

Looking Back

by
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That's Anna on her Suzuki 250cc X6 Hustler somewhere between California and Virginia

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Introduction

Stories of My Adventures and Misadventures as Entertainment for My Friends

One day, after tennis, I was lamenting to my friend John that my autobiographical memory was sorely deficient. If I was lucky, ten years from now there would be only a half a dozen days from this year that I would remember. I said to John “It’s those near-death experiences that are seared into your memory – you never forget”.

John looked at me and asked “You have had near death experiences?”

I looked back at John and wanted to say “Why sure, hasn’t everyone?” but I kept silent.

Some experiences are unforgettable moments, burned into your memory. I frequently muse on the fact that there are, at best, a half dozen days in this year that I will remember 10 or 20 years from now. But those terrifying moments – you never forget. We must treasure those.

I used to keep pretty quiet, never adding much to the conversations around me. I never thought of myself as particularly interesting, but as I have gotten older, I have discovered that I have accumulated a few experiences and misadventures and some of these stories are kinda funny. This is a collection of the better ones.

I have two personality traits that seem to invite memorable stories. I am endowed with an abundance of self-confidence. I think this was mostly because of my mother. Poor woman. Never appreciated.



She was the one who, upon being goaded by me and my friend Tommy from the back seat of our 1954 Ford V8 station wagon, would get up enough speed to get air over a certain bridge in our home town of Jackson, Michigan. Yeah, I'm sure it was Mom. Neither of my parents seemed to worry about me. There were never any of those "call when you get there so we know you're ok" exhortations. For whatever reason, they seemed to think I would be ok, so I guess I thought so too.

Secondly, I don't seem to be concerned about a lot. This shouldn't be equated with lack of fear, just lack of concern. I usually don't worry about things until it's time to worry about them. Yeah, you're right, by that time, it's usually too late.

These moments, these unforgettable ones, have a sort of life of their own. It is said that time slows down. It does. It really does. How else can you explain having an entire analysis of the situation pop into your head in a fraction of the time that it would take to say it? Scientists have attempted to study the phenomenon. In one study the scientists created a sort of "wrist watch" using 7-segment digits that changed so rapidly that the viewer would see only "888". They hoisted the subject up to the top of a crane and dropped him on a bungee cord, hoping that the time dilation effect would enable him to make out the rapidly changing numbers – didn't work. Current scientific thinking is that the "locus coeruleus norepinephrine system" activity increases during frightening situations, speeding up our thought processes so that external temporal events seem slower.

My close friend Barb often describes my life as one of an "extreme athlete" which embarrasses me because I never thought of myself as anything extreme. But after all, there was no such thing as an extreme athlete back then. I just tended to gravitate towards activities that I found exciting. Which has always made me wonder – are we good at things we like or do we like the things that we are good at?

I have often likened my life to a leaf blown by the wind. I have tended to do what I liked doing at the time without too much forethought – just the easiest path at the moment. By an incredible abundance of good fortune, things have turned out well.

These are mostly stories that I normally wouldn't tell anyone. Firstly, they aren't the sort of stories that you normally encounter in mainstream conversation, for example "yak poo min doe" means "this is not good" in Tibetan. Secondly, the retelling frequently feels self-aggrandizing, but, what-the-hell, this is about me. So here goes.

Early Years

I had a fortunate childhood for many reasons; Mom & Dad had a stable marriage, Dad had a job, nobody had substance abuse issues, they were both intelligent, but most of all, they were the essence of sportsmen. Hunting, fishing, camping, canoeing was a way of life.

My mother and father came from Morley, a podunk little town in central Michigan south of Traverse City. This is a rural area of very few people and lots of trees. Those people that did live there were generally poor with no nearby industries to offer employment and the land was not suitable for growing much.

My father's father had moved the family of wife and 7 kids to the area during the depression to take over a boat livery service for fishermen and tourists on the Muskegon River. Hardy Dam had created a large lake with about 50 miles of shoreline lined with sandy beaches and pine trees. Although the area was beautiful, the business not so much. Perhaps that is why he ran off with another woman leaving his family with a struggling business in the depths of the depression, a transgression that my father would harbor against him forever.

The depression forced my mother's father to move his family from Detroit where there was no work to a place where they could "live off the land". He purchased 160 acre farm. Well, it turned out that the area around Morley was all sand and rocks. Living off the land meant slim pickings. They had a few dairy cows, so they sold the milk. There were chickens, which meant they had eggs to sell. My grandfather cleared the rocks out of the fields so he could plant corn which mostly fed the deer. This depression era survival left a deep impression on both my mother and father for the rest of their lives.

Both attended the "Bucktown School", a single room K-8th grade log cabin a couple mile walk from their homes. There was a high school about 7 miles away in Morley that they subsequently attended.

In an effort to escape the poverty that surrounded him, my father joined the National Guard in 1939. He was promptly transferred to the Army Infantry and sent to fight in the South Pacific at the start of WWII. His plan worked. He returned to attend the University of Michigan paid for by the G.I. Bill.



Meanwhile my mom moved to Detroit to live with her aunt where mom got a job at IBM. As soon as my father returned from WWII, they married and moved to Ann Arbor where they lived in the GI housing complex behind the ice rink which is where I was born late in 1946. My mother said I was a “surprise”, which I thought odd, being a farm girl and all. These are the times of my earliest memories. Remember what I said about trauma preserving memories? I could not have been 3 years old when I had dragged a chain across the parking lot entrance and a car blew its horn at me – still remember it today. What was I doing wandering around the neighborhood alone in my diapers anyway?



Going camping

After graduation, my father got a job with Consumers Power Corporation as a mechanical engineer and never left until he retired. I was 3 years old when we left Ann Arbor to relocate to Jackson, Michigan. My father and my mother's father built a small house out of cement blocks, two bedrooms, one bath probably about 750 square feet.



Michigan was not a bad place to grow up in; there were lots of opportunities to hunt, fish and camp, which were all pretty much free, an important consideration in our family. We had a dog, Buck, (*Call of the Wild* – one of my father's favorite books). Buck was a German Short-haired Pointer that my father took great pains to train which turned out well because Buck won several medals in show and field competitions. There are few experiences more satisfying than hunting behind a well-trained dog, especially a pointer.

Another early memory seared into my 4 year old brain was from a camping trip in the upper peninsula of Michigan. I had wandered away from camp and blundered into a yellow-jacket hornet's nest. Life was different back then, but still, what's a 4 year old doing wandering away from a wilderness campsite. My parents were not derelict in their parenting duties, I guess they just did not worry about me very much. Helicopter parents they were not.



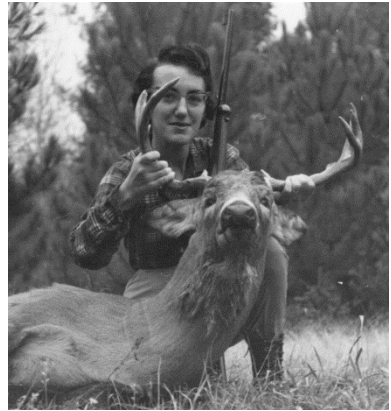
They took me with them everywhere, probably because they could not afford a babysitter. My father would put me in his backpack while he hunted ruffed grouse. They would tie me into the canoe with a fish stringer while they fished. I remember thinking about what would happen if the canoe capsized.



Learning to drive



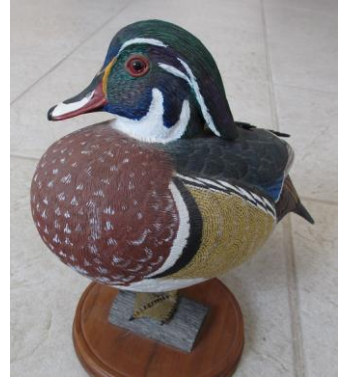
Guns were a big deal in the family. I was 10 years old when I got my first .22, long before that I roamed the woods with my trusty BB gun. My father earned an expert marksman rating for both rifle and pistol in the army. Mom was on the Ann Arbor shooting team and scored several medals herself. My father's father was a gunsmith. My father's family of 5 brothers and 2 sisters all knew guns inside and out. During my father's youth times were tough and hunting meant putting meat on the table. Every year we would hold a marksmanship shootoff. There was a trophy of some kind that got passed around to the year's winner. I wish could adequately explain the term "sportsmen". It was a philosophy of life just as much as it was a lifestyle. Sure, there were "hunters" then just as now. Guys would go deer hunting, set up camp,



Mom's big buck

drink beer and shoot each other. Every so often someone would drive over a tent and squash the sleeper inside. My family seemed to have a joy of the outdoors, being surrounded by trees, birds, animals and nature. During deer season, my father would frequently pass up opportunities to shoot a deer early in the season because he knew he would have to stop hunting if he did. He just liked to look at the deer.

My father was also an artist. He checkered and carved the gun stocks that he fashioned from the maple trees that he cut down in the woods. I should also mention that many of my parents' guns were truly things of beauty with stocks of walnut or maple and engravings of outdoor scenes covering the exposed metal. I have many of the carved and painted decorative ducks and other birds that he created.



We spent many weekends at my mother's parent's farm. It was a delightful property with an old farmhouse, barn, windmill, granary and stone outhouse. A creek (pronounced "crick") ran nearby to a modest sized lake on the "back 40" (acres) filled with sunfish, catfish and largemouth bass. My grandfather had rigged up a dredge to dig up the clay to sell. One of the most interesting features of the lake was the ice house. This was a low log structure built at the lake's edge. The floor was filled with sawdust several feet deep. During the winter



The ice house

my grandfather would cut blocks of ice and bury them in the sawdust. Mom said they had ice all summer.

My father was both motivated and a do-it-yourselfer. One day he decided that a swimming pool would be nice, so he got out his shovel and started digging.



When the hole was about 5 feet deep, he lined it with tar paper and built a diving board. That's a lot of digging.

My family was not a close or particularly affectionate family. I was never told I was loved and don't recall any kisses either. Actually, I think my mother was being generous when she described me as a surprise. Although I could tell my father was happy to have a son, I was also pretty convinced that my mother was ambivalent at best. For many years in my youth, being the only child, I referred to myself as "X1 - the prototype that never went into production."

Me & God

Call me Ishmael. My name is Steven, but today I am Ishmael. I am the lookout in the crow's nest high atop the mizzen. A fair breeze fills the sails. I am looking for whale sign as I scan the horizon looking for the blow. You can see the spouting plume miles away on a clear day. Today is a clear spring day. I can see one now. "Thar she blows!" I shout.

No one minds if I shout because it's Sunday. Besides, we live in the country and the only people who could hear me are Mom and Dad who are inside the house. There aren't really any sails, just the branches fluttering in the wind. The mizzenmast is really an elm tree and the crow's nest is really just a crotch about 20 feet up. Elm trees are really hard to climb. On an elm, there aren't any branches until the first crotch and that can be 15 or 20 feet up. Maple and oak are much easier with branches down low. Anyway, I keep a keen watch to see if the telltale plume reappears. It does. "Thar she blows!" I shout again.

We had all gone to the Saturday night movies last night and saw Moby Dick. I loved the sailing and the ships but felt sorry for the whales when the men stabbed them with harpoons. The idea of keelhauling terrified me - how could someone hold their breath long enough to be hauled under the ship?

I can see it now. The long black body is coming towards me. Maybe it's a killer whale. They're black. No - it's a Buick. The dust plume reappears each time the car makes another crest on the gravel road in the rolling hills. "Thar she blows!" I shout joyously as only a



barefoot 7-year-old in a tree can in the warmth of spring when the buds are on the trees but before the leaves of summer have obscured the views from my crow's nest.

The car passes under me, slows and stops. It reverses and pulls into our driveway. This is very odd, I think. We don't have visitors. I watch as a man in a black suit gets out and knocks on the front door. People don't wear suits around here. Mostly jeans and flannel shirts with an occasional tie. He turns around to look up at me and seems to let out a sigh. I do not shout "Thar she blows." I am surprised that he has seen me. I am very quiet.

My father comes to the door and they stand under the sycamore tree discussing something. I can tell by my father's manner that whatever they are talking about, it's serious. After only a few minutes the man in the black suit gets in his black Buick and drives away. My father looks up at me and motions me to come down. I climb down quickly, curious about what the man wanted and why my father would summon me instead of my mother to discuss it.

"Do you want to go to Sunday School?" he asks.

I think for less than half a second not really knowing what Sunday School is, but it doesn't sound like as much fun as climbing trees. "No" I reply.

"Ok" he says. "Don't climb trees by the road anymore on Sunday."

To say that religion was not a high priority in our house would be an understatement. I can clearly recall a conversation when I was about 4 years old. My father had shown me how to draw a tree – vertical trunk with lots of lines slanting down on each side – a pine tree. We were driving along highway 50 on our way into town when I noticed that the oak trees were different. "Hey Dad" I asked from the back seat of the car "how come the branches on those trees don't slope down?"

"Because God made them that way" he replied.

"Who is God?" I innocently inquired.

My innocence did not last long. I soon started school. The school was a mile and a half walk through the fields and by the swamp to the one room school for kindergarten through 8th grade. There were three kids in

my grade; Doyle (who was a bit of a bully), Becky (who showed me what her grandfather was doing to her and her older sister) and me. Anyway, Mr. Goodman would come every so often with his puppets and put on a little bible show for us. It must not have impressed me very much.

I have a good friend, Milt, who likes to say “I wake up every morning and thank God I am an atheist.”

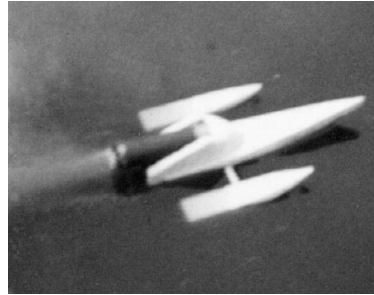
I have been touched by god though. Me! The penultimate atheist. How can I be touched by god? Twice. But that is another story – later.



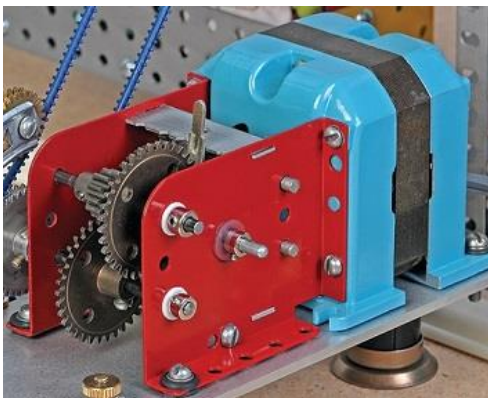
The Young Engineer

I watched the gears meshing together in my Erector Set power gearbox. “I’ll bet if I stuck my finger in there, the gears would suck it right in.” I thought.

As early as I can remember, I was allowed to use the tools in my father’s shop. The whole “making stuff” experience was a most influential factor in my personality profile. There is a new “Maker” movement afoot today, back then, I was just a kid on his own. A couple of projects that I recall were a pump made from pipe with marbles for valves, a waterwheel and a little rocket boat powered by a 12-gauge shotgun shell filled with smokeless gunpowder. “Gunpowder!?” you say? Yeah, my father reloaded his own shells, so there was always an ample supply of gunpowder around the house. There was only one rule in the shop – put the tools away after you use them, other than that, it was all good.



Erector set motor



The motor supplied with Erector Sets back then was serious. Not one of the little 6 Volt battery powered Japanese made motors that you see in Erector Sets today. This one was a good old USA made chunk of iron powered from a 110 VAC wall socket that featured a 2-speed gearbox (with reverse!). The gearbox was an open frame affair so you

could see all of the gears in action, which was the object of my fascination.

I gingerly put my forefinger into the meshing gears. Nothing happened. The gears slid over my finger without incident. “Hmmm,” I mused, “I need something softer so that the gears can get a grip.” I leaned over and extended lower lip into the gears.

This all happened when I was about 7 or 8 years old. I would put together cars and cranes with the Erector Set in the middle of the living room floor while my mother worked around the house. The house was a pretty small 2-bedroom affair that my parents and grandfather built in the town of Jackson, Michigan where my father had landed a job at Consumers Power after graduating from University of Michigan as a mechanical engineer. Maybe my proclivity as a budding mechanical engineer was genetic.

My analysis was correct. The gears engaged my lower lip and quickly chewed their way into my mouth. There are moments when your brain instantly screams “This is a mistake!” This was one of those moments. I kicked the power cord out of the wall and held the motor and gearbox up to my chin. There was no hope of pulling my lip loose so I yelled for my mother but by now blood was dripping profusely down my chin and onto the wood floor. The image of the surprise / terror / WTF!??? on her face is still clear in my memory as she emerged through the bedroom door.

First, she tried to tug the gears off, but that only made my lip bleed worse. Holding the heavy motor with one hand and with my ability to speak severely hampered by having a 2 pound motor attached to my lower lip, I explained to my frantic mother “You have to go out in the shop, get a screwdriver and loosen this screw right here.” I pointed with my other hand to the critical screw. She dashed out to the shop, returned with a screwdriver and soon had the gearbox disassembled enough to extricate my lip.

Mom brought me an ice pack for my lip with the parting words “I should take you to the doctor and have it stitched up just to teach you a lesson.”

Doctor's visits as punishment – little wonder how terrified I still am of the doctor's office today.

The Shack

I got my Gilbert chemistry set when I was 11 or 12 years old. Chemistry sets in those days were not at all like the ones you can get today. The chemicals included potassium nitrate (read – gunpowder!), glycerin, (nitroglycerin!) and sodium ferrocyanide (danger!). Today all you get is acetic acid (vinegar) and sodium bicarbonate (baking soda). Fizz, blurb, wow – totally underwhelmed. What did not come in the chemistry set was readily obtained at the local pharmacy. I don't know why the pharmacy would have ether or highly concentrated nitric or sulfuric acid, but they did and would sell it to a 12-year-old kid without any questions.

My chemistry lab was my bedroom in our small home. It did not take long for my mother to object to the smells that I was creating and I was provided an outdoor chemistry lab. Well, actually it was the duck coup. Before that, it was the outhouse.

My parents built a cottage on 80 acres of property adjacent to my mother's parent's property between Grand Rapids and Traverse City in Michigan. My grandparents owned 160 acres of cheap farmland that was too sandy for much to grow on. As a consequence of being poor farmland most of the property was covered with the natural "woods" which was a combination of evergreen and hardwood trees that made walks in the woods a real joy. Another consequence of the poor land was that there were few neighbors and those that were nearby owned similarly large tracts of unproductive land. All of this added up to a pristine outdoor adventure park for exploring. Spring brought forth a green unlike anything we know in the west. Summer was hot, muggy and the air was filled with the sound of cicada. Fall was a painting of oranges, reds and purple with the fallen leaves muffling your footsteps. Winter was cold. The property even had a creek and 20 or 30 acre lake (depending on the state of the beaver dam) that held catfish, sunfish and largemouth bass. The woods were loaded with squirrels and a few deer.



The cottage was a weekend getaway from our home in Jackson where my father worked as a mid-level manager for Consumers Power Company. The 20'x24' simple structure was basically one room with a bathroom

that was not plumbed yet, hence the need for an outhouse. The outhouse was a "3-holer", seating room for 3 side by side occupants sharing the pages of the ubiquitous Sears and Roebuck catalog as needed. Today the thought of 3 geezers sitting side-by-side is hard on the brain, but I guess culture has changed a lot in the last hundred years.

After the plumbing was installed in the cottage, the outhouse duties were finished it was loaded on a trailer and hauled to our home in Jackson where it became the duck coup.

The ducks are a funny story. My father brought home six duck eggs and put them under a lamp. Soon we had six mallard ducklings. As they grew up it turned out to be one drake and 5 hens. They happily scouted the nearby territory, discovered the swamp and would spend their days puddling around then trundle back home at dusk. It was funny to see them waddling home over the last hill when they didn't feel like flying. One of the hens flew off with the "Wild Bunch" - a group of wild ducks that would join our flock on occasion but the rest hung around for the winter. I gave her a lot of credit. Needing winter shelter, the seats were ripped out of the outhouse and presto! - a duck shanty. The ducks wintered in the duck coup. The hens laid a few trial eggs which my mother would cook for the dog. But the duck eggs gave the dog such a case of smelly gas that this soon stopped.

