shy of 7,000 vertical feet. Water, food, and rest – in that order – were all we wanted and needed that evening.

Our fourth day in the mountains was a reverse journey of days two and one. We began the remaining sixteen-mile return hike at 8:00 a.m., passed Little Seneca Lake inside an hour and a half, re-encountered the dead horse twenty minutes before noon, and reached the parking lot at Elkhart Park by 4:30 p.m. I finished the last of my food on the return trip, still I was in favor of spending another night at the campground before making the journey home. However, the majority consensus was to drive to Pinedale, dine at a restaurant, and spend the night at a motel. Come to find out Brent had his motel room already reserved!

Photo Album: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/SB8AhYG1apNg1z5L9>

**Borah Peak, ID, 12,662 ft. – September 5, 2009, HP #7: Raised During an Earthquake**

After work on Friday September 4, I took I-15 north from Utah to Blackfoot Idaho, then US-26 northwest to Arco where I continued northwest on US-93 through Mackay and finally to Birch Springs road to the southwest ridge trailhead of Borah Peak. It was a 330-mile drive. Upon arriving at 10:45 p.m., I folded down the back seat of my SUV and made myself comfortable for the night.

Next morning, I was up at 5:15 a.m. and by 6:20 a.m. I was following a footpath upward to the east between pine trees and sage brush. Soon, as I headed up a series of switchbacks, I caught up to a party ahead of me. I put my head down and picked up my pace and as I overtook them, much to my surprise, one of them called me by name. I turned to see Mark Wray who I had worked with in Australia back in 1988. These days Mark is a pilot and lives in Idaho. In the last twenty-one years we had only seen each other one other time when nine years prior his work had taken him to the DC area. He was climbing Borah with his son, and it was a pleasant surprise to run into an old friend especially at such a remote location. I did not want to interrupt his father and son time, so I was soon on my way.

About 80 minutes into the hike the trees thinned out and Borah Peak came into view, I was at over 9,000 feet by this point. This was my first time seeing it with my own eyes, as I had arrived in the dark and did not get a view of the mountain from the highway. From this vantage point, the summit looked lower than its neighboring peak – an common optical illusion in the mountains. At roughly 10,500 feet the trail enters an alpine plateau, and about 800 vertical feet later a rocky buttress is encountered which is the bottom of the legendary Chicken Out Ridge, considered the crux of the outing.

Chicken Out Ridge involves continuous stout third class scrambling - with a few fourth class moves sprinkled in for added spice- as it gains 300 vertical feet. The ridge has exposure on both sides with the north side being the more perilous as it looks down 2,000 or so feet. Sounds daunting, but the rock is solid with amble trustworthy hand and foot holds - some folks even take their dogs up and over it. The ridge ends at a 20-foot down climb landing on a snow filled notch (which was not so snow filled this late in the year). Just in case, I had packed an ice axe with me but there was not any need to unstrap it from my bag. The route travels northeast from this point to the peak following the southwest ridge. This next section is narrow, but was easily passable, and leads slightly downward to a saddle which I reached at 9:10 a.m. From the saddle it is another 800 feet or so up to the summit, which required 40 minutes to climb.

This southwest ridge trail is steep, gaining on average close to 1,500 feet per mile as it surges 5,200 vertical feet in three and a half miles from the trailhead. I took three and a half hours to ascend it and I was privileged to arrive to an unpopulated peak. An American flag, with an Idaho flag sunk below it, was flying from a flagpole supported by the summit cairn. The Idaho flag was partially resting on the group of rocks.

I only had the peak to myself for about five minutes as I took in the beautiful landscapes of the Lost River Range with its many 12,000-foot peaks scattered before me. No longer alone I took advantage of the company by having someone take my photo as I posed holding the faded jean "Mount Borah, elev. 12,662 ft." banner, which is stored on the peak for all to model with, as I sported my 70’s style sunglasses. Those who climbed this mountain before 1983 would have needed a banner labeled with 12,655 feet as Borah was raised seven feet during a 1983 earthquake that shook the area.

By 10:10 a.m. Mark and his boy arrived, and we took a couple of photos together. While chitchatting we both mentioned a desire to one day climb Denali – Mark hoped to climb it with his son.

A picture containing text, sky, mountain, outdoor

Description automatically generatedI hung out on the peak for about an hour. Eventually I reversed my steps, returning to the parking lot by 2:00 p.m. Near the trailhead I stopped to read a “Safety Tips For Hiking Borah” sign which had been in the dark when I began my ascent. The sign said to plan on a 12-hour round trip but besides that it made some reasonable points. A second sign gave the origins of the mountains name stating, “Named in 1933 for William E. Borah, Idaho’s senator from1906 to 1940”.

Next to the parking lot I found an empty camping spot with a picnic table. After removing my boots, I cleaned up then made lunch at the table. It was quiet so I rested hoping, but failing, to fall asleep. Around 6:00 p.m. I began the long drive back, arriving home just after 11:00 p.m.

Photo Album: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/TTSoEj5vUY6xHicE7>

**Mount Elbert, CO, 14,433 ft. – September 18, 2009, HP #8: It Appeared as Though I Was Alone**

It was a quick and easy decision to make, when I learned the Mount Elbert trailhead was only about a one hundred mile longer drive than what I had driven the week before to get to Borah Peak, Idaho. Mount Elbert it would be then – my one hundredth distinct mountain and a new personal height record to boot. Prior to climbing Mount Elbert, I had completed 152 successful mountain climbs on 99 separate mountains. Not wanting to rush it, I planned it for a week out. I would leave next Thursday afternoon, sleep in my SUV at the trailhead and climb it the following day.

Thursday arrived, and I set off anonymously after lunch. The miles passed uneventfully and soon I found myself in Grand Junction, Colorado with my odometer indicating roughly half of the drive was behind me. Four o’clock seemed a bit early for dinner, but after I filled up the gas tank, I realized I might as well eat too. Soon enough I was back on I-70 heading east, covering new ground with each passing mile often through scenic areas. Near the small town of Minturn, I exited the freeway turning south onto US-24 to wind my way up to the two-mile high town of Leadville.

As I neared Leadville, I spotted Mount Elbert to the southwest and thought it looked more impressive in person than in pictures. Reaching Leadville just as the sun had set, I topped off my gas tank before heading off in search of CO 11 which would lead me into the San Isabel National Forest and the trailhead of Mount Elbert about 12 miles distant.

A wooden sign in the woods

Description automatically generated with low confidenceIt was around eight o’clock when I pulled up at the northeast ridge Mount Elbert trailhead where only one other vehicle occupied the parking lot. The vacancy, coupled with the darkness and an unfamiliar place, contributed to an eerie feeling as I stepped out of my vehicle to examine the trailhead sign. Confirming I was in the right place, next I had to decide if I would spend the night here as planned or in the campground across the dirt road. This decision became obvious when a faceless male voice from the other vehicle suddenly informed me to keep my eye on the eastern sky where he claimed to have seen strange lights and unidentified flying objects.

At the campground I approached a string of lights thinking it was the trailer of the campground host, but it turned out to be the headlamps of a group of four campers. They informed me the campground was closed for the season, so there was nowhere to pay a fee. Not wanting to bother anyone and also liking my privacy, but bearing in mind my uneasiness when across the road, I prudently picked a secluded spot within shouting distance of the other campers. I had few preparations to make for the morning so I was soon stretched out comfortably in the back of my SUV with an alarm clock set for 6:00 a.m. The plan was to hit the trail by 7:00 a.m. with the sun just up, but with plenty of hours ahead to make the climb and descent before the inevitable afternoon thunderstorms arrived.

Five fifteen the clock read, and already someone was pulling into the Mount Elbert trailhead parking lot. Obviously, I was not going to be alone on the mountain. Shortly my alarm went off, and I was up and crunching down some homemade granola and a boiled egg. I hit the trail at 6:50 a.m., and within half an hour I had climbed several switch backs on the Colorado Trail and was at the turn off to the Mount Elbert trail 1.3 miles into the 9-mile round trip.

As the forest thinned the trail seemed to get steeper, and around 8:00 a.m., at nearly the tree line, I passed two older gentlemen who I learned were from Texas and had been driving the car that woke me up at 5:15 a.m. Shortly thereafter the mountain came into view, a large but plain looking peak. As I left the trees, I encountered a father and his grown son resting, and they commented about eating breakfast as I passed them. A woman hiking alone who I thought might be with them, was a few yards further ahead on the steep barren trail. I continued my march up and soon caught up with her as she informed me that she was alone and hiking as part of her training to climb Mount Kilimanjaro in a few weeks. She was talkative, but I was energized and pressed forward hoping I would be the first on the peak this morning.

A false summit of approximately 13,800 feet loomed in front of me as the wind blew slightly and I stopped to put my fleece back on. As I made my way up, I occasionally noticed a fresh boot print and the odd dog footprint, making me question my pole position. Once the false summit was reached, I was a bit let down to see how far away the next summit was.