The drake had a great time that spring and soon there were a total of 35 ducks and ducklings. We had a very well behaved German short haired pointer hunting dog at that time, Buck, who, in his lifetime, had retrieved many ducks that my parents had shot. Whenever Buck would get near one of the nests, the drake would bravely attack the dog, grabbing at his toes while making the grrrr, grrrr, grrrr sound that Mallard drakes do. The dog would gaze down at the duck with a look of resignation, thinking, I'm sure, "if only you knew..."

I guess no one really wanted to become a duck farm so the flock was loaded into the back of our Ford station wagon, driven to an unpopulated lake, the car backed up and tailgate thrown open. The entire flock tumbled out, headed for the water and immediately sorted themselves out into the four families and went happily paddling away.

That's how the outhouse became my chemistry lab. I built a work bench and some shelves and made myself at home. It's interesting how much has changed since then. My first experiments were with bombs. The police would arrest me today if I duplicated what I did then. Fuses were a big problem. Making my own by soaking cotton twine in potassium nitrate resulted in a sputtering fuse that would seem to go out just after it entered the body of the bomb. Once I made the mistake of not waiting long enough and the thing went off just as I started to reach for it. Told mom I burned my hand on my Bunsen burner.

Remember Sputnik the first satellite? This was 1957 and rockets were the thing. So, I started making rockets. Little ones at first, gunpowder tamped tight. Nothing was very successful. I graduated to powdered zinc and potassium perchlorate and bigger rockets with aluminum bodies. My last rocket was about 3 feet tall. It was my last rocket because when it ignited there was this huge cloud of smoke and I felt tiny bits of aluminum raining down on me. The cloud hadn't cleared before the sounds of the grass fire could be heard. My mother hated grass fires. It was my job to dig holes in which to burn the trash. Sometimes I did not dig deep enough or wait long enough and the grass caught fire. Once the fire department had to be called. Anyway, after this fire was extinguished, my father took all of my chemicals and emptied them one by one in the field. I am reminded of the film *October Sky*. I guess I was not going to be chemical engineer. The whole episode was much like the film *October Sky* except my father and I never managed the re-connection enjoyed by those in the film. But I had gained a better than usual understanding of chemistry and was offered advanced placement in chemistry during my senior year in high school, the first time such a course was available.



The advanced placement course was pretty much a self-study project. I was given access to the lab, handed a book of experiments and a pat on the back for encouragement. I promptly set up a still and started supplying the students in the next class with 150 proof alcohol. During the research for these stories, I looked up the old class yearbook where I discovered that someone had written I willed my still to another student after graduation.

After the outhouse that became a duck shanty that became a chemistry lab became an electronics shop. A family friend gave me several boxes of old radio equipment, tubes, receivers, condensers and all manner of parts which I moved into the shack. I managed to get one of the old receivers working and listened to *Amos and Andy*, *Jack Benny*, *The Shadow* and *Sergeant Preston of the Yukon*. So instead of chemistry, now I was into electronics. These old radios were not just tubes, but old tubes – the kind with caps on the top where the 250 Volt plate voltage was applied. I was constantly getting zapped, in fact, I had sort of calibrated myself as a living voltmeter– zap! “Ah, that’s 90 Volts.” Zaap! “Yikes! That’s 250.”

Among the assorted junk was a telegraph key, earphones and a microphone. I climbed up the telephone pole in our back yard and attached two fine enamel wires that would not be noticed to the telephone lines. We had a party line then, so no one would notice that someone was talking on the phone when you picked it up. It took several tries to tap the phone number out on the telegraph key, but it worked. These life lessons learned in the shack would serve me well when I went off to the University of Michigan. My girlfriend was attending school on the other side of the state, so all I had to do was climb to a roof top, poke two safety pins through someone’s telephone line and we could talk for hours.

Also, among the goodies was an old Model T ignition coil. This was a sort of buzzer that could transform 12 Volts DC into a voltage high enough to produce a spark for ignition. Like all ignition sparks, it could also shock the hell out of you. I wired the coil to the doorknob of the shack and turned it on when I saw the little neighbor boy coming. He soon learned not to touch the door if he heard the telltale buzzing. I was merciless to the poor little guy. One time, after giving him a ride on my home-made go-kart, I asked if he would like to know what electricity feels like. He said “sure” so I told him to touch the spark plug. I did not realize that my mother was watching out the window. She called me inside and bawled me out but finished by saying “I would never have thought that fat little kid could jump so high.”

I accumulated all sorts of electronic junk including a couple of old TV sets. One day I needed some part and stuck my head into the rear of the TV cabinet that had been sitting outside for the summer. There was an ominous buzz and my heart leapt into my throat – I knew what was coming next. Yeah – I got it – right on the back of the neck.

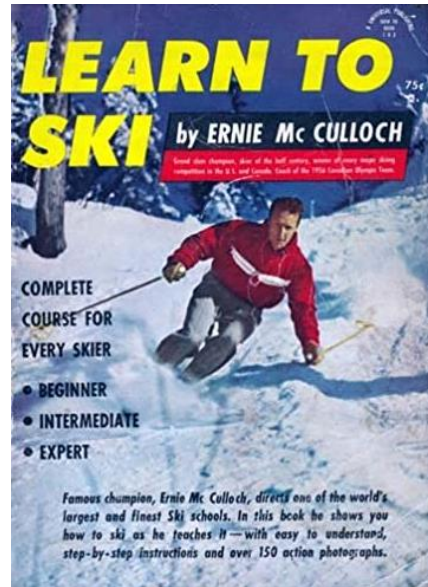
I hated hornets. I was always getting stung. Not that it was really their fault. Whenever I found a nest, I would devise all manner of ways to harass them. In Michigan there are bald-faced hornets. These mothers are big and ugly and their sting is really potent. One time my friend Tommy and I were camping and we came across one of their large hanging paper nests. An apple tree grew nearby. When an apple hit the nest, the hornets would swarm in a great mass growing ever bigger with each apple strike. After the apples were expended, we started picking them up off the ground from the other side of the nest, but these were closer. Soon – Whammo! I got stung on the top of my head. My friend had to lead me home by my hand because both of my eyes had swollen shut.

Actually, I think it is another case of inherited genetic traits. A few years ago, I called my mother and she did not sound so good. When I asked her what was wrong, she told me that she found a nest of bald-faced hornets and decided to use the vacuum to get rid of the nest. Things were going along fine until she reached up too high and the hose disconnected from the vacuum cleaner.



The First Run

I was 13 when my parents announced “We’re going skiing this year.” This meant that I had to buy skis. I got out the General Merchandise catalog and ordered a pair of skis for \$18. Sears and Roebuck supplied the boots for \$11 and poles for \$4. I went to the library and borrowed the book *Learn to Ski* by Ernie McCulloch, a Canadian ski champion of the late 1940s. As I siphoned up the pages describing the beginning snowplow through the advanced parallel turns and finally the expert “wedeln”, I thought to myself “The stem-christie, if only I can learn that – I will be happy.”



The skis were wood. If I reached far over my head, my extended fingers would barely touch the tips of the skis. Although the skis had metal edges attached with screws, the bindings were “bear traps”, meaning that once the cable bindings were latched and the cable tightened around the heel of the ski boot, there was no escape. My parents got more expensive release bindings, hmmm. I guess they figured that I was young and healed quickly.

Pretty soon my skis arrived. We were spending the weekend at my grandmother’s farm in the middle of Michigan where my parents frequently went on the weekends. The plan was to go skiing at a nearby ski hill the next day, but I was eager to put my new-found knowledge into effect. “Where is the steepest hill around?” I thought to myself. “Ah! The old toboggan hill in the back 40.” I put my skis over my shoulder and started hiking through the foot or so of snow.

The old toboggan hill was steep and short, maybe forty feet of vertical followed by a flat runout. A successful toboggan run would put you across the runout, through the broken-down barbed wire fence and into the creek at the bottom. Most runs were not successful – “Lean right!” never seemed to have much effect on a toboggan.

I got to the top of the hill, clamped my skis on and looked down. There was something that Ernie had not told me, but I didn’t know it – yet. There are lots of kinds of snow; packed piste where the snow has been carefully prepared by machines so that the skis will turn easily, powder that comes up to your knees and flies in your face as you fly joyfully down the slope and crud which is anything in between. This snow was not like any of that – this was about a foot deep with milkweed stalks and tall grasses poking through. Looked good to me.

I started down the hill and soon found myself going too fast. “Ha!” I said to myself “I know exactly what to do – the snowplow.” Snowplowing through the weeds and snow certainly was effective. It brought everything to an immediate stop, sending me over the tips. When I got up, I looked at my left thumb. It was folded over backwards resting against my wrist. “Oh no!” I said to myself (I never said “fuck” or even “shit” in those days, but certainly would now). “I’ve broken my thumb.”

It’s interesting how personality traits that are with us today emerge at such early ages. My first reaction was to “fix it.” So, I grabbed the dislocated thumb and snapped it back into place.



Mom was a good skier

My hand turned black and blue. The next day at the ski hill the single rope tow was a challenge with only one hand that worked, but it was a lot of fun. We skied at now long defunct ski areas with rope tows. Rope tows just aren't around anymore, basically, it a continuous loop of rope that you grab onto at the bottom and let go of at the top – sounds easy, but it has its challenges. We skied a lot at a nearby resort called Caberfae. This place was a step up from the local rope-tow one-man operations. Caberfae had T-bars! It was always a chuckle to see my 6' father and 5' mother sharing a T-bar.

Actually, my father built a rope tow using a 5 horsepower lawn tractor engine. We had a hill behind the cottage with about 70 feet of vertical, so you could get in a few turns before arriving at the bottom.



Mom & me at Caberfae



Tuckerman's Ravine

It was spring break of my first year at University of Michigan. Andy asked me if I wanted to join a group of guys going climbing and skiing at Tuckerman's Ravine in New Hampshire. I didn't know anything about climbing, but loved to ski so I jumped in. Maybe someone said that the skiing was really steep.



University of Michigan

I soon learned that this was going to be a pack trip. Great, I thought, it's camping. I love camping. I've got a tent (WWII army surplus 2-man mountain tent, weighs 15 pounds) and a sleeping bag (insulated with kapok, that's tree seeds, looks like cottonwood fuzz, weighs another 15 pounds). I'm set. Just need something to tie it all onto together with skis, ski boots, food, clothes, stove, fuel, axe (!) and other bare necessities. A quick trip to the army surplus store and I was the proud owner of a WWII pack board. Do you know what a "tumpline" is? This pack board was vintage - before weight bearing hip belts on pack frames were invented. A tumpline goes over the top of your head. So, you're carrying 80 or 90 pounds on your neck. I was young.

We piled into Andy's old Mercury station wagon. This was a real bummer to drive. If the car wandered too far to the left, you had to bring the steering wheel a long way to the right before it started to have any effect. Then, if you applied too much pressure and you needed to steer to the left, the same procedure had to be repeated on the opposite side.



The headwall at Tuckerman's Ravine

We wove our way through the night and arrived at Pinkham Notch in the morning. I don't remember much about the two and a half mile hike up to "Ho Jo's", a big log structure that served as the after dark gathering place for all of the campers (Ho Jos burned to the ground not long after). Back then, you could camp anywhere in the surrounding woods, cut down a few trees, build a fire and generally make yourself at home in the snow. (Now this "high use" area is closely controlled and patrolled.) Early the next morning Andy announces that he is taking the group climbing. Ice axes, crampons, bits of rope appear. Andy mentions something about the temperature is below freezing and the snow is hard. He never said too hard, just hard. I said I came to ski and ski I would.



HoJo's - burned down long ago`

Meanwhile more and more information came trickling out about what, exactly, I had so eagerly signed up for. First, the term “extreme skiing” was not invented yet. Next was the news that a lot of people have died here (131 as of 2013), many while attempting to ski the steep headwall.

Tuckerman’s Ravine is on the southeast shoulder of Mt. Washington, one of the highest peaks in the eastern US. Mt. Washington attracts big weather. The highest recorded surface wind of 231 miles per hour was recorded here (a category 5 hurricane has winds up to 157 mph). Typical yearly snowfall is 55 feet, most of which gets scoured off the top of the mountain by the prevailing westerlies and dumped into Tuckerman’s.

I shouldered my Head Competition 205 cm Slalom skis, my high school graduation present, with Marker turntable bindings, longthongs and Look toepieces and headed for the Left Gully also called Hillman’s Highway. The equipment is interesting. Today I ski on 162 cm skis. These come up somewhere in the middle of my face. Back then, you reached your hand high over your head and touched the ski tips. The toe piece and turntable allowed the toe to release, but offered no forward release. The longthongs were thick leather straps that wrapped around the tops of the leather boots several times for added ankle support. (You could also use them to tie your feet together as I used to do while attempting to learn to look like a ski instructor.)

Of all the routes, Hillman's Highway is the easiest. The average gradient is about 45 degrees. In the years since then, my rule of thumb is that anything over 40 degrees is serious; the snow your skis kick loose surrounds you as you ski down and if you fall, you probably can't stop.

The trek to the top was unlike anything I had done before. I was alone, but content. Kicking steps into the frozen snow was difficult but the import was lost on me. I looked aside to see another adventurer with crampons and ice axe descending.



Near the top it gets so steep you have to carry your skis sideways



I finally arrived at the top, took a last look across the valley and

strapped on my skis. I surveyed the couloir (a French mountaineering term for a narrow, steep cleft in the mountainside). The width was generous, probably about 50 feet at the top. I could see that it narrowed about 2/3 of the way down to about 25' and then took a bend to the left near the bottom. The total vertical was probably 500'. But,

as I looked closer, I realized that it was considerably steeper than anything I had ever skied before. This didn't really worry me, but I made a mental note that I would have to be careful.

I made an energetic first turn, edged hard, turned again and soon settled into a series of quick turns that kept my speed down. After about a dozen turns, while attempting to slow down by edging my skis on the hard snow, I slipped and fell on my uphill hip. "No problem", I thought, "happens all the time." I edged the skis harder to slow down. My right ski popped off. I dug in the left ski. It released. Now I was going pretty

fast, sliding on my butt with both heels dug in trying to slow down, but still gaining speed.

This did not last long. Soon I was spun around so that I was on my stomach going headfirst down the narrowing couloir. By now, I was going so fast that I was getting air off the bumps in the snow. Remember those longthongs? The skis were still attached to my boots but spinning wildly behind me. I think I might have resembled a Chinook helicopter with its twin rotor blades.

The couloir narrowed and took a 45 degree turn to the left. I could see the piles of boulders that bent the couloir to the left. if I did not make the turn, they would stop me. Small consolation. Between me and the rocks was a single bush in the middle of the couloir. I knew I had one chance – I had to grab a branch on the way by. I grabbed, hung on. The branch held. I swung to a stop below the bush, really shaken up. I lost my glasses, but still had my camera. No damage to the skis or me (checked in that order). I carried my skis down the rest of the way back to camp.

The next day the weather had warmed the snow and spring was upon us. There were tons of people at Seal Rocks – a rock outcrop / hangout at the bottom of the headwall where cheers would erupt when someone blew it big time. The scent of Coppertone was in the air. To this day, whenever I smell Coppertone, I think of Seal Rocks. With the soft snow, skiing was much easier, but having learned respect, still scary.

Colorado

Of all the classes in school, I enjoyed the science classes the most; basic science, chemistry, physics. When I started high school my 9th grade science teacher was Mr. Wood. He was also the coach for the gymnastics team that I was on. I liked Mr. Wood and he liked me because I was a good student, I thought.

I went to school in a mostly rural community in southern Michigan. My 142 classmates represented a rather homogeneous group; nobody was rich, there were a couple of kids from obviously poor families, very few had cars and those that did all had used clunkers. I had a bicycle that I had attached a lawn mower engine to. No black kids, no Hispanics. My worldly experience was very limited. Most everybody knew everybody else. When Mr. Wood did not show up for school the next year after teaching there for many years everyone wondered why.

As the summer of my 10th grade neared, I got a letter from Mr. Wood inviting me to join him at the University of Colorado Boulder for a month. I thought it would be great, my parents agreed and off I went to Denver on a Greyhound Bus.

Mr. Wood lived in a travel trailer somewhere in the middle of downtown Boulder. This was in the early 60's. Don't get the impression of a luxurious 50 foot long RV – this trailer was about 16 feet long with a table at one end and a bed at the other. The kitchen and bathroom were squeezed in between.

When I woke up the first night and discovered his arm around me, I thought “Hmmm, I guess he really likes me.” But nothing more than that – like I said – limited experience. We had a great time. We hiked in Rocky Mountain National



Park up to some high mountain lakes where he encouraged me to take my clothes off and dive in while he took pictures. I did – the water was so cold that it felt like a clamp on my chest. I borrowed his bike to travel around town and up Lookout Mountain. All in all, it was a great introduction to the American West.

During my second year at University of Michigan, my friend Harold suggested that we drive out to Colorado for a ski adventure over our Christmas vacation. I did not know what an adventure it would turn out to be.



Harold had become my good ski buddy during my first year at school. He skied on Hart metal skis with Cubco bindings. The old advert says “automatic release”. The problem was that they would automatically release anytime they pleased. Like when he was 10 feet in the air over a big jump. Remember – this was an era of release straps that tied the skis to your boots

with leather straps. Try running with two skis tied to your feet.

I had purchased a VW Camper from one of my professors. It was equipped with a gasoline heater – just the ticket for a winter camping trip. So off we went. We did not get very far. About 30 miles west of Ann Arbor the engine quit. Harold drove a VW Karmann Gia, so he hopped out and hitched a ride back to Ann Arbor. Hitch hiking was so easy in

those days. An hour or so later Harold was back. We tied the camper to the Karmann Gia and towed it back to Harold's apartment parking garage. Harold had a nice apartment, at least by my standards. I lived in small room with a hot plate. Harold had a bathroom and a kitchen! We parked the camper and the Karman Gia side by side, jacked them both up, swapped the engines, carried the dead engine up to his apartment and put it in the bathtub. We were back on the road within a couple of hours.

Somewhere in Chicago late that night, I had to shift gears. When I pushed the clutch an awful screeching noise emanated from the rear of the camper. "Ah, that's just the clutch throwout bearing" said Harold. "Just ignore it." It was easy to ignore, because you don't shift much on Interstate 80. Later in the dead of night in the middle of Iowa, the engine let out a fearful shriek and died. I coasted to a stop by the side of the road. We waited until morning to take stock of the situation. At first light, the situation was grim. The engine was not just sick, it was dead. The closest town was Iowa City, with no real plan in mind, I hitched into town. I first went to a car rental and asked if I could rent a car, thinking I could use the car to tow the van. Nope, no dice, no way said the nice car rental people (I did not even mention towing the van).

I was walking down the street, really at wit's end when I spotted a sign "We rent anything". There was a pickup truck in the back. Saved! I bought about 6 feet of chain (chain was expensive), drove the truck out of town, disconnected the speedometer (rent by the mile) and returned to the van.

Iowa City did not have a lot of resources so we decided to tow the van to Des Moines which was about 80 miles away. With me driving the truck and Harold steering the van, this was not an easy tow; icy roads, 6 feet between the van and the truck, but we only collided once on the drive. We arrived late in the day and started looking for a garage that could repair the engine. By another stroke of good luck, we found a kind shop owner that let us park the camper in his shop, use his tools, take the engine out ourselves and sleep in the shop. Turns out a valve had dropped off, fallen into the combustion chamber, met the rising piston, bent the crank...It took a day or so, but we were "On the Road Again" as the song goes two days later.

Colorado! We had finally made it. Our first stop was Vail. The first run down from the top was very interesting; we were both out of breath after pounding our way down a few moguls. At first, we did not understand, then it dawned on us – altitude!

Living in the camper at the base of Vail (no problem back then) wasn't too bad. There were hostels that you could sneak in to use the bathroom or shower. The one problem that we did have was that the heater would not heat. Ah, but we were young.

The drive back was nearly as exciting as the drive out – distributor cap blah blah. Sometime around Chicago the transmission started slipping out of gear. One of us had to sit on the gearshift to hold it while the other drove.

In retrospect, the trip had a profound impact on me. I realized that I could surmount seemingly insurmountable problems. I also realized that I really liked Colorado.



The Big Green Bullfrog

Anna and I moved in California in early 1970; she to attend Berkeley grad school in fine arts, me to work at Fairchild Semiconductor, the leader in silicon manufacturing at the time. Intel was that upstart startup just around the block. We lived in Fremont about half way in between.

We drove the old Rambler station wagon west from Michigan. Good ol' I-80, a road that I was to become very familiar with over the next decades. As we neared California, I remember being surprised at how steep and snowy the mountains were. Going over Donner Pass was a highlight of the trip. After settling in, Anna needed a car. She bought an old, green, Ford Econoline van, the kind with a 6-cylinder engine and a 3-speed stick shift on the column. Very spacious inside, but really ugly. Being an art student, it needed a paint job. Being green, it reminded her

of a giant bullfrog. One side sported a big bullfrog, the other a swamp and on the back was the bullfrog's back end.



As soon as we arrived in California, I bought a surfboard. I stowed the board in the van and Anna and I set off to find the biggest breakers we could (just like the first ski run – steepest hill). It was winter so the surf was up. We pulled off somewhere south of San Francisco where the waves were shaping up nicely as they thundered into a rock bordered beach in a small bay.

I paddled out beyond the breakers, turned around and waited until I saw a wave forming up behind me. I got on my knees and started paddling like mad. The wave passed under me. I repeated this a couple more time. I did not realize that I had paddled into the break line so that when a larger than usual wave came up behind me, I did not have to paddle at all – it lifted the back of the board and sent both me and the board straight down.

I have both arms wrapped tightly around the board and we are going down. “This is not good,” I think, “maybe if I release the board I will float back to the surface.” This was a really dumb idea but I was deep and being driven deeper so I let go of the board. Anna said it shot about 20 feet in the air. I looked up and started struggling to the surface. I managed to swim in but was exhausted – enough for today.

Eventually I discovered Steamer Lane in Santa Cruz. This was a very friendly right-hand break with a big sandy beach. I got good enough to catch a wave and guide the board to shore. It was great fun.

One day I drove the van to Santa Cruz to surf. Anna was doing something else that day but we had agreed to meet in San Jose for a party that one of my office mates was throwing. Anna rode the motorcycle to the party. The plan was to put the bike in the back of the van and I would drive home.

Parties being what they were in the early 70s, I got seriously stoned and Anna got knuckle-dragging drunk. Sometime late at night, we went outside to load the bike into the van. It didn’t fit. Anna said she could drive but the van needed gas so she followed me to a nearby gas station. Gassed up and ready to roll, I said to Anna “Follow me.” She nodded in agreement but something must not have clicked and she took off.

The gas station was on El Camino Real, one the major streets in San Jose. Fortunately, it was late at night so there wasn't much traffic. There was no cross street but Anna did not need one as the last I saw of her was the ass-end of the bullfrog bouncing over the median. She took off going the wrong direction on El Camino Real without headlights.

I smiled for about 2 seconds, but then realized that if the cops caught her there would be big-time trouble. I pursued in the direction she had gone and found her stopped by the side of the road. "I didn't know where I was going" she said sheepishly.

Ballad of a Thin Man

Bob Dylan

*You walk into the room with your pencil in your hand
You see somebody naked and you say, "Who is that man?"
You try so hard but you don't understand
Just what you will say when you get home
Because something is happening here but you don't know what it
is
Do you, Mr. Jones?*

I walked into the room. There were three officers with “scrambled eggs” all over their caps and gold braid covering their uniforms (read: big honchos). They were all bent over studying something and laughing their asses off.

“What are you laughing about?” I asked.

“Your transcript. You flunked out of ROTC!”.

This was serious. If I didn’t get into the Coast Guard Officer Candidate School I was going to Vietnam. I had already gone through the physical and received orders to report for duty. The draft.

“Yes, but I got a perfect 4.0 grade point average that semester.” I pointed out helpfully (or was it hopefully?).

My father told many stories of WWII. I discovered at an early age that when he was angry with me, all I had to do was say “Tell me about the time in New Guinea that you ...” and he would gladly tell whatever tale I suggested, forgetting my transgressions. Curiously, these stories were never about combat. Instead, he told about camp life, the beauty of the islands, the natives and in particular the native children. I know that he was heavily involved in combat, being an infantryman in the south



acific war against the Japanese was intense, close quarters fighting. He received a purple heart, a bronze star and a silver star – a true hero but he never told me about a single battle. All of his stories were about the humorous mishaps of Army life.

As a youngster, I played with my plastic army figurines, Tinker Toy tanks and fighter planes. On Saturdays I would stand at the foot of my bed for “inspection” – I was being inculcated into the Army way.

My mother told me that during WWII was when he lost faith in god – what god could allow such a travesty as war? So, in retrospect, it is somewhat of a mystery that he was so keen on having me join the army just as the Vietnam War was heating up in 1965 when I graduated from high school.

It is important to acknowledge that the army was my father’s escape from his childhood poverty. My father was the middle child of 7 children. His father had abandoned his mother for another woman in the height of the depression. They lived in a particularly poor area south of Traverse City in Michigan. My father joined the National Guard in 1939, was promptly shipped off to the south pacific in WWII, rose thru the ranks to become a decorated officer and after returning to the US, the GI bill paid his way through the University of Michigan engineering college. None of which would have happened if he had not joined up. Consequently, the military was “The Way” much like “Tao” is the way in eastern religion. You don’t question it – you just do it.

When I graduated from high school my father took me aside and said “You have two choices; join the army or go to college. If you go to college, I will pay your expenses but you must promise to join ROTC (Reserve Officers Training Corps).” I had always planned on going to college so that is the path that I elected. ROTC was fine with me, because, at that time I did not have much of a world view other than that which my father had ingrained into me. I said “sure”, I did not know much about the army other than the virtues that my father had extolled, so I promised to join the ROTC.

I applied to the military academies and got a couple of acceptances but failed the eyesight exams for both. I have crossed eyes that were

corrected with childhood surgeries, so although they appear pretty straight, I only see out of my left eye. Consequently, I have absolutely no depth perception. I am lousy when it comes to any kind of “hit the ball with the stick” kind of game. I applied to the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and was accepted.

I got my first summer job parking cars. I have forgotten how much I saved, but managed to pay about 50% of my first year’s expenses. It soon became evident that even though my father contributed to my needs, the money came with strings attached. He demanded that I keep an accounting of all money spent. This goes back to his need to be in control. In the spectrum of control freaks, he was way out there.

If I saved all the money I earned during the summer and worked part time while attending classes, I could just about make ends meet. My parents contributed about half of my first year’s costs and \$500 during my second year of college. After that, I made ends meet by whatever means I could as long as it did not involve asking my parents for money.

This independence, however, came at a price that I am still paying today. In order to make ends meet, I would save everything from my summer job and work during the school year. My budget did not include any extras so dating was pretty slim, mostly consisting of going somewhere that offered free entertainment on my motor scooter. On the occasional ski trips, I remember making “tomato soup” out of free hot water and ketchup packets when my friends were eating at restaurants. I had to justify and scrutinize every dollar spent – a habit that still haunts me today.

The way that scholarships were awarded then was much different than now. The first question that they asked was “How much do your parents make?” which had little bearing on how much money I had. Later I was awarded a couple of small (\$500) scholarships that were based on grade point average. These came as most welcome additions to my funds. It was during this time that I developed an economic philosophy that seemed to dovetail nicely with my personality profile: *One can adapt their means to fit their wants or adapt their wants to fit their means.* I chose the latter as I really had no control over the former. With a sort of

Buddhist outlook, I simply decided to want less. It worked. I never suffered from envy of those around me besides, my resulting minimalist attitude has provided comfort throughout the rest of my life.

My early army indoctrination lasted all of one semester of ROTC. I soon learned that there were other political perspectives than my father's "Republican – Right or Wrong". But, having promised, I reluctantly tried to keep my word. The army, on the other hand, did not make any such promise and determined that I was unsuitable officer material. Somewhere, I may still have my first discharge papers, it was written "For the Convenience of the Government" when they booted me out in my senior year. Fortunately, that particular semester was the first semester that the pass/fail option was available at the University of Michigan and I, in great foresight, took the class on a pass/fail basis. Consequently, the "F" was not counted in my perfect 4.0 grade point that semester.

I graduated in December of 1969. I was counting on an occupational deferment. I got a job at Fairchild Semiconductor, the leader of the semiconductor industry in Mountain View, the heart of what would become Silicon Valley. Fairchild was a big defense contractor, I was safe.



Anna, who I had been living with at the time, was accepted into Berkeley graduate School of Fine Arts. We loaded up the old Rambler station wagon and headed to California. I got my draft notice in the winter of 1970. I flew back to my draft board in an effort to get my case re-opened, I applied as a conscientious objector. When I told my father this, his unforgettable words were "you can stay tonight, but I want you out of the house tomorrow." My father and I had a very

strained relationship. If we had met, we would have liked each other, but as a father his overbearing nature and my independent streak clashed. Many years later when my mother called to announce his death, my only

thought was “Good, maybe now my nightmares will stop.” Amazingly, they did.

Meanwhile, Berkeley had shut down to protest the Vietnam war. Anna’s classes were all canceled. Things were looking pretty grim when I got my order to report for a physical. I seriously considered Canada, but rejected the idea. I liked the industry that I was in and did not relish the idea of living in the north country. I found that the Coast Guard was accepting applicants for their Officer’s Candidate School.

When I walked in to the interview room, the three officers were laughing. I asked “What are you laughing about?” and they said “You flunked ROTC!” I have forgotten the rest of the interview, but, to my delight and their poor judgment, I was accepted for officer’s training in Virginia Beach, Virginia.

Anna and I jumped on our two motorcycles and headed east. If you were married, you got \$26 a month more, so we got married by a one-armed Justice of the Peace in Reno, Nevada.

Coast Guard OCS did not go any better than ROTC, but it had this great advantage; it occupied six months out of a two-year active duty enlistment during which you were treated reasonably well. After that, I had only 18 months remaining, which I served on a lifeboat station on Lake Erie and in the Regional Headquarters in Cleveland. I managed to get court martialed three times. They really didn’t like me. The best one was when I was supposed to go out to the end of the pier and take the flag down at night. It did not occur to me that riding my motorcycle back down the pier with the flag flying around my shoulders like Superman’s cape was a court-martial offense. Well, it is.

Life at the Cleveland headquarters was a little better. I was snagged by a Captain who needed repair manuals written for the radar equipment that the Coast Guard was installing in the lighthouses. This was a technology that I understood and was able to provide step-by-step trouble-shooting instructions for the electronics technicians. By saving all of my leave, I was able to get out in just over a year. I was never so thankful. I got to save a couple of people on Lake Erie which, as an

alternative to shooting “gooks” in Vietnam, is to this day great source of pride.

The entire experience was the worst time of my life – ever. I recently read an article *Atheists and Believers Both Have Moral Compasses, but With Key Differences*. The study found that both atheists and theists share the same values of liberty, protection of the vulnerable and rational thinking. However, whereas believers are inclined to endorse values that promote group cohesion, atheists tend to judge the morality of actions based on their consequences and have less respect for in-group loyalty, authority and sanctity.

To this day – I hate flags.



The Motorcycle Diaries



Velocette Venom 500

It was 1970. The Vietnam War was in full swing. The draft was a major factor in the choices we made in life. I had chosen to avoid the draft by joining the Coast Guard for two years, the first six months of which was to be spent at OCS in Virginia Beach.

Although Che Guevara rode his 500 cc motorcycle, affectionately named “The Mighty”, across South

America, I did not have much confidence in my old Velocette 500 cc single, so I sold it and purchased a used Triumph 650 cc twin – just like Marlon Brando in *The Wild Bunch*.

Anna and I put what little we had in storage, hopped on our two motorcycles and headed east. Anna had a Suzuki 250 cc, X6 Hustler. It was a sweet little lightweight 2 cycle bike back in the days when you poured the oil in the gas tank to mix it. Shortly before our departure I thought that the Triumph was making a bit too much engine noise and took it to the shop for inspection. The diagnosis was not good – something about all of the bearings ... blah, blah, blah.

It seemed like forever before the shop finally called late one day and said that the bike was ready. We had been chomping at the bit to get going, so I threw our gear on the back of the bikes and took off. I wanted to put as many miles behind us as possible that first day to make up for all of the delay in waiting for the bike to get fixed.

You wouldn’t think that you could fall asleep riding a motorcycle. This was an era of loud bikes and no helmets. There was plenty of wind

in my face and noise in my ears, but I distinctly remember moments of pure silence before waking up riding across a field. We pulled the bikes off the road and slept for the night.

My early life was spent on a motorcycle. Principally because a motorcycle is cheap to operate; gas mileage was great and if anything failed, I could fix it. But there were two main problems with riding a motorcycle; first, there is no such thing as a “fender bender”. If you fall off your bike, you’re going to get hurt. If you tangle with a car, you’re going to get hurt bad. I remember riding to work one day with the pavement still wet from last night’s rain. “Don’t lean it over” I said to myself (I didn’t say “slow down”.) It is so exhilarating to go into a turn on a full lean, wondering if your tires are going to let go or would you come out going faster than when you went in. I leaned, the tires let go, I spent the day with my handkerchief wrapped around my ripped up bloodied knee.

The second problem is that motorcycles are cold, especially in the wintertime. I borrowed a helmet once and marveled at the wonder of watching the snowflakes part in front of me. I had this mantra; if the destination was, for example, 100 miles away, I would say to myself “if I ride at 100 mph it will only take an hour and I can stand anything for an hour”. Well, I guess what doesn’t kill you makes you tougher...

I should probably blame my mother’s brother for my life on motorcycles. When I was about 15 years old, he bought a Yamaha 50 trail bike and would let me ride it on my grandmother’s farm. This wasn’t a very productive farm because it was all sand. Now sand is a really tricky proposition on a bike. Anyway, Leonard was not a particularly go-getter sort of person, but in one of those “life lessons” that sticks with you for the rest of your life, his advice for riding in sand was; “if you get up enough speed, you can get through anything”. I smile today thinking of all the situations that I have applied that philosophy to.

One day my friend Tom and I were riding our motorcycles along the country roads in Michigan. It was summertime. If there is anything that I miss about Michigan, it's the green. There is nothing in the west that resembles the green of summertime in Michigan. Anyway, Tom was on his single cylinder 250 cc BMW and I was riding my Cushman Eagle scooter. He was having brake light problems, so I had dropped behind as he tapped the brake. I pulled ahead and removed my right hand from the throttle to signal "ok" over my shoulder. It was at that point that my front wheel dropped into a rather large pothole. The scooter immediately flipped. Fortunately, the road curved so I was catapulted off the side of the road.



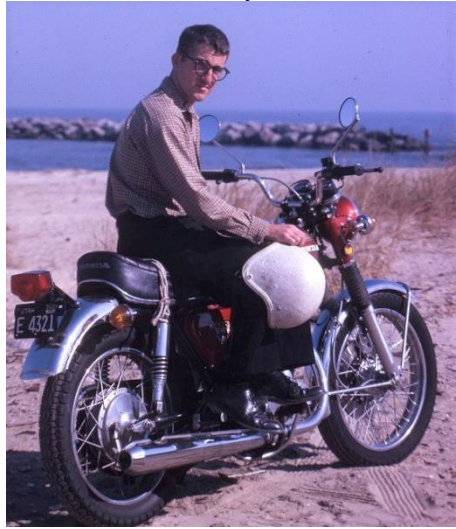
Here goes that brain thing again – I was probably less than 4 feet above the ground but going 35-40 mph. As I watched the green grass of the roadside passing beneath me, I spread my arms wide and thought "I'm a B-17 bomber. My landing gear's been shot off and I'm coming in for a crash landing!" but in that same moment, I also knew that I was not going to get hurt – the grass looked so soft as it rushed beneath me. It takes less than a half of a second to fall 4 feet.

The American west is glorious. There was so much that neither Anna nor I had seen. We had a month or so before I had to report for training, so we motored from one national park to another, camping along the way.

The Triumph was not healthy. The engine noises that concerned me before we left had returned with a vengeance. I started running heavier and heavier oil in the crankcase. Pretty soon I was filling up with the heaviest oil I could find and a good dose of STP to boot. Motoring through southern Utah, the bike suddenly began to shake violently from side to side. The engine was seizing. Time to camp for the night.

The next morning, I rode to Tooele where I had arranged a trade-in for a Honda 450. I topped the oil off with STP and kept the speed very low. When I pulled in the mechanic said “Shut it down!” I didn’t tell him that I had ridden the bike 250 miles from Goblin Valley like that.

The Honda was a gem. After a few hundred miles it was time to adjust the valve chain tension. This was a horrible job on the Triumph, requiring about 45 minutes, a special Wentworth wrench with a bend in the handle and lots of patience. With a certain amount of resignation, I tackled the job. I got out the owner’s manual and read “loosen the cam chain locking nut, tighten the cam chain locking nut.” That was it! Less than a minute. It was no mystery why all of those great British machines were going broke; Norton, Vincent, Matchless, BSA, Royal Enfield, Velocette...



Honda 450

Camping? Motels were out of the question and our camping equipment was way second rate. We didn’t have a tent, a bit of plastic sheeting slung over a picnic table was the best we had. Our sleeping bags were heavy kapok, if they got wet (which happened frequently), they were useless. We were young. It snowed in Yellowstone. We were cold, wet and broke. We piled all of our money on the table at a restaurant and came up with something like \$14. We had to get to Ann Arbor where I had some money in a bank there. We made it but with less than a dollar in change when we arrived.

The remainder of the ride is forgotten. I do remember making something of a splash, reporting to duty on my motorcycle, but that splash turned into more of a belly flop as I discovered, once again, that military life was not for me.



Anna kicking up sand in Virginia

The Sinking

I look at Anna's stern face swimming valiantly in her life jacket, struggling to make progress toward the distant shore as the current and wind sets us ever seaward. With the water temp in the low 40s I knew our survival time was limited and even if we did make it to shore, there is nothing there but miles of wilderness. I say to myself "I got her into this. If we ever get out, I'll never leave her. I promise this as I pray "Please God, help us."

Irony piled upon irony. That I should beseech God in the first place. In the second place – what a pickle my friend Bill and I should find ourselves in after celebrating our recent discharge from the Coast Guard.

Bill lived on the Keweenaw Peninsula on the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. He had described his adventure years earlier when his sailboat was caught in a storm off Isle Royale. Is it that things repeat themselves or that we just keep inviting the same events into our lives?

Whatever. Our plan was to hoist his old fiberglass water skiing boat aboard the ferry out to Isle Royale, float the boat and motor to the other side of the island for a week of camping and hiking. Many roadblocks appeared as the plan unfolded. Bill's car wouldn't start – we needed it to tow the boat trailer. Bill dove under the hood and got it running.

"A good mechanic can fix anything with the tools at hand." – Bill. The boat trailer bearings were shot – fixed. There were more problems, but we persevered. Later, I came to believe the gods were speaking to us.

We boarded the ferry along with our little ski boat for the 60 mile crossing of Lake Superior to Rock Harbor. Upon arrival, Bill, Anna and I jumped into the boat, and, along with our camping gear motored northeast along the coast, turned northwest at the tip of



Bill - fix'n

the island, then southwest along the northwest shore. The island is actually a submerged mountain range, so it is important to stay well offshore when clearing the northeast tip of the island. We discovered a beautiful spot in Five Finger Bay and set up camp. After several days of hiking and just hanging out, we returned to the ferry docks for more food.



On our return, we had cleared the northeast tip of the island and were running southwest paralleling the shore a mile or two distant. The sea was up and the old

fiberglass ski boat was pounding hard on the waves. Anna looked behind her and said to me “There’s a lot of water back there.” I checked and said to Bill “There’s a lot of water back there.” Bill looked back and said “Ohmygod, we’re sinking!” Yep, we sure were. Bill turned the boat for the shore, gunned the engine, but the boat responded sluggishly. Soon the transom went under, the motor was still running. Not for long.

It didn’t take long for the boat to go down. We kept scrabbling around on the overturned hull of the boat in a futile effort to avoid getting in the water. It was inevitable. The very tip of the bow protruded a foot above the waves too small for even one person to perch on. We started swimming for shore.

The situation was bad. Although we had life jackets, a brisk southeast wind was kicking up whitecaps and setting us out to sea. The water temperature was low enough that hypothermia was a certainty. Even if we reached shore, we would be cold, wet and a long way from any help.

I can see it clearly today, 50 years later. A small cruise ship, maybe a half mile away. We waved. Nothing. The cruise ship kept going past us. We turned and resumed our futile paddling toward shore. I looked back. The ship had turned!