In planning, I had figured I could easily complete the whole 4,383 vertical feet and 4.5 miles of non-technical hiking in three and a half hours but hoped to complete it in three hours. Three hours now seemed doubtful. Nonetheless, I was pleased with my progress, and glad I was unaffected by the elevation. Within twenty-five minutes I reached the next elevated point, from which I could finally see the true 14,433-foot peak. I would have to gain about another 50 feet and travel along a small wide ridge to reach the pinnacle of Colorado. By now I had been hiking for slightly over three hours. As such I decided not to hurry, taking a few pictures of myself with the peak behind. Surprisingly, it only took an additional six minutes to complete the ascent, putting me on top at 10:02 a.m. It appeared I was alone, much to my delight. A new personal height record, the highest point in Colorado and the second highest spot in the lower 48 had been reached.

Several rock walls had been stacked up as wind barriers. As I looked around moving from one to another in search of a summit log, I quickly discovered who had made the boot and dog tracks. Well, now I had someone to take my picture! I asked him about the summit log. He pointed out a piece of PVC pipe, inside which I found to be stuffed with crumpled moist papers. Cleaning it out I discovered only one well maintained paper - a sign listing the mountain name and elevation. Armed with the sign, I asked the dog owner to take a photo of me with the view to the south of the rugged north face of 14,336 foot La Plata Peak in the background.

I relaxed in the brisk air at the top of Colorado, donning my windproof layer to ensure I would stay warm. Content with my accomplishment, I munched on some snacks as I absorbed the spectacular views in all directions. To the east I could see Twin Lakes, and to the northeast the town of Leadville. Colorado’s second tallest peak, 14,421-foot Mount Massive, dominated the view north. In all directions the odd cloud lingered but none of them looked threatening, giving me no reason to hurry down. More pictures were taken, and I even made a short summit video.

After about 30 minutes the lone female hiker arrived and just before 11:00 a.m. another lone male hiker arrived. While listening to him talk, I soon wondered if he was not the voice warning of UFOs the night before, but thought it best not to ask. He had me take a picture of him with his disposable camera.

About the time I decided to begin my descent, I noticed the father (who I had seen at tree-line) arriving alone without his son. As I started down, the fellow and his dog were not far behind. Intentionally I followed a path which angled down a bit to the east, instead of the northeast, causing the dog and his owner to diverge from me. Once we had some distance between us, I veered back to the main trail with at least five more people were making their way up. At the lower false summit, I encountered the two Texans steadily working their way up, one of them again mentioned his GPS as he had done when I passed him on my ascent.

Just below the lower false summit I decided to tighten my boot laces to avoid hammer toe, and as I did so I was overcome with hunger. As I ate, several of the now familiar faces I had encountered off and on passed by. At tree line I exchanged a few minutes of conversation with the father. He mentioned reaching the summit of Mount Elbert fulfilled has goal of summitting a “Fourteener” at the age of 60. Being fit, he looked younger and I told him as much.

As I walked into the parking lot at 1:45 p.m., my suspicions were confirmed as I saw who sat in the driver’s seat of the lone vehicle of the night before. As I had asked the night before, I felt tempted to ask him again if he was a believer, but decided against identifying myself.

Grateful, hungry, and little bit tired, I crossed the road to my vehicle not surprised I now had a neighbor. Desiring solitude, I relocated to a campsite closer to the creek where I washed up before having a second lunch. Soon the inescapable afternoon mountain shower rolled in as I relaxed and napped in my SUV bed. It was wonderful to be in the woods, and just as splendid to have reached the highest point in Colorado as my hundredth distinct mountain summit.

I was not stopping at 100, tomorrow would see me on top of 14,421-foot Mount Massive.

Photo Album: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/1CzjpV2JJ7tbRMGVA>

**Mount Hood, OR, 11,239 ft. – July 12, 2010, HP #9: One Windy Monday**

The day prior to leaving for Oregon, I spent most of the evening packing and double checking our gear list. Josh would not pick me up until the following afternoon, but I am not one to leave things until the last minute. We had been preparing for several weeks and in just three days we would be climbing Mount Hood – the tallest mountain in Oregon.

The main climbing season on Mount Hood is April through June as a combination of more stable weather and lower avalanche risk make these months optimal. During this time frame, the mountain sees a lot of traffic, reportedly making it the world’s second-most climbed snow-covered peak, after Japan’s Mount Fuji. That does not, however, mean it is an easy mountain to climb. Its glaciers contain snow-covered crevasses ready to swallow up climbers without warning. The upper slopes are very steep where falling is likely to result in serious injury. Rock and ice fall are common, and its weather can rapidly deteriorate. Indeed, Mount Hood has been the site of many accidents, rescues, and numerous deaths. Many of its climbers use guides to mitigate the risks.