One lady from New Zealand on the cruise ship had seen the upturned bow of our boat amid the whitecaps, recognized it for what it was and, with a borrowed pair of binoculars, spotted us. She ran up to the bridge and pointed us out to the captain. We were saved. When they hauled us aboard, no one could stand – the cold had rendered our leg muscles useless. The crew attached a line to the bow of the boat and, together with our grateful selves, towed it back to Rock Harbor.

The beating from the waves had caused the fiberglass bottom of the boat to crack laterally from the keel to the chine. This acted as a water scoop which explains why the boat sank so quickly, especially after Bill tried to increase the speed to get us ashore. We were sort of famous amongst the locals. They kept finding our gear “We found this floating out by 20 mile shoal...”



Mountains

You get up every morning, brush your teeth with the same toothbrush, drink the same coffee from the same mug, poop in the same toilet – it's no wonder that what follows during the rest of the day are pretty much the same thoughts – you're in a rut. If you want to think new thoughts, be creative or just escape the rut, you have to change your environment. This is what attracts me to the wilderness.

My parents were avid outdoor sportsmen. Hunting and fishing were their sports which they pursued avidly. The family photo album was filled with big fish, dead deer and bird dogs. My parents took me camping with them on fishing trips in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan as a youngster. As I grew older, I would carry a tent to the swamp behind the house and spend the night. We all knew how to paddle a canoe. My father had one guiding rule for hunting – if you kill it, you eat it (beaver tastes very good, muskrat not so much, coot is awful).

After graduating from University of Michigan, Anna with a degree in fine arts and me with a degree in electrical engineering, we headed for California. I don't think we researched much in those days, just piled into the old Rambler station wagon and set off. As we neared California on I-80 I started to see signs about pullouts for putting on your chains and snow warnings. I was pleased to see the mountains, but had not looked the route over to see that we were going over Donner Pass. I had chains having gotten stuck a few times in the Colorado mountains in previous years. I put them on. It was late at night and only a few other cars were on the road. Soon there were no other cars on the road and I was in first gear trying to plow through the snow. Fortunately, the chains gave us enough traction and first gear was low enough to keep moving and we made it over, barely.

Soon after Anna and I arrived in California, we decided to go backpacking in Yosemite. After all, I had all the kit left over from my Tuckerman adventures a couple of years earlier – heavy kapok (kapok is a tree with cotton-like seeds) sleeping backs and my WWII army surplus two-man mountain tent and packframe. We loaded our gear and headed to Yosemite. We awoke the next



Anna marveling at the spectacular views in Yosemite



morning greeted by the spectacles of Yosemite. The falls, the rainbows... It was awe inspiring. We shouldered our packs and headed up towards Vernal Falls. The falls were wonderful. We camped nearby. I had heard about Yogi, I think he lived in Yosemite, so I hung all the tasty food in a tree about 6 or 7 feet off the ground. I put the food in cans next to the tent.

We slept soundly, although in retrospect, Anna reported “hearing something” in the night. We awoke to find that a bear had cleaned us out. The food was gone, all the cans had been

opened (well, penetrated with a tooth) to see what tasted good. Apparently, pizza sauce and spam are very good, carrots and canned corn not so much.

We subsisted mostly on carrots and corn for the rest of the weekend.

We went on a couple more backpacking trips in California before my life was upended by my draft notice. On one trip to Desolation Valley, someone stole my wallet from the tent while we were away on a day hike – California. You’re never alone there.



After I got out of the Coast Guard, I rediscovered the joys of backpacking, especially with new lightweight equipment (lightweight in those days meant less than 50 pounds of gear – today it's more like 20 pounds). We started going to the Wind River Mountains in Wyoming. This is a half million acres of land traveled only on foot or horseback. Here you are alone. The Wind Rivers may not have the sheer granite faces that Yosemite is rightly famous for, but they have something else – isolation. This Wilderness Area is over 100 miles long. Many areas of the mountain range are only accessible after several days of backpacking. We would pack in for a couple of weeks and see no one else after the first day.



Bear!

The fishing in the Wyoming wilderness is incredible. We ate trout. We ate Brook Trout, Cutthroat trout, Lake Trout, Rainbow Trout and Golden Trout (a rarity which I now regret). As we packed deeper and deeper into the mountains, I started to feel the urge to climb to the top. Getting to the top of most mountains is simply a matter of looking up, figuring out a likely route and putting one foot in front of the other for several hours. Some, however, added the element of exposure.



Climbing Fremont Peak - no harness, just a loop of rope around the waist

In mountaineering terms, exposure is when the results of a fall would be bad. This is when things get “technical”, another mountaineering term for the skills and equipment needed to manage the climb safely. I bought a Goldline “3-lay” nylon rope, so named because it consisted of 3 twines twisted together. Look at the old pictures of George Mallory – like those. All climbing ropes today are “kernmantle”, meaning an inner core of nylon for strength and an outer braided sheath for flexibility. Nice, but expensive.



Armed with my new rope, we tackled Freemont Peak. I soon realized that leading the rope up a hundred feet or so and then looping it around a rock is not really all that secure. There is an old adage in mountaineering – the rope

A rock climb is "technical" if a fall would result in serious injury. A rope is required. One climber, the leader is tied to one end of the rope, affectionally called "the sharp end". The second climber is tied to the other end. The second is anchored to the rock by means of protection ("pro"). Protection used to be pitons, steel spikes driven into a crack, now, nuts wedged into cracks are more commonly used. A carabineer ("beener", rhymes with weener, looks like a big safety pin) joins the climbing harness to the pro so that the second cannot be pulled off the rock. The second's job is to feed rope to the leader but in the event of a leader fall the second must lock the rope (belay – old sailing term, to hold fast) to arrest the fall. The leader climbs above the second and places a piece of pro securely into the rock then using a beener, clips the rope through the pro so that it will run freely as he ascends. Thus, the leader is protected in the event of a fall. He will fall twice the distance that he has climbed above the last pro. Upon reaching the end of the rope or "pitch" the leader anchors himself and belays the second up. The second is in no danger of falling because the rope is always tight above him. Along the way, the second removes all of the pro from the route to be reused on the next pitch.

ensures that you do not die alone. Once back in Michigan, I bought several books (just like skiing) about mountaineering and began learning the craft; rappelling off the balcony, using prussic knots to climb trees, practicing the art of belay with a link of chain and tying the all-important bowline knot. I was ready.

Here the story gets complicated.

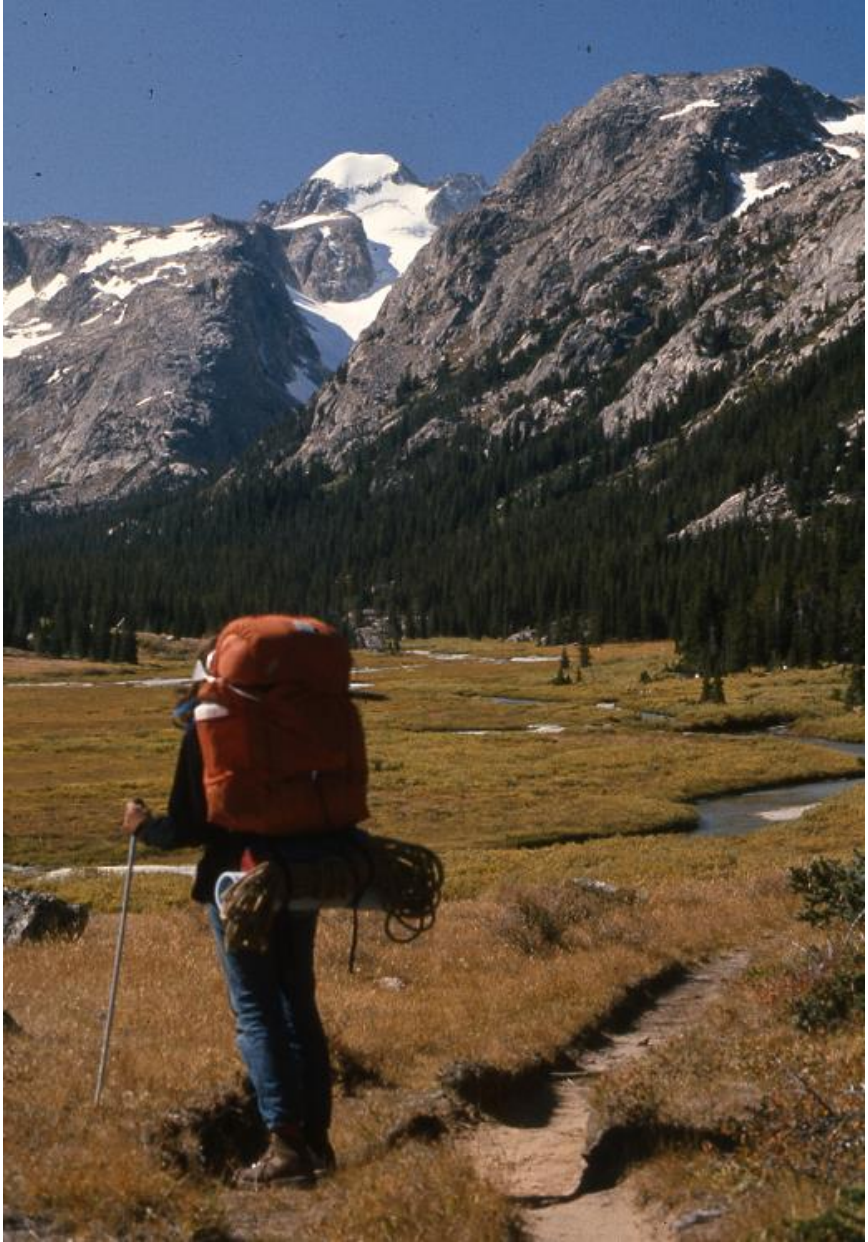
One day I saw a notice posted on a bulletin board at the U of M from someone interested in backpacking. That is how I met Diane who was soon graduating from University of Michigan. We decided to go off on a backpacking / climbing trip in the Beartooth Mountains in Montana. Obviously, this did not sit well with Anna. Things went just about exactly as you would guess – I left Anna and hooked up with Dianne. In all honesty, I was an ass back then (sometimes I still am). I was a product of the 60's liberal culture and fancied myself as the "long haired leaping gnome" in the song *Spill the Wine*. I look back on those episodes with great sadness and chagrin.

The divorce was uneventful, a minor dispute over a pair of skis but mostly just a matter of filling out the paperwork, presenting it to a judge and W1 was no more.

Diane was adventurous. We packed, climbed and skied our hearts out. Our rock climbing skills progressed as well, because there was not



much to climb in Michigan, we would travel hours to reach a small sandstone cliff of 50' or so. After she graduated, she announced that she was going to travel. I could come with if I wanted – or not. We packed up my Opel Kadet, left Ann Arbor for the last time and headed west. We stopped in Wyoming for a late fall mountaineering adventure – a climb of Gannet Peak, Wyoming's tallest. It takes about 3 days of hard packing to get to Gannet Peak with heavy packs – late fall means cold weather, plus mountaineering adds an additional 20 pounds of gear. There are real glaciers, which means ice axes, crampons, winter tents, ropes, the whole nine yards.



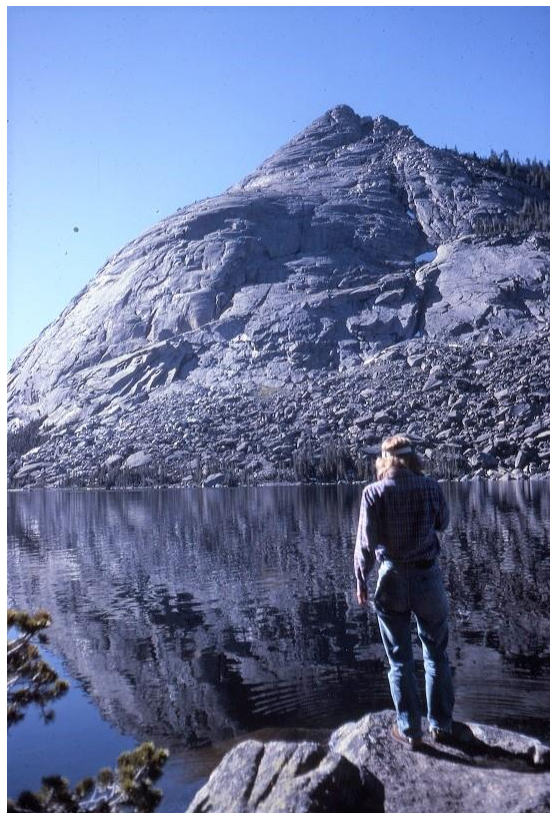
After we got down, it was back to the car and head for San Francisco. Somewhere along the way the muffler fell off (the car was totally rusted out due to the extensive use of salt to clear the snow off the roads in the Michigan winter), so I stopped at a hardware store to find something to calm the sound. I settled on a shower curtain rod – smile if you must, but the result was not unpleasant and mellow enough not to get a ticket. Going over the San Francisco Oakland Bay Bridge the car ran out of gas. I coasted into one of the pullouts and poured the last gallon of Coleman Camp Stove Fuel into the tank. The little guy loved it.

Diane and I sampled the world's mountains. New Zealand was our first stop – ice and snow covered peaks right smack in the middle of the southern ocean. Storms that would knock you off your feet. The Indian Himalaya was real high-altitude stuff. The Hindu Kush was remote and, like all big mountains, dangerous. After returning to the USA, she started an adventure travel business and we took clients to the volcanoes of Mexico.

After spending the winter skiing in Jackson Hole, I spent the summer backpacking in Wyoming. I loved the Wind River Range with hundreds of thousands of acres of wild mountains. I packed up the van and headed for Lander. I had not visited the southern end of the Winds before. This is how I came to discover Smith Lake.

Smith Lake

I spent a summer exploring all of the trailheads into the Wind River Wilderness area having already hiked the adjoining Jim Bridger Wilderness area in previous trips.



Jacque fishing in Smith Lake

In most cases packing into the mountains involves days of uphill slogging from the trailhead. This place was different. The drive from Lander to Dickinson Park is thousands of feet of elevation gain which tops out at nearly 9,500'. The destination, Smith Lake is at 9,750', so the trail in is a bit of up and down without any significant elevation gain. This is a big deal when carrying a heavy pack. The trailhead at Dickinson Park is a wonderful destination in itself. There is a Forest Service campground that is usually deserted because the access road crosses the

Wind River Indian Reservation and the Indians have taken control of the road requiring the purchase of an Indian reservation fishing permit even though Dickinson Park is not on the reservation. A stream teeming with brook trout runs through the park (a mountain "park" is a bit of flat, treeless land surrounded by forest and mountains).

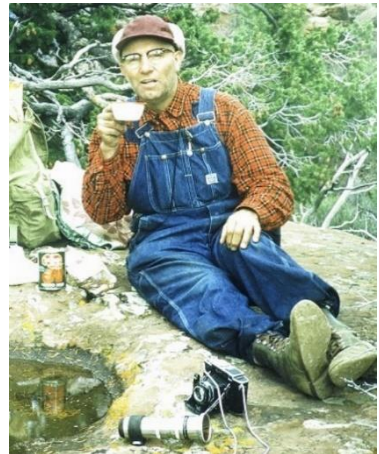
Over the years I have shared the place with many of my friends and family. I brought my mom & dad here for their first backpacking trip – they were in their 60s at the time. My father said it was the most beautiful place he has ever been and returned several times. My mom was a bit more skeptical expressing her fear of bears. In fact, upon arriving at Smith Lake, she spotted a black shape scampering off into the woods. I tried to reassure her that it wasn't a bear (it was) and that even if it was, it wouldn't return (it did).



Cook Lake Cathedral Peak behind

Smith Lake lies at the bottom of a huge cirque carved out by a long-gone glacier. The cirque has many lakes, all within an easy day hike. Not only are these lakes absolutely stunning in their beauty, but they are all teeming with trout, thanks, in large part, to Finis Mitchell.

Finis and his wife, Emma, ran what would today be called a dude range, but it wasn't really a dude ranch because it was free. Finis just wanted to show people the beauty of the mountains. In order to increase his friend's success at fishing, Finis started packing fingerling trout up to the mountain lakes. A couple of pack horses, each with two milk cans containing 1,000 fingerlings, was how he stocked over 300 lakes with more than 2.5 million trout.



Finis Mitchell

Smith Lake has the largest, most voracious Mackinaw trout, the nearby lakes each have a unique population of brook trout, golden trout and cutthroat trout. You can eat trout until they come out your ears. When I first started packing in to Smith Lake, it was impossible to get there until after the 4th of July. The snow was simply too deep. However, now, things have changed. The snow is completely melted by late May, sobering evidence of climate change.



Cloverleaf Lake



I returned to Smith Lake in 2021. I had planned a “family trip” but one by one they all bailed out, so I was left alone. The hour-long drive up Trout Creek Road was stirring – seeing all of the old familiar landmarks of the spectacular Wyoming landscape - the deep canyons and panoramic views across the valley far below. Upon



arriving in Dickinson Park, I got out my fly rod and tried my luck in Sand Creek – caught half dozen little brookies in as many minutes. If I was really hungry, they would have made a good breakfast, but I wanted to get on the trail as soon as possible so I tossed them back.



Smith Lake cirque - granite walls and trout filled lakes

I had not seen anyone on the hour-long drive in, nor was anyone at the National Forest campground. Not a soul at the trailhead either. When I signed the trail register, I noticed 2 people hiking a different trail about two weeks ago. I was on my own.

Dickinson Park was a very melancholy experience; all of the important people who I have shared this place with that are now gone. Mom & dad, Jacque, Carol – all dead. The shared experiences – wild animals seen, mountains climbed, trails hiked, fish caught – all memories that were brought back to life by the surrounding trees and mountains. I was nearly brought to tears seeing the meadow where Jacque and I watched a herd of elk years ago.

I started hiking about noon. My lightweight backpack was a real joy to hoist over my shoulders. Previously, I would have to set the pack on a rock, sit down, put the pack on and then stand up. The trail to Smith Lake is a bit less than 6 miles. It surprises me how, over the last 10 years, trails have gotten rougher, rockier, steeper and longer. This trail traverses pretty rough terrain so there are lots of ups and downs, swamps, rocks and not a lot of easy walking. It took me over 3 hours to reach the lake and find a campsite.

After setting up camp it was time to go catch dinner – the highlight of the trip! My favorite fishing spot was a bit over a quarter mile from camp. I grabbed my rod and began walking through the forest. There is a major creek crossing which I managed atop a downed tree. Before I got to my hot spot, I put a Panther Martin on, thinking I never really liked using spinners, never had much luck with them and would not mind losing it if it snagged on the bottom. Sort of a test lure.

I cast out into the lake. Whammo! I got a hit as soon as I started reeling it in. Nice 16" or 17" Mackinaw Trout. I cast again. Whammo! Landed another one. I tossed it out again. Whammo, this time I lost it, but in the course of reeling the lure in, I had two more strikes. I cast again, but my reel snarled and I had to let the lure sink to the bottom as I sorted out the line. When I pulled the line tight, sure enough, it was caught on something and I had to break the line. I decided to put on a big Kastmaster silver spoon, something completely different.



The spoon has barely hit the surface before Whammo! It barely took 15 minutes before I had 4 large trout for dinner. “This isn’t any fun” I thought, “too easy. I’m going to get bored if I don’t have to work any harder than this for dinner.”

I started back to camp. Made the stream crossing without incident but came to a large downed tree. I have a knee that won’t bend much past 90 degrees nor take a lot of weight. So, with several pounds of trout in

one hand and my fishing rod in the other, I found myself slammed on my back. A searing pain shot up my left arm and across my back to my right shoulder. I was scared. This is what I had feared the most – getting injured out here alone. I laid still for a moment assessing the damage. Shoulder hurt really bad but nothing broken. I sat up. The trout were laying nearby, “Where’s my fishing rod?” I thought. There is an outdoor adage that says if your first question is about your equipment, you’re not really hurt that badly.

I have not found a lightweight way to cook trout. I used to carry a gasoline stove, gasoline, large aluminum frying pan, cooking oil and cornmeal to cook trout and they came out perfect. All of the bones of a properly cooked trout can be lifted out by peeling the backbone away from each side. My lightweight solution involved a lightweight aluminum grill and a campfire. It was a disaster. Parts of each fish ranged from overcooked to sushi. And it was such a mess to eat on the disposable paper plates that I brought. I had to go down to the lake and wash my pants in order to remove the fish smell that might attract a bear.

The next day was another warm one – probably about 75 degrees, the last time Barb and I were here it snowed every day. I missed Barb. My shoulder still hurt. So, lonely, sore and bored, I packed up and hiked out.

Avalanches I Have Known

Avalanches are like affairs. Some are quickies; one-night stands. Others... yeah. Others are serious.

“No! Don’t traverse above me!” I shouted to Anna. I knew it was that damned first turn thing – Anna was a good skier, but the first turn is always the hardest when you are scared and she was frightened, skiing thick powder on a steep slope. Last night a couple of feet of wet snow had fallen. She continued the traverse. That’s when I heard the “whoomph” and felt everything starting to move.

There was a popular song about this time *You Can’t Rollerskate In A Buffalo Herd*. That’s what it’s like. You think to yourself – no problem, the snow had not gained much speed so I’ll just point ‘em downhill and ski out of this. But you can’t. The skis just don’t go anywhere as the tumbling snow burbles up around your boots.



*After a cold night in a lean-to
at Tuck's*

This is Tuckerman’s Ravine again. I had returned in the early 70s to take my revenge. I had new Rossignol Strato skis that could really turn and I was determined to do it right. Unfortunately, the weather had other plans. Firstly, although it was spring, it was really cold. We spent the night shivering in our lightweight summer sleeping bags. Then all this new, wet snow was making skiing difficult. We had climbed partway up Hillman’s Highway and then traversed off onto one of the lower snowfields.

Today, avalanche beacons are de rigueur – everyone going into the back country has a set.

Back then, avalanche awareness consisted of 50’ of bright red small diameter nylon cord that you trailed behind you in case you got caught in the hopes that some portion of the cord would float to the surface and you could be found by whoever survives by

following the cord and digging you out. I had not brought my avalanche cord with me.

Quickly realizing that skiing was not going to work, I grabbed a ski pole, gripping it in both hands like an ice axe and dug frantically into the moving snow. I knew that I was near the top of the slide and that the new snow was only a few feet deep. Soon my ski pole hit something solid and the snow slid out from under my feet – a text book *self arrest* with a ski pole! I watched as the slide, about 150' wide, gathered momentum and hit the trees far below. As avalanches go, this was not a real big one, but it was big enough to topple pine trees and could easily have buried a person. Getting buried is bad enough but getting sieved through the trees is way worse. Well, maybe not. Fast vs slow.

When I was skiing in Cortina, I fell in with a group of young German skiers who told me their avalanche survival tale. The entire group of 6 were caught in a big slide. Several were totally buried for about 10 minutes and the youngest for about 30 minutes. The woman telling me this said that the only way she survived was because she could speak to a friend who was also buried nearby. All were found and dug out by their companions who were able to extricate themselves.

I was skiing with Diane in Iran in the springtime. The snow was deep and soft. I skied too close to a little dropoff, caught an edge and pitched off. I landed headfirst in the deep soft snow below. My arms were pinned to my side. All I could do was wave my feet in the air. “Ha ha,” I thought, “I must look like one of those mackerels that the Eskimos catch through the ice and stick in the snow.” (There goes that weird brain stuff again.) Within a fraction of a second it all changed – I could not breathe. I panicked. I had never before, nor since, experienced real panic. I tried to yell, tried to flail my feet in an attempt to wiggle out. Nothing worked. Fortunately, Diane skied up and freed me.

While skiing with a bunch of guys in Val d’Isere, we frequently skied away from the piste. There really is no “out-of-bounds” in Europe. You can ski wherever you like. Nor is there any attempt at avalanche control. Consequently, you had to be very attuned to what is likely to slide and

what is moderately safe. One of our group, Tony, had the nickname “Avalanche” because he was forever kicking off slides on top of us.

One day Tony and I were at the bottom teleferic station waiting for the ride up. The tram was not due for a while so Tony sat down in the sun and leaned up against a cement wall facing up mountain. I was looking up the opposite side of the valley when I saw a big slab of snow let go thousands of feet above. The slab cascaded over cliffs and gathered more snow as it came. It looked like nearly the entire mountainside was coming down. This one was huge.

I ran over and grabbed Tony by his coat collar and said “get up!” Later he told me that by the look in my eyes he thought it was terrorists. So far no one else noticed it. Then the screaming started. We made our way behind one of the cement stanchions supporting the teleferic cables and waited. Soon the air filled with snow. “avalanche smoke” it’s called. You could not see an outstretched hand. The avalanche came down the steep slopes, hit the bottom of the valley, climbed up the opposite side and missed the teleferic station by about 100 yards. It was about 30’ deep where it crossed the road near the station. The entire episode is exactly like the one depicted in the movie *Force Majeure* except that this one was not a controlled slide and it was much, much bigger.



A big one in the movie Force Majeure

For Sale-\$25-Stop Me-No Phone

... said the sign in the rear window of the Opel Kadet. Somebody yelled at me from the sidewalk in Berkeley. "Hop in." I said, "We're headed for the airport." Plan B was just to leave the car parked at the airport, so this put some money in our pockets and solved the problem of big parking ticket.

My old faithful Kadet had taken Diane and me across the US from Michigan. It wasn't in the best of condition. As a typical Michigan car, it was rusted through and through from all of the salt that the road crews dump on the road in the winter to melt the snow. The muffler had fallen off somewhere between Ann Arbor and Wyoming and I had hose clamped a shower curtain rod to the exhaust manifold to keep the exhaust gases out of the passenger compartment and the noise down a bit.

We had just finished our climb of Gannet Peak, the highest summit in Wyoming. It was October in 1974 and it was really cold with nighttime temperatures in the mountains plummeting to minus 30°F. It took us several days of packing to reach the glaciers at the foot of the mountain. A real glacier! With crevasses and everything! We got out the ice axes, ropes and crampons that we had carried in our 60-pound packs and managed a summit between storms. It was exciting.

Now we were headed to the San Francisco airport where we had one-way airplane tickets to Bali, Indonesia. I don't think we had a plan, more like a vague concept. We really wanted to do some mountaineering in New Zealand and neither New Zealand nor Australia would allow you to enter the country without "onward passage."

I handed the keys and the title to the fellow in the airport parking lot and wished him well. He got in the driver's seat and noticed how it rocked back and forth as the foundation was rusted through, noted also that you could see the road between your feet. "It runs great." I said. He handed me the \$25 and we were off.

Fiji

Diane and I arrived in Fiji where her brother was stationed while working in the Peace Corps. Fiji was a wonderful respite from the cold temperatures that we had endured in the Wind River mountains in Wyoming. We swam, snorkeled and lay on the sandy beaches.

I asked Diane's brother if he knew anyone with a boat. "Yeah," he replied, "Charlie has a boat at the yacht club." It doesn't get any better, I thought.

We arrived at Charlie's house early the next day and spent the better part of the morning trying to get the old outboard started. At about 10 o'clock he noted that the wind was up and thus obviated the need the outboard.

As we arrived at the yacht club, I scanned for Charlie's boat among the yachts moored in the slips. We drove behind the clubhouse to a very old wooden sailboat sitting atop a trailer. We hitched up and proceeded to the launch ramp. Charlie was not a terribly adept sailor as I recall several boats trying to maneuver out of his way as we floundered out to sea.

The waters around Fiji are clear and beautiful, full of coral and sea life. As we coasted across the lagoon, I noticed how the coral heads looked pretty shallow. I mentioned this to Charlie. "Naw, no worries." He said, adding something about the clarity of the water, when kerwham! and the boat shuddered to a stop. "Would you pull up the daggerboard a bit?" he asked.

We sailed to a small sandy island and beached the boat. The snorkeling was fantastic – sea snakes, cone shells and all other sorts of interesting sea life that can kill you. After an hour or so of snorkeling, I raised my head to look back at the island and noticed that the tide had come in and the boat was drifting out to sea. Being a heavy old boat, it wasn't drifting very fast and I was able to swim out and sail it back to shore. After a couple of blissful weeks in Fiji, we continued our journey to New Zealand.

New Zealand



Leading through an icefall

The airline tickets that Diane and I bought took us from San Francisco to Fiji to New Zealand to Australia to Bali. Each country required “onward passage” before they would let you in. Bali was the first country that did not have this requirement. The plan (Plan? We don’t need no stinking plan! – my favorite line from *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* “Badges? We don’t need no stinking badges!”) was to get to Bali and wing it from there.

They drive on the left in New Zealand. This changes things in subtle ways – such as which way

to look when you cross the street. My huge pack severely hampered my vision as I stepped off the curb at the airport only to hear the skidding tires of a car on the pavement as I cringed awaiting the impact. I got off lucky.

I love New Zealand. Mountains, surrounded by the sea, a political system that works, a laid-back national attitude...

Diane and I hitchhiked south to Ruapehu National Park. Mt. Ruapehu is a ski resort on a huge volcano. It was springtime and the ski season had ended, but it was interesting to see the signs that read “In case of lava flow – go here.” We spent a couple of days hiking before heading to the South Island where the largest mountains are.

Mount Cook National Park is impressive. The views are dominated by the Southern Alps with Mt. Cook the highest peak at just over 12,000’.

Although 12,000' doesn't sound like much coming from the land of "14ers", you have to consider that these mountains start from sea level, not 10,000' or 11,000' like in Colorado. Add to that the fact that New Zealand is the only obstacle sticking up in the circulation path around the Southern Ocean. This means storms and snow. Lots of snow. Lots of snow means big glaciers.

Diane and I rented skis and took the bus to the Ball Hut at the foot of the Tasman Glacier. New Zealand has a wonderful system of mountain huts. It is much more sophisticated today but back then the huts were basically survival shelters for mountaineers. The huts were equipped with kerosene cooking stoves, a few pots and pans and whatever leftover food other mountaineers have abandoned.

The Tasman Glacier valley is filled with the ominous sound of crashing ice falls. The glaciers here are very active and move several feet a day. The steep sides of the valley are covered with feeder glaciers that are constantly breaking off and crashing onto the main glacier. This can be very disconcerting at first. In fact, "Ball Hut" has been destroyed and rebuilt several times. The hut today is the fourth reincarnation.

The next morning, we packed up and started up the glacier. The glacier was a surprise. Not ice or snow, instead totally covered with rocks and boulders. Although we did not have to worry about crevasses, travel was



Atop the Minerets

difficult because of the uneven terrain, loose rocks and heavy packs. After several miles of packing we reached the “neve”. This is where the surface of the glacier is mostly snow. I roped the skis together to make a sled, piled our gear on and hitched ourselves up like a dog team. This was much easier. That night we slept in our tent pitched on the glacier.

We spent several days skiing the glaciers that fed into the Tasman. Skiing in mountaineering boots was just like the ski equipment of my youth; leather boots and cable bindings.

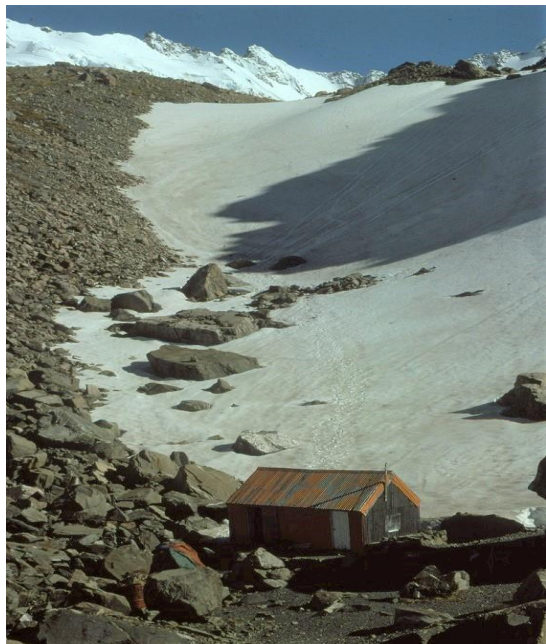
We had a great time. We had about a month’s supply of food, which, together with all of our winter clothing, climbing and skiing kit probably weighed about 90 to 100 pounds for each of us. Consequently, when it came time to move further up the glacier to a mountain hut, we decided to leave the tent pitched where it was and return in about a week.



That might have seemed like a good plan at the time, but when we returned after a week a large crevasse had opened right underneath the tent. As scary as it was recovering the tent, I couldn’t stop thinking about how much worse it would have been if we were in it when the crevasse opened up. The entire episode taught me one of those life lessons – never leave your shit behind.



A storm breaks over the continental divide



The sheltered hut where I watched the roof sway

We spent several weeks skiing, mountaineering and hanging around in the mountain huts. We ended up hanging around a lot because of the incredibly violent storms that frequently blew through. The huts had a large steel cable about 1" in diameter anchored to the rock, strung along the peak of the roof and anchored to a rock at the other end. During one storm I watched as the wind blew so hard that the roof swayed about a foot to one side then came back to center as the

wind relented. This was

happening in a hut thousands of feet below the divide and nestled deep in a gully protected by a moraine on one side and a mountain on the other. One of the peaks that we climbed was the Minerets. It took us 4 attempts, starting each morning at first light, then having to turn back because of bad weather. One time the wind was so strong, I was actually blown off my feet.

After our adventures at Mt. Cook, we trekked and climbed in several other areas of the Southern Alps. All in all, it was a glorious trip.

We hitchhiked everywhere we went in New Zealand. Not only was hitching easy, but it was also a wonderful way to meet the people. We were invited to stay at several homes and thoroughly enjoyed the reserved, low key humor of all that we met.

I have been back to New Zealand twice since then. Jacque and I brought our mountain bikes, rented a car and toured both islands. The mountain biking was pretty rustic, the hiking was great but the people and scenery were fantastic.

Carol and I did a home swap and stayed with a couple in Nelson. The trip was partly to investigate the suitability of New Zealand as a second home in the winter. The thought of the 24+ hours of travel needed to get from one home to another was too onerous to justify the benefits.

Diane and I flew to Australia after leaving New Zealand. We hitchhiked around Australia for a month. We got to see Ayer's Rock and the opal mines. I was saddened by the impression that I got from the Australians that I met. It seemed to me that they regarded their aborigines much like we regarded our Native Americans 50 or 100 years ago.



The Nullabar Plain - so flat you'd think you were a sea

India



subcontinent. The train system was perfect for our needs; cheap, easy and reliable, but extremely crowded (like all else in India). We spent quite a bit of time in Srinagar in the Kashmir district of northern India, even went skiing at Gulmarg. We traveled south and crossed to Sri Lanka (Ceylon) where we traveled to the gem mines in search of cheap rubies. I picked up

Khajuraho Tantric Buddhist carvings get more interesting with each level up

After Australia we flew to Bali on the last leg of our “onward passage”. Bali was a beach lover’s delight but we did not stay long. We got a local flight to Jakarta and caught a “banana boat” steamer to Singapore. From Singapore we were able to get bus / train connections through Malaysia and Burma (Myanmar) all the way to Calcutta (Kolkata).

We spent the next six months touring up and down the Indian



some nice stones, but we discovered that the real riches of Sri Lanka were cloves. If you smuggle a couple of kilograms of cloves out of Sri Lanka into India, you can triple your money. We each bought several kilograms. There were no problems with customs entering India. I was relieved when we got on the train headed north. Sometime after leaving the station, an Indian fellow, approached us, held up a badge and asked us to open up our packs. I protested, saying I could get a badge like his in the bazar. He went on to the foreigners in the next compartment. Suddenly the air was filled with the scent of cloves. Every time I smell cloves, I am reminded of our brief smuggling career.

International Counterfeiter

“Hey Meester, one dollar, fourteen rupees.” I heard the whispered offer from behind me. This was a very good exchange rate in New Delhi back in 1975 but also very illegal. The government-controlled exchange rate was about 9 to 1. I turned around and eyed the Indian fellow. He looked like all the rest; dark, short, somewhat distrustful. “Ok,” I said, “I’ve got \$100.” He led me to a stairway and offered that I should count his stack of bills which were a bit short of the 1400 total. “No problem, give it back and I will add the remainder, meanwhile give me the \$100.” Which I did, but did not see him switch the roll of large denomination bills for a roll of smaller denomination but about the same heft. Furtively, he made the swap, looking over both shoulders for the police (designed to make me nervous) and made off. After returning to the hotel, I realized that I had been duped. Hmmm, I thought to myself, they all look the same to me, I’ll bet we all look the same to them. I got out two \$10 bills, cut the zeros out of one and pasted it to the other, took off my hat, put on a bandana and went back to the same area of the bazaar. It did not take long before I heard “Hey Meester, one dollar, fourteen rupees.” This time I knew what to expect and pocketed the initially proffered roll whereupon he started to protest but I just handed him his “\$100” bill and he went unhappily off. I only wished that I could have seen the result when he took it to the bank.



The Zen of No Expectations



Zoji La - helpers place rocks behind the tires to keep the truck from rolling backwards

overloaded trucks. They would race the engine, pop the clutch and lurch upward a few feet whereupon the driver's helpers would quickly place rocks behind the rear wheels banking the upward progress.

Diane and I had taken a bus over the Zoji La (La means pass) in the Himalayan mountains through Kargil to Leh, the capital city of Ladakh. The road over the Zoji La was a dicey affair, a single lane and very steep. Traffic would be allowed on one direction in the morning and the other direction in the afternoon. This was a road hewn into the mountain by hand. No bulldozers, caterpillars, or earthmovers. Every rock was put there by someone's hands. Here was an economy where every shovel has two operators – one to push on the handle and another to pull on the rope attached to the shovel blade. The steepness of the road was a challenge to many of the

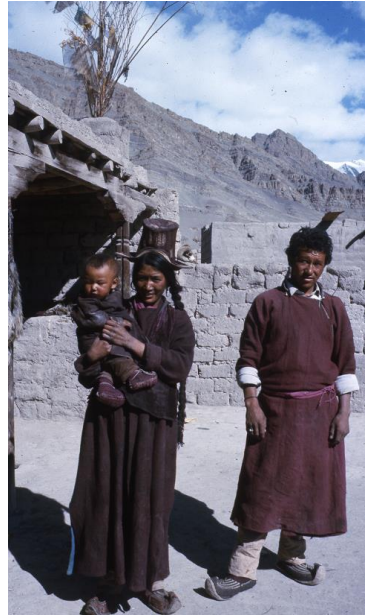


Ladakh is culturally Tibetan. The contrast with India was striking and beautiful. Buddhism is everywhere. Prayers surrounded us; carved into the rocks, flags waving in the wind and spinning prayer wheels. Leh was a city of turquoise, red coral and monasteries.



The women wore jewelry of red coral and turquoise. The men walked slowly spinning their prayer wheels. Prayers were cared on stones bordering the pathways. The monasteries were accessible to all.

After touring the city and the surrounding monasteries, Diane and I packed up and trekked out of the city headed south towards a beautiful mountain called Stok Kangri. The first day was a long trek across the Indus River plain to a small village of Stok. As we walked through the village, a man called to us from a window in his stone hut. Soon he and his wife were beckoning us inside. It was a generous offering because we could only communicate with sign language. After sharing his meal of dahl and chapati, we were bedded down in a room next to his donkey. Well, at least I did not have to set up a tent.



We were off early the next morning, continuing our trek up the long mountain valley. Soon we were beyond the villages and sheep herders. Trekking without the support of a local tour agency is a tough business – you have to organize all of your own supplies, transportation, language, etc. As it was, we stocked up on beans and whatever canned food we could get in the bazaar. After packing up the valley for two more days, we made a base camp at the foot of the mountain. Our climb was uneventful – we got close to the top, but we had to stop when we reached the snow-covered ice near the summit – our climbing equipment; ice axes, rope, crampons had not caught up with us when I shipped the packs from Australia to India.



We hiked down and returned to New Delhi. I can still remember the sign “American Food”. After weeks of eating beans, lentils and other brown mush, I really wanted American Food! I scanned the menu. Pork Chops!!! My mouth watered in anticipation of a pork chop. I ordered a pork chop. Perhaps I did not read the menu carefully, but when the potato patty arrived with a pork bone stuck in one side, I was more than disappointed, I was devastated. But I did learn another one of those life lessons that has served me well – The Zen of No Expectations.