Mountaineering mostly in the Utah Mountains where glaciers do not exist, and crevasses are

typically not a concern, neither of us had any hands-on glacier travel experience. Nevertheless, we had done our homework and studied up on the subject. To exercise our newly acquired knowledge, we had taken a training run up local Mount Timpanogos. There on the snow-covered slopes adjacent to Emerald Lake, we had practiced arresting falls while roped together, setting up anchors, and rescuing each other out of imaginary crevasses. Since we would be climbing Mount Hood off season, we understood we could only count on our combined knowledge to keep us safe.

July 10, we drove a bit more than half the distance from Orem Utah to Oregon’s Timberline Ski Resort. Crossing the Snake River from Idaho into Oregon we stopped in Ontario, the first town we encountered. There we located a motel for the evening. The next morning, I was up and ready to go much too early. My eagerness was partly due to the anticipation of the pending adventure, but mostly because I do not sleep well in motels. As we resumed traveling west on I-84 we commented to each other how much the landscape reminded us of Utah rather than what we expected of Oregon as it was rather dry and barren. Upon reaching the Columbia River, the scenery improved. Soon thereafter we began to catch glimpses of a large white object in the distance, which in time proved to be Mount Hood.

Around noon we pulled into a town named The Dalles and ordered hamburgers from a local restaurant. From there we had just 21 miles remaining on I-84 west before exiting and following Oregon Route 35 for the last 40 miles. We stopped a couple of times along Route 35 to take pictures of the impressive 7,700-foot prominence of Mount Hood.

By 2:00 p.m. July 11, we reached Timberline Ski Resort and had our first look at Mount Hood’s south side. To reach the summit, we planned to use either the Hogsback route or the South Side Old Chute Variation route. I pulled out the route descriptions and maps, and we began to pick out landmarks as we speculated about which route would be best for the current conditions.

After a while we visited the historic Timberline Lodge, there we chatted with a Park Service employee. He did not have any information about the current climbing conditions, but suggested we try the Climbers Cave at the Day Lodge. At the Climbers Cave we found self-registry climbing permits and a weather forecast, but no one to talk to. The forecast called for clear skies with 30 mph wind gusts. Leaving the Climbers Cave, we approached a ski resort employee asking him if he had climbed the mountain. When we learned he had, I turned to a ski resort map behind us asking him to point out the location of the Hogsback Ridge. He responded by saying “that is a cartoon map”, and simply walked away without offering us his insights. Trusting we could rely on the information we had we gave up on asking for more.

Our plan was to start up the mountain at 12:30 pm – still nine hours away. Climbing at such an odd hour is done to avoid warmer temperatures of the afternoon which can present safety hazards including both rock and ice falls. In the meantime, we located an empty campground. I laid out my tent’s footprint along with my sleeping bag and tried to catch some sleep while Josh rested in his car. Laying beneath some large pine trees, I watched the tops moving in the wind as clouds moved rapidly across the sky. I hoped the wind would push the clouds away, and we would be graced with clear skies.

By 8:00 p.m., Josh and I were both eager to do something, so we headed down to the town of Government Camp. The stores closed shortly after our arrival, but we stumbled upon a skateboarding contest underway. Before long, the sun set and the temperature began to fall, prompting us to enter a restaurant where we ordered a pizza. Around 10:00 p.m. as we headed back to the ski resort a storm seemed to be brewing which dampened our enthusiasm for the imminent climb.

In the afternoon, the ski resort parking lot had been full but now it contained just a smattering of vehicles only one of which was occupied. The wind was howling, the moon and stars were absent, and there was a desolate feeling in the air. At the Climbers Cave I discovered three climbers. One man and two women whom I established were with the man waiting in the car I had noticed in parking lot. Returning to Josh’s car I filled him in on my discoveries. Realizing another group was about to head out spurred us into action.

It took an hour and a half to get ready in the cold and dark as we reevaluated what to wear due to the unexpected weather. Nonetheless, we remained on schedule and ready to go by 12:30 a.m. – placing us one hour behind the other group.

The parking lot sits in front of the Palmer Glacier at an elevation of 5,800 feet. The climber’s trail travels up the far east side of the glacier paralleling the ski runs . At the trailhead we saw two more climbers, parked behind the Day Lodge, about to start up. As we attached our crampons to our boots they passed by.