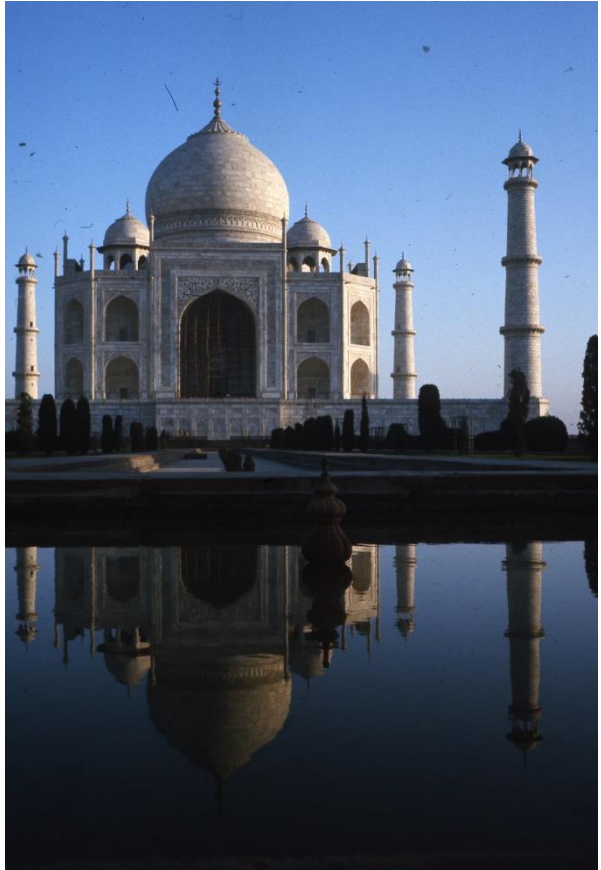
A makeshift car ferry

Touched by God

I have been touched by god. Me! The penultimate atheist. Twice. What was she thinking?!

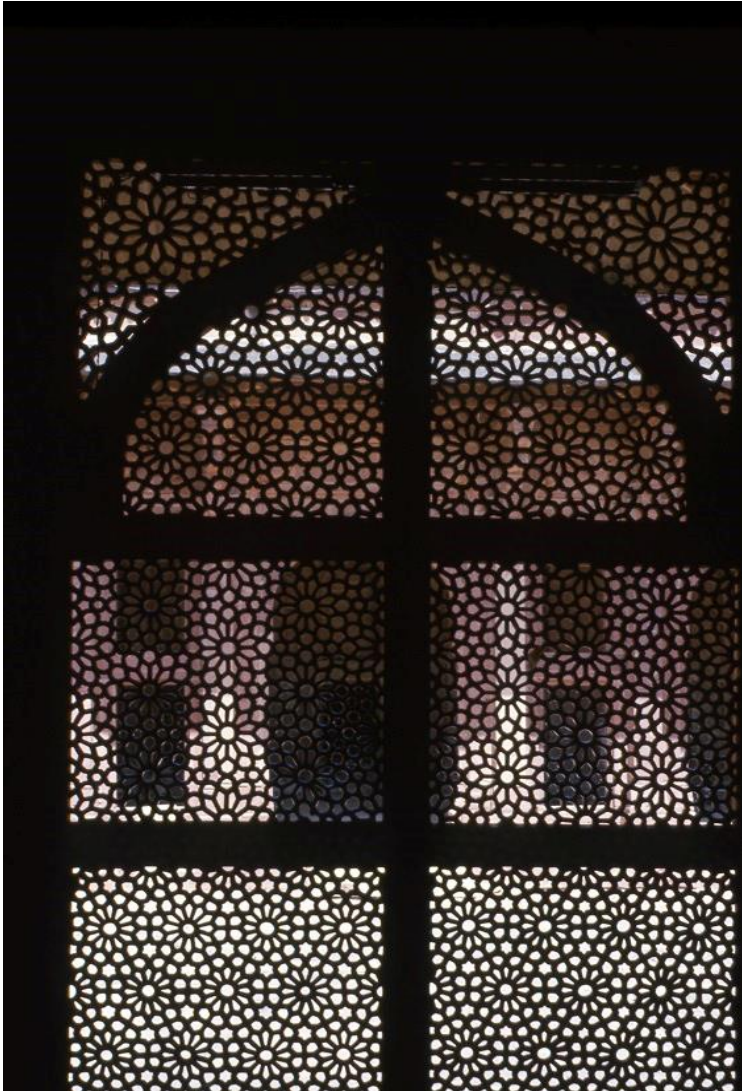
I am standing in the Taj Mahal, the mausoleum that Shah Jahan built out of white marble for his wife (well, W3) Mumtaz Mahal. The 80-foot-high walls are covered in intricate inlaid gemstones. Carved marble screens separate the areas of the main chamber. I am overcome, not just by the incredible beauty of the place, but by the thought of the love that Shah Jahan must have felt for his beloved wife.

Such a powerful emotion, unlike any that I had felt before overcame me. I begin to weep. I cannot stop. "This is really dumb." I think, "Why can't I stop crying?" The emotion was so intense and so unusual that it left an indelible imprint on me. If I did believe in higher powers, I would certainly ascribe my feelings to a direct connection to something far greater than myself.



Shah Jahan's testimonial of love for his wife Mumtaz Mahal

The end of Shah Jahan's story isn't so great. His plans to build himself a black marble mausoleum facing Mumtaz's across the river were nixed when his son staged an uprising and imprisoned him. He spent the rest of his life looking out his window at the resting place of his favorite wife.



A window made of stone, perhaps just like Shah Jahan's prison?

I was struck by nearly the same feeling years later while guiding a group of mountaineers up Pico de Orizaba in Mexico. Dawn had just broken and we were high on the mountain. You could see other volcanoes poking through the clouded valley far below. I had to stop the group and excuse myself as I unroped and took a few steps aside. At 18,000' maybe anoxia played a part in the intensity of the feelings. But, once again, the feelings were so intense and unique that only a god could account for something so powerful.

Republicans are 50% more likely to believe in God than Democrats. The God gene hypothesis proposes that human spirituality is influenced by heredity and that a specific gene, called vesicular monoamine transporter 2 (VMAT2), predisposes humans towards spiritual or mystic experiences. Brain research has revealed that transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS) of the temporal lobes will elicit a feeling of a “presence”. Interesting.

GOD HELMET: This converted snowmobile helmet is credited with generating quasi-spiritual experiences. © Noa Gang & Bryce Mulligan.



Uznu Gol

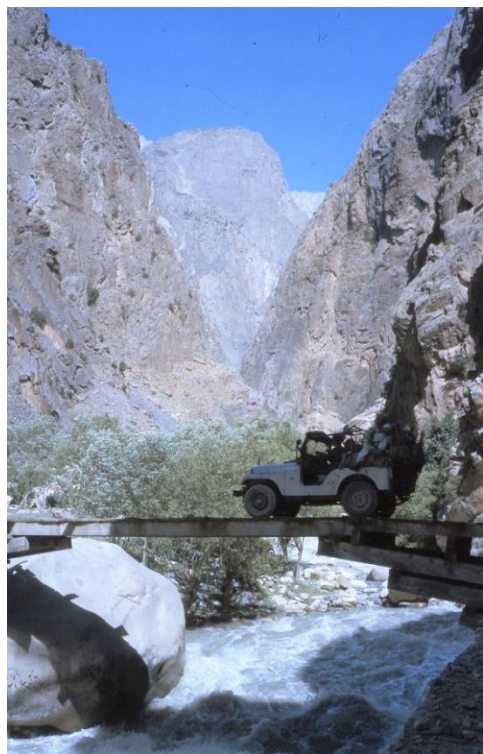
In mountain speak there is a word for it; “extended”. Extended is when you are in trouble far from salvation, without any hope of help, assistance or medical aid. Yer on yer own, kid. This is a story of extended.

Diane and I had journeyed to the Northwest Frontier of Pakistan deep into the Hindu Kush Mountains, home of the fabled Khyber Pass connecting Peshawar to Kabul. The bus ride from the capital Peshawar over the Lowari Pass was memorable because the road crossed a glacier and the bus had to drive across the ice. We were headed for the local capital city Chitral on the Kunar River.

This was (and even more so now) an era of great paranoia. Foreigners were not allowed near the borders; detailed maps were impossible to get and you could get seriously arrested for carrying any kind of map anywhere close to the borders. This border was the Afghanistan border and it was restricted. In fact, this was probably part of Osama Bin-Laden’s escape route in later years. I had obtained some aeronautical charts that showed the terrain in relief, useful for general route finding, but not much help on the details.

The provincial capital city of Chitral was a grim place. The food was bad. On most days, I would buy a chicken in the market and cook it in our grim little room on my camp stove.

I finally found a jeep that was taking passengers up river. Did you know that you can fit 10 people plus all of their gear in a little CJ3 jeep?



*Bridge over a deep gorge of a tributary
of the Kunar River*

You discover the real meaning of resourcefulness in third world countries. The road was so bad that in several places we had to unload so that the jeep, with windshield folded, could sneak under overhanging rocks to proceed. These roads are all hand hewn, no bulldozers. Consequently, the switchbacks are minimal affairs. The short wheelbase CJ3 had to reverse several times to make it around the corners. During the course of the entire day, we made only 75 km (50 miles), but this brought us to our jumping off point – the literal end of the road.

Somehow, I stumbled upon a team of donkeys loaded with rock salt that was going upriver. The rock salt looked more like rocks than salt to me and it was a wonder that

such a trade was economically viable. I had packed a months' worth of food and gear into two burlap bags, each weighing about 100 pounds. Diane and I had minimal day packs with personal gear. The donkey team driver tossed our burlap bags atop a couple of donkeys and we were off. We traveled with the donkey train for 3 days.

The trek north was beautiful. The Kunar gorge is cut deeply into the Hindu Kush to the west and the Hindu Raj Mountains to the east. The journey was interspersed with villages whose manner was very friendly. This was a most welcome change from the neighboring Swat Valley just on the other side of the Hindu Raj Mountains that we had visited a couple of months before. There most of the men were armed and would glare menacingly at us as we walked the streets. I watched as the men kicked

a dog to death and then kicked the carcass off a bridge and into the river. Muslims and dogs, I guess...

Usually, the village elder would greet us with great fanfare. The children would spread a sheet under a mulberry tree and shake the berries down. These would be served with tea



Donkey train carrying rock salt

while sitting on the ground. Although the local language was Khowar, there was never a problem of finding someone who speaks English, a leftover of the British Raj. During these travels, I began to appreciate the expression “The sun never sets on the British Empire.”

When night fell, we would be graciously hosted by someone who offered a roof over our heads, a dirt floor and animals in the next room. In the mornings, Diane and I would climb up the side of the valley. To our embarrassment, we often encountered the villagers taking their morning crap in the irrigation ditches that filtered down to the village and provided the drinking water for the tea that we had been served (more about this to come).

After three days of trekking along the east bank of the river, we arrived at a village across from the mountain peak that I had targeted for our adventure, Tirich Mir (sounds like a Lord of the Rings kinda place, huh?) or one of its environs. There was much discussion about a certain issue – Uznu Gol, but I could not comprehend the exact nature of the problem. I knew the word gol meant steep valley or couloir, but little else. I hired two porters for \$1 per day, handed each of them the 100-pound burlap bags and we were off, Diane and I with our Vibram soled hiking boots and lightweight day packs and they in their injection molded plastic

shoes. The porters looped a horse hair rope around the burlap bags, slung it over each shoulder and held the two loops in front of their chest with a thumb – quick release in case of trouble. They each carried a jacket, a blanket and a small sack of flour atop the bags. We did our best to keep pace, but it was a struggle.



One person at a time over the Kunar River

At the village's edge was a bridge across the river. We had no way of knowing that the bridge would soon be washed away during our month long stay in the mountains. The Kunar River was a big river as it drained the eastern side of the Hindu Kush all of the way from China. There was no hope of fording. The unnamed river that we were following up into the mountains was smaller, but ferociously fast – so fast that you could hear the boulders as they rumbled along the bottom of the river. There was no hope of fording this river either. There was nothing up this valley except the mountains so the paths that we followed with either made by mountain climbers or other wild animals. Cliffs frequently made it necessary to use our ice axes to cut footholds into the river bank or, if we were lucky there would be a snow bridge over the river so that we

could escape to the other side. At night the porters would build a fire under a flat rock, cook their flour into a chapatti then cover the fire with sand and spread their thin blanket over themselves as they lay atop the warm sand.

Two days of trekking along the glacier fed river we came to Uznu Gol. I could see immediately - this was a problem. A steep glacier fed torrent was cutting through the cliffs above cascading all of the way down to the river below. The porters looked at me expectantly. Some distance below I spied a grove of birch trees. I cut down 3 trees with my ice axe, trimmed the branches and hauled them up to the waiting group. I was able to use the three trees to span to a rock mid-stream, but Diane refused to go. I took both our packs and the two burlap bags of gear across the tenuous bridge while Diane and the porters watched apprehensively. Finally, Diane crawled across followed by the porters.

After another day of trekking, we reached the snout of the glacier. From here on, the going was “technical”, meaning that ropes, crampons and ice axes would be needed. I paid the porters and sent them on their way with instructions to return in 30 days, a 50/50 chance at best I thought to myself.

Diane and I ferried the gear by double packing – take half of the gear up, drop it, come back, get the other half... for two days. The going was treacherous – big crevasses, solid ice. But now we were camped and ideally poised to make out summit attempt on a beautiful unnamed mountain peak that we had chosen. The setting was idyllic, camped on a spur of a ridge leading up to the summit alongside the glacier below. That’s when I got sick.

I remembered the village tea as I tried to stand, my wooziness coming in waves as I tried to piss my coke colored urine. Whatever I had (it was probably hepatitis), I wasn’t going anywhere until I got well enough to walk. We had the better part of a month for that to happen, so we waited.

Sick as I was, the location was spectacular. The weather was glorious. Not a cloud in the sky up here. Gazing down the valley towards the Kunar River, we watched as huge thunder heads built up below us. We didn’t think of the bridge over the river or about the birch trees spanning Uznu

Gol or about all of the snow bridges that we crossed on the way up here. After the food ran out, we didn't have many choices. I dumped a lot of the gear, packed a lightweight pack for myself, most of the remaining gear into Diane's pack. She was tough. The going out was bad. There were several technical spots where I had to lead, haul the packs up then belay Diane as she climbed. We made it off the glacier and began the long trek back to the village. The snow bridges that had provided an easy crossing from one side of the river to the other had seriously thinned. I could hear the river rushing under the snow as we tiptoed across. If either of us had broken through... There wasn't a choice. Luckily, the birch trees were still there and I ferried the loads across Uzun Gol. Going downhill, we made good progress.



Remains of the same bridge a month later the Kunar River, I realized how much water had come down the river because the main bridge was gone. We had to trek a couple of miles further to another bridge to cross. After resting a day, the porters packed our gear back to the end of the road where it all started.

We left Pakistan as soon as we got back to Rawalpindi. Jumped on a bus and headed over the Kyber Pass into Afghanistan. Afghanistan was a place of many sights, too bad none are available now and some are gone forever. Don't have too much to say about Afghanistan because I was really sick, but the landscape speaks for itself.



See the donkeys?



*Great Buddha of Bamiyan -
blasted away by the Taliban*



The lakes of Band-e-Amir, notice the small stone structures along the bottom of the natural dam

Inside each is a flour mill. Waterwheels are grinding the grain into flour





*The rushing water drives a horizontal grinding wheel.
The air is filled with flour dust. Ingenuity at its finest.*

Tehran

After the near disaster of Uzun Gol I needed to recover my health. I had lost a lot of weight and needed to stop traveling. Diane and I traveled through Afghanistan and arrived in Tehran. Tehran is the first outpost of western civilization that greets you when traveling from the east. Not anymore, but at least it was back then.

On the bus as we approached Tehran, Diane announced “I am going to expand my social horizons.” (Read: The Boot.)

The streets of Tehran looked like the streets of any modern western city with lots of automobile traffic and nattily dressed women going about their business. Admittedly, if you ventured very far into the bazaars or smaller villages things were different. Women wore headscarves and were seldom seen alone.

Diane and I both got jobs. She found work as an English instructor. I landed a job repairing General Electric X-ray machines working for the Iranian distributor. We had both wanted to work abroad so this was great.

We got an apartment together, just not as boyfriend/girlfriend. Soon life settled down and became routine. Diane started dating Iranian men. She was a hot property; an intelligent, attractive western chick. Repairing X-ray equipment took me to all of the hospitals in Tehran. As a result, I got to meet a lot of nurses. Well, you know nurses...

It turns out you've to watch yourself. Extramarital sex can land in an Iranian prison for 6 to 12 months plus the 100 lashes of the whip. I was young.

I met Saman, the head nurse at the largest hospital in Tehran. She was fluent in English (my Farsi was pretty rudimentary) and we got along well. She was divorced from an abusive husband and had a daughter named Shadii.

I bought a Citroen 2CV or Deux Chevaux (two horses). This little 600cc two-cylinder goofy looking car was quite popular in Tehran at the time. The car was built in Iran and called the Jyane – a Persian word meaning ferocious – just goes to show the Iranians had a sense of humor.

Driving in Tehran was unlike anything I had experienced up to that time. The combination of relative wealth (lots of people could afford cars) and a loose interpretation of traffic laws resulted in chaos. The one, single, overriding, most important traffic rule of all was – don't hit the car in front of you. Other than that, it was all good.

The Alborz Mountains formed the northern edge of the city of Tehran. From the edge of town, you could ride a chairlift up to a teahouse then strike off on your own. There were lots of rock climbing opportunities on top grade rock.

Skiing in Iran (Skiing in Iran??!!) was some of the best I have ever experienced. High altitude desert powder snow. So light that you would sink up to your belly and the snow would break over your shoulders as you skied through it.

I had ridden up to Shemshak, my favorite ski resort, with a group from Tehran. One of the group, John, approached me.

“If you teach me to ski, I will teach you karate.”

I discovered John was a former karate instructor for the Israeli Military Special Forces. OK – this could be interesting.

Actually, it was fun, a good excuse to go to the dojo, train for a couple of hours and work up a sweat. John was a good instructor and became a close friend.

After about a year, Diane left. She was kinda messed up – the business of dating Iranian men had not worked out as she had hoped which resulted in a negative impact on her psyche. (“You can take the men out



of Iran, but you can't take Iran out of the men" she would subsequently say).

I remained in Tehran as the Iranian Revolution gained momentum. I was well aware of the SAVAK – Shah Pahlavi's notorious secret police. Actually, Saman's last name was Tajbakhsh, which translates "to give back the crown". She was the granddaughter of last Shah of Iran who was overthrown in 1941. Consequently, her family was a target of the SAVAK. She described how her father had been taken away in shackles with a hood over his head in the middle of the night and returned days later.

As fall of the second year approached, I started planning to leave. I knew that Saman wanted to get out of Iran so I offered to marry her. I had a very libertarian view of all governmental intrusions into my personal life, so to me, this was just one friend helping another. I was careful to explain to her that this was only a "paper marriage" which I believe she understood. So, we went to a mullah and said "ashhadu anna la ilaha illallah" and we were married.

Time Stands Still

“Yikes! That hurts!” I feel a stabbing pain in my left calf. “Focus! Right now, you’ve got bigger problems to deal with.” This entire, fully formed thought pops into my head. I am in the air, but this is not pretty air. This is serious hospital air. Spread-eagled, upside down, feet way over my head. How can the brain come up with a complete assessment of the situation, express so eloquently and inform you in milliseconds? They say time slows down. It does.

I had left Tehran in the fall of 1977 laden with my backpack and skis. Tehran had been fun. The Alborz mountains abutted the city where hiking and rock climbing beckoned. The skiing was fabulous – dry desert powder snow, sometimes hip deep. Although the Shah Pahlavi was a progressive ruler, his secret service, the SAVAK was a rightfully feared organization.

Fun as it was, the time spent working for an Iranian firm repairing X-ray equipment was not. So, when it came time to leave, my choice was to take a bus through Turkey or fly to Munich. Fed up as I was with Islamic anti-feminist moral codes, I flew. I had wanted to ski in Europe and had had my fill of third world travel, so instead of busing through Turkey, I copped out and caught a 747 flight to Munich. The demonstrations against the Shah had begun but he was still very much in power so I was able to sell my little Citroen 2CV, a smaller version of a slab-sided VW beetle with a 2-cylinder air-cooled front engine and get my money out of the Tehran bank. In all this I was very lucky. My good friend John had to literally fight his way onto the same flight several months later. He was not so fortunate and had to abandon his savings, car and anything he couldn’t carry on the plane.

Diane had left Tehran several months before. I landed in Munich with my backpack fully loaded with all of the mountain climbing gear that I had lugged with me, checked into a downtown hotel, went up to my room, unlocked the door and nudged it open with my foot. I instantly realized that I had put way too much enthusiasm into the nudge and that the door

was going to slam into the wall. With the large pack on my shoulders, I could do nothing to stop it. I cringed as the door swung rapidly towards the wall.

Clink – the smallest sound echoed as the door hit the perfectly placed doorstep. I cannot describe the feeling that washed over me – I had finally arrived back in civilization! They got it right. Ever since leaving Australia, I had not been in a single bathroom where the plumbing wasn't askew or the facets didn't leak or the sinks weren't wobbly. It is hard not to feel superior when you are traveling in poor countries. It was such a welcome relief to see that little doorstep.

I discovered that a used car selling event was taking place on Saturday on the outskirts of town in a large dirt lot. I looked at a nice Porche 911 for \$1,200, but knew that I could never import it to the USA because of the newly enacted EPA requirements. I was drawn to a very nice little Opel Kadet – exactly like the one that I had left at the San Francisco airport a couple of years ago, only this one was in much better condition. \$500 and I was on my way.

With nothing to do the next day, Sunday, I headed south into Austria for a day of skiing. Upon my return, the line of cars at the border was so long that they opened the border and we all drove through. It did not occur to me how lucky I was.

The next morning there was a muted knock on my door and I opened it to find, to my surprise, the previous owner of the car. The kindest fellow –with hand gestures and a few words in German he convinced me to follow him. Ah! registration and insurance – details I had not really thought much about (none required in Tehran). I went skiing again in Austria the next day, but upon reaching the German border that night, I was taken aback when the guard demanded in a stern voice “zee papers for zee car, pleez!”

I headed for the Otztal Valley in the Austrian Tyrol. I was skiing by myself, skiing fast through a forest of oak trees when my ski tip nicked a tree. There are some falls that you can see developing and prepare yourself for. This one was not one of those. It was instant. Suddenly I was upside down and airborne. I tumbled to a stop, fortunately not caused

by a collision with an oak tree. I skied down to the lift having forgotten about the pain I felt while flying through the air. As I was getting on the lift, the lift attendant pointed to my boot and I saw that there was a trail of blood dripping down the back of my leg and onto the snow.

What had happened was that I had stabbed myself in back of my left calf with my ski pole while I was flying upside down, a scar I still have today, a perfect match for the other leg where I stabbed myself with the front points of my crampon in New Zealand. Anyway, I skied down to assess the damage. First, I went to the first aid station to get some bandages and antiseptic. I don't remember why I did not let them take care of it, but I decided to do it myself. In my rented room, I got my pants off, dumped antiseptic on my little finger and ran it in to the second knuckle before I got sick.

The next day I could barely walk, let alone ski, so I decided to head for Italy. I drove to Venice to spend a few days recuperating. Venice in the winter is pretty grim. Rainy, gray, not to mention lonely. I was missing Saman, Jasmine and Fahtia. I didn't miss Diane much. We had kind of a falling out not long before she left. How can you have a falling out with someone you aren't sleeping with? Although we had not been lovers since arriving in Tehran, we had been living together. Diane had been dating several Iranian men and I had struck up a relationship with these Iranian women. One day Diane got really angry at me. Jealousy? Later, back in the USA, she admitted that her relationships with Iranian men had "messed with her mind."

After a few days of healing (god! I wish I was young again!) I was able to walk so I headed for Cortina. Cortina was one of the most beautiful resorts – high, steep mountain, lots of snow, not to mention the Italian women. I got to know a small group of German skiers who gave me the nickname Stein und Steil – steep and rocks. This seemed to be their appraisal of the routes that I proposed. However good I was, there were skiers there who were much better. Their ski tracks down the narrowest and steepest of couloirs, barely a ski length wide still makes me shiver.

One quiet, windless night it snowed. When it came time to dig out the car, the parking lot looked like a collection of lumps. Several feet of snow had fallen during the windless night. I dug out the front of the car, managed to squeeze in the door and popped it out of its embrace in the snow.



After Cortina I headed west across Italy with the intention of entering France. I learned the French word for closed when an emphatic attendant at a gas station crossed his fingers in front of my face and shouted



“ferme” to indicate that the pass that I was inquiring about was closed. I guess I had been kinda dense about catching his meaning up to that point.

I drove to Val d’Isere, a big resort consisting of a series of valleys off the main valley. At the foot of each smaller valley is a village (or was – it is probably one big town by

now). Skiing in Europe is not like skiing here. Here you go up, you ski

down. There you go up and then bop along to the next lift which will take you over the ridge to the next valley where wine and cheese are served at the way stations in between. Very not goal oriented.

I found a bunch of English-speaking skiers who had rented a chalet for the season and moved in. This was at the very top end of the valley with the best powder snow. We had lots of simply fantastic powder days. There was Tony, the Australian, Chris, the Canadian together with his brother Steve who was “in training” (for what, I never discovered) and Eric the New Zealander. Crazy Eric we called him. A group of English skiers hired Eric one day to “inspire” them. They didn’t pay him, but instead supplied lunch which meant unlimited wine. Eric took a blind jump only to discover that the landing was a boulder field. He showed us the x-rays – you could see a crack in his skull going from the front all the way over the top. End of season for Eric.

The chalet was located in the uppermost village in the Val d’Isere chain of villages across from a teleferic (gondola) station. You could see the ski snowfields far up the mountain, the pistes leading down through a band of cliffs just below treeline and a distinct couloir with a dog-leg turn cutting through the cliffs. I could see that couloir every morning from my bedroom. It wore on me.

The Dog-Leg Couloir



I'm on my back, sliding downhill headfirst and gaining speed fast. I look over my left shoulder and see the low hanging branch of a pine tree. "No problem" I thought, "just like Tuckerman's Ravine back in '66." It's that damn brain thing again – how can you have these complex and coherent thoughts in the fraction of a second before disaster? In my mind, I clearly saw the branch that saved me ten years before and I knew this branch would save me now. The branch came up fast. I reached. I grabbed. The branch broke off in my hand. I went over the cliff clutching a sprig of pine tree.

My nickname in Val d'Isere was "Couloir" because I loved skiing the steep narrow clefts in the mountainside. I don't recall exactly what drew me to Val d'Isere, but I ended up sharing a chalet with a bunch of expatriates. The chalet was located in the upper end of the Val d'Isere valley, a small village called Le Fornet. I could see the couloir from the window of the chalet. It cut through the lowest band of cliffs on the other side of the valley below the ski runs. It was forested above and below. I could see it was going to be tricky, not only narrow and steep, but it had a bend in it – sort of like a dog's hind leg. The couloir traversed the cliff at about a 45-degree angle down and to the right before it turned and went straight down. It sort of gave me butterflies looking at it. It was one of those things that you know you have to do, but don't really want to.

It was late in the season; in fact, I had decided it was the last day. Today was my last chance to ski this damned thing. It looked hard. It had been bugging me for a month as I looked at it out of my bedroom window from the chalet across the valley at Val d'Isere. The couloir cut through a band of cliffs quite low on the mountain, so to get to the top, you had to go off-piste, enter the forested lower slopes and find it. I had taken pretty good bearings so I lined up the landmarks I could see on the opposite side of the valley and entered the forest. I was skiing alone.

Route finding is always a challenge. Although I could clearly see the couloir from the chalet, all I could see from above was the forest. But by lining up a couple of landmarks, I found my way through the untracked snow, through the trees and nailed to the top of the couloir. I felt proud. I knew there was no going back – too much uphill through deep snow and this was the only break in the cliff that I had seen. It really did not

occur to me then, but only as I write this, that I was not just alone, but was way off piste in an area where no one skis and if something bad happens, I would not be found until springtime. It wasn't like I was seeking danger or being macho – it just didn't enter my mind.

I looked down and studied the challenge. The couloir was narrow, about two or three ski lengths wide. That was not going to be a problem; I was comfortable making jump turns. The route cut across the cliff face at an angle for about 100 feet and then angled straight down – the dog-leg.

Ok, ready. First step is always to kick loose any snow that is going to avalanche as you start to ski. I did. I kicked the snow loose – there was always an avalanche waiting when skiing “off piste”. The ensuing slide exposed a hidden surprise - a rock dead center in the couloir before it turned and went straight down. “Ok, still doable, just don't hit the rock.” I thought. “Can't hit the rock.”

I started down, good turns. I hit the rock. The tails of my skis scissored and instantly spun me around. I am on my back, head pointed downhill, headed for the edge. I grabbed the branch but it broke off and I went over. It was a steep cliff, so I didn't bounce off any rocks as I flew through the air.

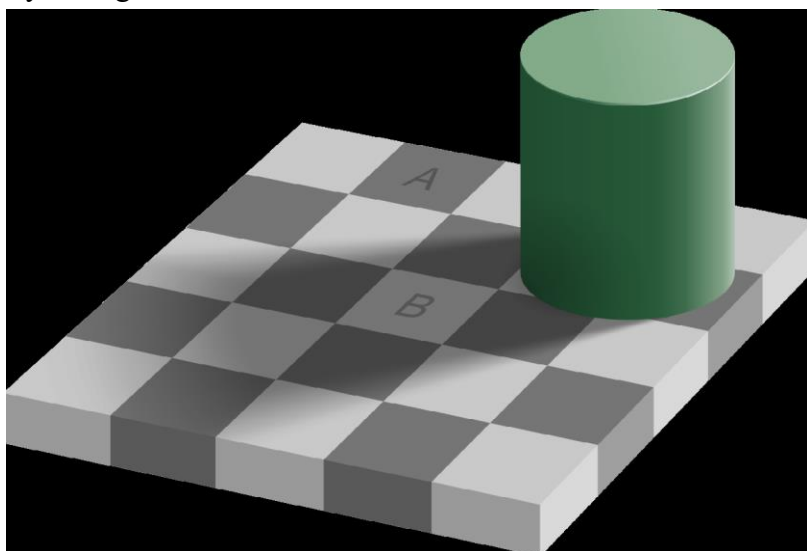
There was probably about 50' of air before I hit the snow at the bottom of the cliff. It was steep spring snow so there was no real impact, but instead of plunging into a hole and stopping I was catapulted into the trees. I started cart wheeling. It seemed like it would never end. I remember thinking, “Boy, I'm sure going fast.” I saw the trees flashing by. Trees are hard on skiers. I am, to this day, amazed that I did not pile into a tree but eventually I stopped tumbling. I took stock; ski pole bent in half, one ski binding missing, one ski bent, one ski boot sole hanging on for dear life, ski pants blown out in front. Me? I was fine, in fact, I was jubilant – now I would not have to haul all my ski equipment home! Yep, today is the last day of the season.

I'll Believe It When I See It

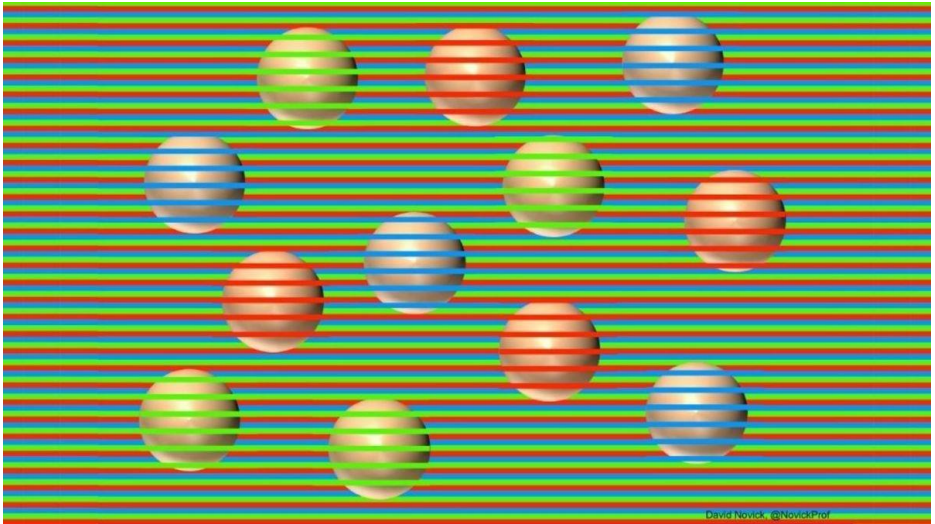
I am fascinated by the human brain. I can spend hours on Wikipedia digging down the rabbit hole of brain research. I suppose this might be because of my background in computers and my tendency to liken the brain to a computer.

“I’ll believe it when I see it with my own eyes!” Did you know that you don’t really see with your eyes?! It’s your brain that does the “seeing” and we all know about the vagaries of the human brain. Your brain “interprets” what the eyes sense. Sometimes your brain gets it all wrong. This forms the basis for optical illusions. Here is some of my favorites:

The squares “A” and “B” are exactly the same shade of gray. “No! They are not!” shouts your brain. “First of all, there is the alternating light/dark pattern to consider and besides that, the one in the shadow must be lighter because there is less light falling on it.” Well, your brain has had ____ (fill in your age here) years of experience with patterns and shadows, so it knows what it knows. But in this case, your “eyes” are totally wrong.

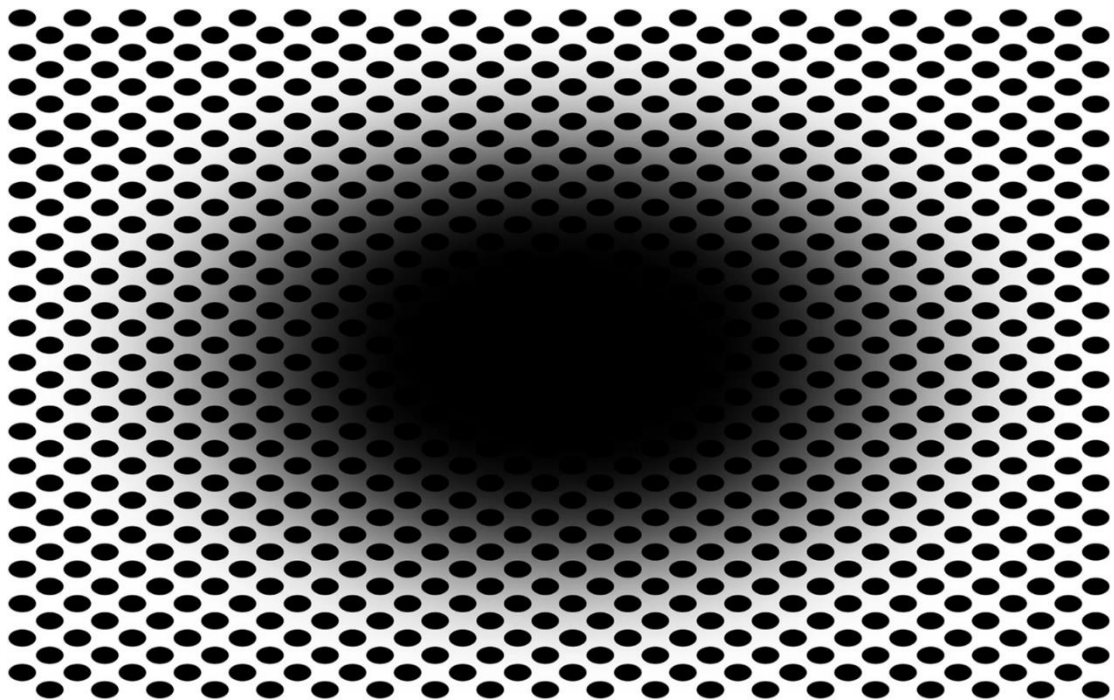


Twelve green, orange and purple spheres? Nope. They are all the same shade of light brown.



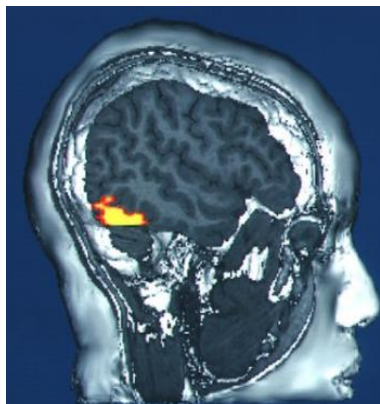
These are two examples of "Simultaneous contrast illusions", a wide-ranging group of deceptive illustrations that trick people into thinking specific parts of an image are different colors from one another, when in reality, they're the same color. The effect rests on the illustrator altering the brightness or color in the background, in order to alter our perception of objects in the foreground.

The next one is a little more sobering. Starring at the "black hole" creates the impression that the black mass is expanding. But the illusion also causes most people's pupils to dilate. I find this sobering because not only is your brain misinterpreting the information, but is actually causing a physical response in the body.



The fundamental fact is that you “see” with your brain. This forms the basis of endless moral, ethical and philosophical discussions that can entertain me for hours.

Here’s another one – depending on the underlying cause of their blindness, some blind can actually “see” but not be aware of it. So maybe Kwai Chang Caine’s blind master Po is not so unbelievable. Check out “blindsight” discovered in the 70s.



*Fusiform gyrus involved
in facial recognition*

Norm Chomsky proposed the concept of brain modules; language, eyesight, mapping our environment, facial recognition... My map module has always served me well. But, ah, prosopagnosia, the inability to recognize faces. That's a module in my brain that needs a major improvement. I am seriously impaired by my inability to recognize people unless I have been exposed to them repeatedly. I recognize

voices, hair styles, noses and eyebrows – all of the components of a face, but not the face as a whole.

This has caused me endless embarrassment as I am frequently assaulted by a stranger at our local grocery store with a bright cheery “Hi Steven.” I look desperately at the stranger’s face in hope of recognition. Nope. None. Zero.

“Hi!” I reply with equal cheeriness, hoping the next sentence will offer a clue.

“How’s Barb?” the stranger inquires. Ah! Knows Barb. That only complicates matters because now all of Barb’s friends are potential matches.

“Oh, she’s good – doing a lot of hiking these days.” I reply.

“Yeah, Jill and I went out with Paws yesterday on the Colorado Trail.”

More clues – “Paws” is probably a dog, wife/partner Jill. Ahha! Jack!

Brad Pitt has the same problem. As he put it;

“So many people hate me because they think I’m disrespecting them,” he told Esquire. “So I swear to God, I took one year where I just said, ‘This year, I’m just

going to cop to it and say to people, Okay, where did we meet?’ But it just got worse. People were more offended.”

This impairment has hindered my social life throughout my life, but now, in my later years, I just say fuck it and fess up that I don’t do faces and that I am at a total loss as to who the hell you are.

Poison

I returned to the USA after skiing in Europe. I spent the summer backpacking in the Wind River Range of Wyoming, mostly alone although Saman did come visit from Iran for a month. I came back to Michigan in the fall to get ready for the ski season at Jackson Hole, Wyoming. I had been skiing at Jackson Hole several times in the past, knew what a great area it was and was very eager to return for an entire season. I spent the fall in the woods on my parent's property. There is nothing like the woods in the fall. These woods are about 50% pine and 50% hardwoods so the color is spectacular. The understory is damp leaves or pine needles so your footfalls are quiet and soft. Very nice for running, which I enjoyed.

Also, very good for sneaking. I shot a young whitetail deer and butchered him up into about 50 pounds of meat which I froze. I built a wooden box that would hold all of the meat and mounted it on the roof of my old rusted VW bug.

My friend Tony ("Avalanche" in Val d'Isere) flew in from Australia to join me for a month or so of skiing. It was probably mid-October when we headed out west. We didn't get very far. It started snowing around Chicago and by the time we were in Nebraska the car was having a hard time plowing through the snow. In the middle of the night, I pulled off on a country road and we both got out our sleeping bags. Tony stayed in the car, but I wanted to stretch out so I laid down on the ground in my down sleeping bag. I was soon covered with snow. After a while, a friendly local saw the car stopped in the field and got out to investigate. He saw Tony in the front seat and knocked on the window. This woke me up and I sat upright shedding a layer of snow. This must have been a sight because the poor fellow let out a quite a howl. After I assured him that all was good, he offered to let up sleep on his porch, but we were both warm and wanted to get going as soon as the roads were clear in the morning, so we resumed the snowy night. The morning dawned cold but the roads were plowed so we set off.