As we marched our way up heading north, the wind gusted from the west. The clouds above hid the stars and a gloomy feeling hung over us. The climbers trail travels two miles (as the crow flies) to the top of the ski area, gaining 2,800 vertical feet in the process. The groomed snow of the ski resort was very solid, and at times the slope was just on the verge of being too steep to flat foot, resulting in a lot of pressure on our heels. Along the way we made sure to stay away from the grooming machines doing their night’s work.

Now and then we would notice the headlamps of the two groups ahead of us. With the colder temperatures my headlamp grew dimmer, so I turned it off to save the batteries, and Josh did the same to his. Despite the darkness, we could see the Palmer Lift and were aware of Crater Rock above it. Reaching a point about three quarters of the way up the ski slope, we passed the group of two while were attaching their crampons.

As we neared the top of the ski runs, the headlamps of the group in front of us seemed to be moving toward us. The sense that they had given up and were heading down was a further blow to our already lowered morale. Gladly, what seemed to be the group descending turned out to be an illusion. It was explained when we encountered them resting facing downhill. Using the northern wall of the upper boundary cat track as a wind block caused them to be turned away from the mountain. It was a good idea and we followed suit.

While resting it did not take long to get cold, still we paused long enough to allow the others to continue up first. We had planned to rope up at this point as we would be leaving the groomed terrain of the ski area. The other group, however, did not feel that was necessary yet and so we too left our rope packed away. Despite our hopes of following them, we found their pace to be slower than ours, and soon we overtook them.

Finding ourselves in front, we looked around for some landmarks. We could see Carter Rock above us to the left and often we noticed boot tracks in the snow making us feel confident we were on the right course. After a while there appeared to be a ridge above us toward the Steel Cliff. We reasoned we might escape the brunt of the wind if we could get over the ridge. Yet, as we pushed up and to the right, “the ridge” turned out to be nothing more than a shadow. In the process we reached the east side of Crater Rock where we encountered a well packed trail in the crusty snow. By the time the trail led us to north end of Crater Rock dawn had arrived. Now we could clearly see the true Hogsback Ridge ahead of us, and a crater below us to our left. We checked the time, discovering it was 5:11 a.m.

The decision we now faced was do we follow the Hogsback Ridge up to the visible bergschrund above it and risk not finding a way across it into the Pearly Gates, or do we cross the crater and trust the Old Chute route would obviously present itself? We decided to stick with our present track which entered the crater through some avalanche debris only to be lost on the snowless hot rocks of the craters northwest side. The crater was not large, and we felt if we roped-up we could safely cross it. As we measured out our rope and attached our prussics, the group of four passed us.

Without roping up the foursome walked down into the 10,300-foot-high crater and stopped to look at the fumaroles. We completed tying into our rope, in turn passing them as we made our way across the crater. Thankfully, on the northside of 10,560-foot Crater Rock we were somewhat blocked from the effects of the wind.

As we arrived at the top of the hot rocks, we noticed one of the men taking off on his own while his three associates hung back to rope up. The next 800 vertical feet climb some very steep slopes, 45+ degrees, to the summit ridge. I took the lead on our rope and headed up confidently having negotiated similar slopes on other mountains. My instinct was to stay to the right of the main runnel, but instead I followed the solo climber now in the lead and went left. As we got higher, and the slope got steeper, the solid icy conditions made the going extremely dangerous and time-consuming. At one point my crampons failed to penetrate the ice and down I went. Despite my immediate self-arrest, I slid at least ten feet before stopping. The slip made Josh and I both more awareness of how hazardous the conditions were. I began picking my footings more carefully and would occasionally take the time to chop steps with my ice axe.

Obtaining the same height as the bergschrund to our right we lessened the distance between us on the rope feeling there was no longer danger of breaking through the snow and falling into a crevasse. Soon the solo climber above us gained the summit ridge leaving our line of sight. The other three members of his group stuck to the right-hand side of the main runnel and before long had climbed higher than us. Mentally I kicked myself for not trusting my instincts.

Josh took the lead on the traverse as we chose to make our way back to the right-hand side of the main runnel. We wanted to see if his stiffer full shank boots would result in steps that I could follow in my half shank boots. Alas, the snow was just too hard to form steps without chopping. Returning to the right-hand side we shortly reached the summit ridge.

We watched the trio crawl northeasterly on their bellies, across the knife-edge toward the peak. The wind gusts were so strong not one of them dared to stand up for fear of being blown off the ridge, which surely would have been fatal. As we followed suit on our bellies, Josh who was in the lead, turned to me and yelled through the wind asking, “Should we call this good?”, and I shook my head “No”. Yet, not more than ten feet further along I shouted, “Maybe we should turn around.” The wind was formidable and we knew we were taking a huge risk. We decided we had to be prepared to jump off the opposite side of the other should the wind blow one of us off, thus arresting the other’s fall with the rope connecting us.

Making it safely across the dicey knife-edge, we noticed the other three topping out on the summit still not risking standing up. Below the summit we stopped to put on our tinted lenses, and they emerged along with their solo companion. One of them informed us they were not going to descend across the knife-edge as they had spotted a different way down. I told them we would watch them. As they disappeared, we continued to the peak.

As I slithered through the wind reaching the 11,239-foot top of Oregon, Josh hung back acting as an anchor by keeping the rope between us tight. The drop to the north was even more vertical then what we had climbed. A couple of minutes later we traded places. The time was 7:00 a.m., it had taken us six and a half hours to summit. We commented to each other that the wind gusts felt like 60 or 70 mph.

Eager to get down to presumed safety, we spent only ten minutes on the peak. We had seen where the other group had gone down, but at first glance we were not sure it was the best alternative. However, once we returned to the knife-edge the idea of shimmying down it headfirst was not appealing, and we elected to mimic the other group.  
  
Josh went first as I hung back to keep the rope between us tight. We took our time, and with the loss of elevation we were again somewhat sheltered from the dreadful wind. Along the way we eventually saw the other two climbers who had started out at the same time as us. They were over the hot rocks and starting up the Coalman Glacier. We watch one of them slip and go a long ways, perhaps a 100 feet, before he stopped. That seemed to be enough for them, as recovering from the fall they both immediately turned around and headed down.

A picture containing snow, outdoor, person, snowboarding

Description automatically generatedContinuing down slowly, we reached the crater within an hour. We snapped a few pictures of Crater Rock and the avalanche debris running into the crater and then climbed the Hogsback Ridge. On the opposite side of the ridge, we were reunited with our de facto climbing partners who were enjoying a rest. As we untied from our rope, we chatted with the trio and the man revealed that during the regular climbing season he was a Mount Hood guide. We were also told their fourth member had hurried on down as he was trying to complete biking from Portland, climbing Mount Hood and biking back within 24 hours. Hearing that made us realize we had seen him riding his bike up to the ski resort along the Timberline Highway the previous evening. We thanked the guide for being there, acknowledging we had followed his lead at times which had contributed to our success. We also learned the two women were twin sisters. Within 40 minutes, with plenty of snacks in our bellies, we resumed the descent.

The views south over the ski resort, with Mount Jefferson on the horizon, were amazing. To our right (west) was a sea of clouds, yet straight ahead was clear. I had a feeling of freedom, and a major sense of accomplishment. The grimness of the night had been swept away by euphoria. To quote James Ramsey Ullman, “we had escaped to reality!”  
  
Rounding the east side of Crater Rock, we were once again blasted by the west winds, nearly being blown over at times. Below us, just above the upper boundary of the ski resort we watched the guide trade his crampons for a pair of skis he had stashed there. At one point as he attempted to ski downhill into the wind it literally pushing him back uphill. By now the winds persistence had become very bothersome.  
  
Our descent path took us to the top of the Palmer Lift, where we found the twins enlightening the ski patrol about their fatigue and asking if they could ride down on the lift. Eventually he agreed but said the chair had to be full to stabilize it against the winds. Josh volunteered to fill the last spot on the chair and down went the lucky three the quick way. Off I went on foot, down the groomed runs toward the climber’s trail.

Two-hundred feet shy of the parking lot I found Josh waiting for me, and together exhausted we walked down to the car arriving before 11:30 a.m. As I removed my pack and retrieved my left-over slice of pizza, Josh went into the Climbers Cave to take back the voluntary information sheet he had dropped off prior to our departure. Returning, he informed me the updated weather forecast had called for 50 mph wind gusts, as we had certainly experienced.

We said goodbye to our three climbing associates, as they headed out for Portland. Soon after we left for Seattle.

Photo Album: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/ZPMCDZ7GCmcLgtPe6>

**Mount Rainier, WA, 14,411 ft. – July 17, 2010, HP #10: Breaking Tradition**

Immediately following our successful climb of Mount Hood in extremely windy conditions, Josh and I drove 230 miles from Timberline Ski Resort to Seattle Washington. Our plan was to take it easy July 13, and do some site seeing July 14. July 15, we were scheduled to meet the other members of our Mount Rainer climbing team at the Paradise area of Mount Rainier National.

As it turned out, Josh got a call - I had not yet given into social pressure and did not own a mobile phone at this point in my life - asking us if we could do Rainer as a quicker trip and meet a few other members of our group July 16 instead. We were told there had been a mix-up with the permits but more likely our group size exceeded regulations and had been split into two and allotted staggered start dates. Considering us both strong climbers, we were asked to sacrifice a more leisure itinerary. An extra day in Seattle was fine, even if we had nothing planned to do, and the morning of July 16 came soon enough.

At the end of 2009 I had started looking for a group, or even just a partner, to climb Rainier with in 2010. One my backcountry ski partners told me about a climbing club in Provo Utah planning to tackle it the summer of 2010. Enquiring further it seemed like the perfect solution and I ended up joining. The club held monthly activities involving either ice climbing, rock climbing, or mountain climbing. To qualify for the Rainer trip members were required to participate in several other mountain climbs in preparation. I met Josh through the club.

It is over 100 miles to Paradise from Seattle, and the morning of July 16, 2010 we allowed ourselves ample time to get there by 10:00 a.m. Along the Paradise road, which parallels the Nisqually River, the ultra-prominence of Mount Rainier was very noticeable. In fact, Mount Rainier is ranked the most topographically prominent mountain in the contiguous United States.

Legend has it that the name “Paradise” comes from the glorious views of the wildflower meadows common to the area. The site is popular with tourists as it is home to the National Park’s main visitor center with its gift shop and cafeteria. A concessioner-operated hotel, the historic Paradise Inn, is also located in the vicinity. We did not have time for any of the tourist attractions, nor were we interested in them.

Close to noon, under the weight of 40-pound packs, seven of us began the 4.25 miles and 4,660 vertical feet climb to Camp Muir, which was done almost entirely on a snowfield. Mount Rainier is a large active volcano, covered by twenty-six glaciers making it the most heavily glaciated peak in the lower 48 US states. The glaciers we would be traveling on above Camp Muir necessitate extra climbing equipment such as pickets, ice screws, ropes, slings, carabiners, harnesses, crampons, and ice axes. Additionally, we carried winter clothing, helmets (to protect us from rock fall), sleep bags, and tents, along with three days’ worth of food.

The name Rainier was given to the mountain way back in 1792 in honor of Admiral Peter Rainier. Rainier is also called Tacoma (Tahoma) which may mean “mother of waters” or simply “snow-covered mountain”. Somewhat fittingly, and certainly by coincidence, the name Rainer means “Deciding Warrior” – that is according to urbandictionary.com. Which also states, “the name Rainier creates the urge to be reliable and responsible”, and “it causes the inability to realize your goals and ambitions”. Many reliable and responsible climbers might resonate with this meaning if denied the peak, as historically only about half who set out to stand on top of Rainier succeed. At least 10,000 climbers attempt Rainier annually.

Views to the south revealed Oregon’s Mount Hood where Josh and I had been just four days earlier in very strong winds. We were both hoping to not have a repeat of such weather on our Rainier summit day. Chatting with folks as they descended, we learned most of them had missed their summit bid due to strong winds, which did concern us.

Arriving at Camp Muir at 4:30 p.m. we located the 12 other members of our club, who seemed glad to see us, and who got a good laugh out of the horseshoe shaped mustache I was sporting. They had spent the day at a nearby glacier taking photos in crevasses and practicing crevasse rescue – as is typically done by many climbers during their first ascent of Rainier. Josh and I had done our own practice back home on the snowfield at Mount Timpanogos.

Camp Muir was crowded, as I suppose it often is during the peak climbing season, so we had to be creative to find and create a suitable spot for the tent. We needed water for dinner, and for the next day’s summit bid, and it took more than a couple hours of melting snow to create enough. In my trip notes I wrote “setting up camp, melting snow for water, and cooking dinner was a four-hour ordeal”. With food in our bellies, and the water ready for the morning, we laid down in the tent, and I pretended to sleep having too much on my mind to actually sleep.

Josh and I would be roping up with the White brothers Tyler and Aaron, and the plan was to leave Camp Muir at 3:00 a.m. I advised the brothers that an hour and a half would be needed to prepare in the morning, but I was the only one up 1:30 a.m., and the only one ready at 3:00 a.m. By 3:40 a.m. everyone on our rope team was ready and we began the climb of the remaining 4.75 miles and 4,330 vertical feet to the top of Washington. Most groups (including the other 12 members of our club) start as early as midnight so were breaking tradition with our late start.

We followed the Disappointment Cleaver route - the most common route. The guiding services seem to dominate this route and have a sort of controlling attitude toward it. Add to that the aforementioned crowded conditions and the tourist nature of the Paradise area, and together these factors tend to lessen the otherwise precarious and adventurous nature of climbing Mount Rainier.

From Camp Muir the route traverses the Cowlitz Glacier to Cathedral Gap at 10,640 feet and then continues left along scree, ice, and snow to Ingram flats at 11,100 feet where we encountered our first crevasse. From Ingram Flats we climbed the Disappointment Cleaver to 12,250 feet.

The term cleaver refers to a rock ridge which divides, or cleaves, a glacier into parts or from another glacier. In this case the cleaver seems to separate the Ingraham glacier from the Emmons glacier. Perhaps, the strain of reaching the Cleaver and still having a long way to go before reaching the highest point resulted in the name “Disappointment Cleaver”, but your guess is as good as mine. “Disappointment” might also apply as I have heard climbers are often turned back here due to threatening weather higher up.

As we ascended the Cleaver, we watched the sunrise. By 6:30 a.m. we reached the top of it, where we paused to remove our headlamps, and wait for another rope team from our crew. With the sun out we had a nice view of Mount Adams. The weather was clear and calm, and the only clouds we saw were in the distance and below us.

Next, we ascended Ingraham’s Glacier to Emmon’s Glacier which took us to the 14,180-foot crater rim by 9:15 a.m. En route many of our club friends had passed us on their descent.

Rainier’s crater is close to a quarter of a mile in diameter, which is very large, but walking across it seemed even longer. The summit is topped by two volcanic craters, with the larger east crater (the one we stood on) overlapping the west crater. At 9:40 a.m. our rope team of four reached Columbia Crest, the true summit, at 14,411 feet.

A group of skiers pose for a photo

Description automatically generated with low confidenceThe summit plateau of Mount Rainier holds two other named points in addition to Columbia Crest. Point Success is the second tallest at 14,158 feet, and Liberty Cap which reaches 14,112 feet. One hundred feet beneath the ice of the craters lies the 16-foot deep, unofficially named, Lake Muriel - the most elevated lake in North America. Lake Muriel is a pool of meltwater that forms as heat rises from the depths of the volcano turning ice into water and filling the twin craters. As such it may not be a permanent lake, coming and going as conditions warrant. I like to think we walked over it without even knowing it was below us.

I did not see or smell any of the fumaroles that surely exist on this volcano. Nor did I concern myself that I was standing on what some consider one of the most dangerous volcanoes in the world. Records date the most recent volcanic eruption clear back to the first half of the 1800, but apparently there is a strong probability of eruption in the near future. As a point of reference, I personally experienced consequences of the 1980 Mount St. Helens eruption as our family car and yard in Alberta was covered in ash.

Since we had broken tradition with our late start, and with the other late starters of our group behind us, we had the top of Washington to ourselves. The temperature was below freezing with blue skies, and a moderate wind was blowing, and we were covered in generously insulated parkas. We spent just ten minutes on the peak mostly taking photographs, then moved lower out of the breeze to have a snack. After 45 minutes of relaxation, we began our descent. Already behind the conventional schedule we probably lingered at the top a bit longer than we should have, but it is not every day one finds himself at such an awesome place. No harm was encountered despite our late start – no avalanches, no falling through a snow-bridge into a crevasse, and no falling rocks - dangers an early start is intended to mitigate.

The return to Camp Muir took four hours. When we reached the vicinity of the Disappointment Cleaver at 1:00 p.m. we were down to our shirt layers and the snow/ice were melting. I removed my aluminum crampons to avoid using them over the rocky section, and the time delay seemed to disagree with the White brothers. Josh and I were on our own rope, as were the brothers on theirs, so they just untied their rope from ours and sped off. Passing the scree, I reinstated my crampons, and we continued backtracking arriving at Camp Muir at 2:27 p.m. after 11 hours on the high mountain. Most of our club members had already packed up and started down.

With our tent set up, my desire was to relax and spend the night as our permit allowed. However, Josh was very set on getting off the mountain that same day. As such, after melting more snow for water, we packed up our gear and started down to Paradise at 5:00 p.m. arriving within two and a half hours. At that moment we were both too tired to fully appreciate our accomplishment, but it was another big one indeed.

Photo Album: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/k4TFfxGDcP93UGBw8>