We drove to Denver where I had left the Dodge van. We picked up the van and proceeded in the continuing snowstorm to Jackson. The driving was tough. The plan was to live in the van. After all, I had a catalytic heater that had always served me well keeping the car heated while staying at California ski resorts. Well, the van was a lot bigger than a station wagon and Wyoming is a lot colder than California. The first



manages 1,000'. Second, I am convinced that Jackson Hole invented the double black diamond. It meant danger. I get a kick out of the posers that I hear in the ski lodges today "Where's the double black diamond runs?" At Jackson Hole a double black diamond meant that you could get seriously killed dead if you blew

morning we woke up to find that the heater had melted a small circle of frost on the ceiling, but the inside temperature was only about 20 degrees. Wrestling ski boots on is always a hassle. Wrestling frozen ski boots on can be impossible. This wasn't going to work. We found the Outlaw Motel and booked a room. I forgot the price, but it was the cheapest one in town.

The skiing at Jackson Hole is unique. First of all, the mountain boasts over 4,000' vertical feet. Our local hill here in Salida, Monarch Mountain, barely



it. Like at the top of Corbett's Couloir where your ski tips touch nothing but air as you strain forward to check out the 15' drop into the narrow couloir.



Lastly, Jackson Hole is cold. Really cold. The coldest it got when I was there was 63 below zero. Everything froze. The roads were cleared of snow, but retained a layer of frozen snow all winter. I watched in amazement as cars drove by with frozen front wheels, steering like bobsleds. During the day, the temperature rose to 40 below. There was usually a

wind at the top and you had to be very careful to watch for frostbite. It would take only a couple of minutes before a spot of white skin would appear on someone's cheek or the side of their nose.

With acres and acres of lightly wooded terrain a powder dump would last for a week. You could always find some untracked snow. The bumps were fantastic; big and steep. I recall relaxing in the bathtub one night and looking in amazement at my legs – what muscles!

I broke six pairs of skis that year.

Tony and I skied for a couple of





months then he headed back to Australia. After Tony left, my friend John from Tehran joined me.

About this time, I met Christa. I was nosing around the town's bookstore one evening and she came over and in the sexist German accent, offered to help. Now the Outlaw Motel was not the greatest setup

for romance. Not only was it a dive but with your roommate is the bed next to you, it seriously constrains your options. Add to that the neighbors. One night the next guy next door was banging on the walls and came over to start a fight. John sorted him out in no time at all but Christa took mercy on us and offered that we should move in with her. She had a very nice home which she shared with her two sons; Misha and Nicholas. We were in Fat City.

Christa was a serious alcoholic. This was the first time I had ever known an alcoholic and it took me quite a while to catch on. Even though she was obviously quite fond of me, she would disappear in the evenings out to the bars and return late at night very drunk. I tried to talk to her about it but her reply was “because I like it”. Hard to argue with that.

After the winter was over, I returned to Michigan to get all of my belongings and move back to Jackson Hole permanently. I had the trailer packed and hitched, gave Christa a call and said “I am on my way love-of-my-life” whereupon she replied “Well...”

That was the story of Christa. I called her Poison. Later she would call me from wherever to announce that she was coming to see me. I would dump whoever I was seeing at the time and she would never show. Poison, but wow, what a purely chemical attraction. This is what convinced me that there are really such things as pheromones.

Poor Christa. I used to say that she was happiest when she was sad. I returned later in the summer to pick up the van that I had left parked in her yard only to discover that she had sold it, using the proceeds, she said, to pay for her stay at the Betty Ford Alcohol Abuse Center. Although the treatment worked for a while, Christa found other substances to abuse. She became a nurse which gave her access to the drugs that she found she could not resist.



Deadly Poison

The Volcanoes of Mexico

After ski season at Jackson ended, I decided to visit my parents. They had built a nice retirement home on the 80 acres adjacent to my grandmother's farm which meant that the cottage was unoccupied. My father announced that he was giving me the cottage. "Consider it yours" were his exact words.

Now my father and I had not been on the best of terms since he threw me out of the house back in the days of the draft. They even went so far as to remove me from their will. At some point they reversed this decision, but I don't know when.

"So, who pays the taxes? I asked in an attempt to clarify exactly what he had in mind.

"Why, you do" he replied.

"And who pays the insurance?"

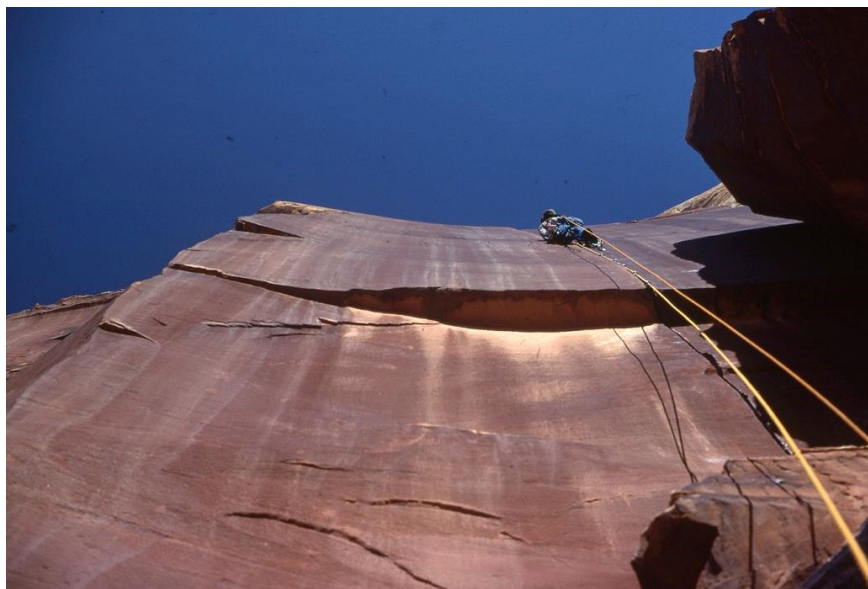
"You."

"So, what about a title to the property?"

"Oh, no no no. We can't break up the 40 (acres)."

I packed up the trailer, hitched it to the Gremlin and started back west. At first, I thought I was heading to Jackson Hole, but Christa put the kibosh on that, then I got a letter from Diane in Denver who said "You had better come visit me." This took me by surprise as we had not left Iran on particularly good terms. I did not have high hopes when I met her in Denver, but as one thing led to another, I ended up moving in with her.

Diane was sharing a house with a woman named Kathy. Kathy's boyfriend was George. Turns out George was a really good rock climber. Although I had been rock climbing for several years by this time, good climbing partners are hard to find, so I had developed a system of solo climbing using ropes – not like the free solo of today without any safety equipment. I was elated to find someone who wanted to climb especially someone more experienced.



We would kiss the girls goodbye as they headed off to work, load up our gear and go climbing. I think George liked climbing with me because I could follow him up anything. When I got to something I could not surmount, I just yelled “tension!” and climbed the rope hand over hand. Although this is cheating by rock climbing standards, it beats having your partner wimp out on you.



Leading a thin crack in the era of pitons

George was the founder and owner of Rock and Ice magazine, the premier climbing magazine of the times. I was honored to have found such a talented climbing partner and good friend. Although my climbing skills were not nearly up to the level of George's, we made a good team. His forte was free climbing (climbing only the rock, using the gear only for safety). George could free climb about 5.11. Mine was aid climbing – I could engineer my way up anything, just put in some “pro” (protection; nuts, pitons) and hang on it. I could lead a free climb of about 5.9 on a good day.

Meanwhile Diane started an adventure travel company. This was at a time when adventure travel was a novel idea. Diane would lead backpacking trips to Alaska and would enlist me to lead mountaineering trips. One of the most successful trips was climbing the volcanoes of Mexico; Popocatepytl and Pico de Orizaba (18,500'). I got a few gigs as a rock climbing instructor as well. When winter came, I got a season pass at Winter Park and spent the winter sleeping in my car and skiing Mary Jane. All in all, it was a great illustration of my axiom “...time and no money (because I didn't have a job) or money and no time (because I did)”.



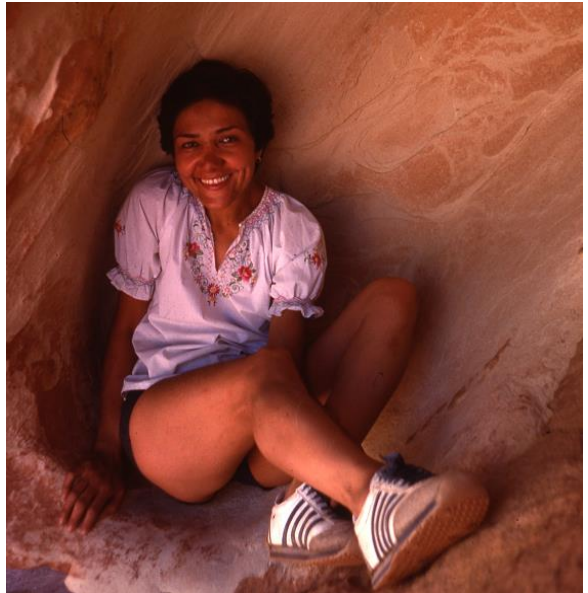
Shadow of Pico de Orizaba at sunrise

During this time, I was living in the projects in Denver. This was low cost housing for low income people. The neighbors were quiet and rent was low – not bad.

Saman joined me that summer from Iran for a sort of “trial run”. We spent the summer together hiking, backpacking and traveling around Colorado. Saman had suffered a tragic fall while hiking in Iran that left her with a serious fear of heights so rock climbing was not in the cards. We had fun. Saman went back to Iran and returned with her 5-year-old daughter Shadii. Saman had her Green Card and Shadii enrolled in school. Things were going smoothly until the Iranian revolution boiled over in 1980 with the seizing of the American Embassy. Saman said “My people need me.” then packed up and left. Predictably, it did not work out well for her. Not long after returning to Iran, she emigrated to Germany where the Iranian ex-patriot community is stronger with better government support programs (Germany and Iran have a long history).

I was peeved. In my opinion, she threw away an opportunity and I was left with a runaway wife. I filled out some paperwork, “abandonment” being a keyword, presented it to a judge and in less than two minutes, W2 was history.

Saman - granddaughter of Reza Shah who relinquished the crown in 1953 to the democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh, who the CIA deposed in 1953 and installed Shah Pahlavi.



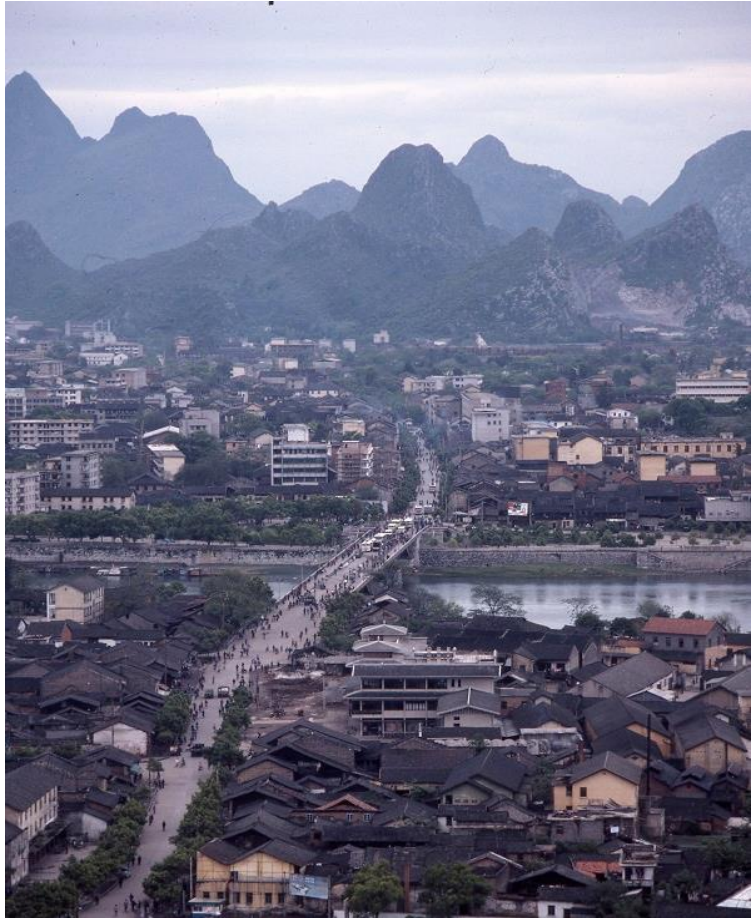
China



Part of an astronomical instrument

China opened its borders to independent travel in 1984. Diane and I decided to go. It was going to be a quick trip as our time was limited; I was starting Vesta and Diane was starting her business as a Personal Financial Planner. There were still a few obstacles, for example, you could not get a visa in the USA. We flew to Hong Kong to get visas. Actually, we flew on Korean Air Lines flight 007, the same one that was shot down by Russian jets less than a year earlier. I don't remember much about the flight other than there were so few people aboard that we could both put down the armrests and lie down across the row of seats.

We spent a couple of days shopping in Hong Kong then crossed into China. As we were leaving Hong Kong, I glanced back at the skyline and could not help but think of the huge changes in store for the people and businesses that would be happening in 15 years – the return of Hong Kong to the government of China. It had only been 8 years after the Cultural Revolution ended and China was still a very underdeveloped country.



City of Guilin on the Li River

One of the first places we visited was Guilin. This is a particularly picturesque city on the Li River. The Li River winds its way through a mountain range of Karst limestone. The result is a sort of fairyland of inaccessible mountain peaks shrouded by clouds with waterfalls shooting out of the sides of the mountains. I had seen many Chinese prints depicting this sort of landscape but I had always assumed it was imaginary. Not so.

We went to Beijing to see the Great Wall and other sights. Beijing was very interesting; there were virtually no cars. Instead, there were millions of bicycles. There were bicycle jams. There were bicycle accidents. It was funny to see young women pick up their bikes after a collision and angrily go “neh, neh, neh” to each other. The air was clear. My old standby “the sun never sets on the British Empire” did not apply to China. English speakers were few and far between.



Real steam powered choo-choo trains

My lasting impression of China was one of admiration. Diane and I had spent 6 months in India, another third world country of high population density. India required constant vigilance, you had to keep your eye on your belongings and be aware of all money transactions. I was amazed and humbled when, on two different occasions, shopkeepers chased me down in the street to give me more change after a purchase. I went away with a deep love of China and a strong desire to go back. However, so much has changed since then that I am certain that I would be disappointed today.





Guard dog





Returned to China in 1999

Jacque

One day I went to the tennis courts to hit against the wall. I was banging away next to an old fellow who had the sagging face of an alcoholic when a couple of hot chicks showed up and started unpacking on a nearby tennis court. Geeze came over to me and said “Wanna see if those two girls would like to play doubles?” “Ok” I said somewhat apprehensively.

Never saw Geeze again, but that’s how I met Jacque. She was a gem. Besides tennis, she was a skier and biker with a very adventurous spirit. I introduced her to rock climbing. Rock climbing is a sport that, by definition, places you in the most spectacular environments. We began a life of adventures together. After about a year, we got married. George was my best man.



My first sailboat and my first girlfriend

Somewhere back in my childhood I developed a fondness for sailing. I used to dream of sailing a 26’ sailboat across the Pacific Ocean. Back then, a 26’ sailboat was considered “ocean-going”, now the minimum is 40’. My father and I built an 8’ small sailing pram when I was in high school. It was great fun. I vividly remember the cold spring day with a brisk wind blowing when I asked myself “I wonder if I can put the gunwale under the water - just for a second?” Remember when I told you about when your brain screams “Mistake!”? Well, that was one of those moments.



When I proposed that we rent a “bareboat” and go sailing in the Caribbean, she was all for it. Bareboating is when you rent the boat without a crew. Anyway, I realized that no bareboat company would rent to me because I did not have any experience sailing larger sailboats. I bought a 22’ sailboat which we proceeded to sail in the lakes around Colorado. After a couple of years of adventures and misadventures, I sent my

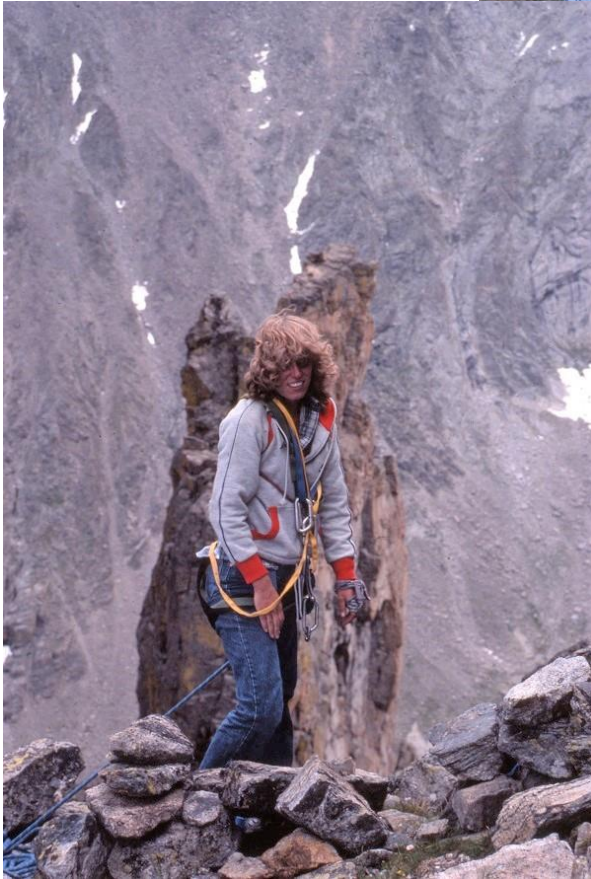
“sailing resume” off to a bareboat rental company in the Virgin Islands. Not only does the captain have to submit their sailing resume, but all of the crew was well. Many of the questions surrounded the vitally important skill of anchoring. Jacques’ response was “when he says ‘let it go’, I let it go. When he says ‘pull it up’, I pull it up.” I still chuckle.



We loved bareboat sailing. We sailed in Florida, the Virgin Islands, Belize, Antigua, Barbuda and Guadalupe. The deserted endless sandy beaches were so romantic. Several times the natives would paddle up to trade shells for food. I loved the mangoes and papaya, which were the size of small watermelons. We sailed through some storms and spent rough nights at anchor.

Jacque introduced me to biking. I was not very enthusiastic until she insisted that we get mountain bikes. This led to a series of trips to Utah, mostly near Moab, the epicenter of mountain biking. We found Utah to be the most beautiful of all the states in the USA. The sandstone colors and cliffs were spectacular. The biking was amazing. One of our favorite adventures was searching for petroglyphs.







Vesta Technology, Inc.

I had been living in the projects in downtown Denver, just north of Colfax and York. This was a very low-cost living arrangement where the rent was based on your income and since I did not have any income, rent was cheap. Rent was, however, required to be paid by a cashier's check, which really bothered me. I would borrow a typewriter, type "Cashier's Check" along the top of my personal check and everyone was happy. The living quarters were small, two bedroom units of about 700 square feet. The neighbors weren't too noisy, so I was happy. My father refused to stop to see me when they drove past on their way to ski. Embarrassed, I guess.

After spending the beginning of 1982 skiing at Winter Park, I landed a job at Cobe Laboratories in Lakewood, Colorado in the spring. Cobe Labs makes kidney dialysis machines but I was hired into the advanced projects division to work on the design of a new therapeutic plasma exchange machine used to separate the particulates (cells) of the blood from the fluid (plasma). I applied my expertise was electronic circuit design to create the control systems for the membrane and the operator panel controls for the machine. After the development of the machine was completed, I was asked to create the machine control systems needed to manufacture the machine. Microprocessors were just beginning to make inroads into the control engineering field and I became very involved in using these for my project at Cobe.

In the course of designing control systems that could easily be programmed by the machine shop people, I created a new kind of embedded system (microprocessor deep within the machine that it controls); one that could be programmed by non-technical people. I wrote an article about it for one of the emerging home computer magazines and soon found myself with orders for a "Single Board Computer". These SBCs were designed to control other machines and were very flexible so that they could be applied to just about any task from robots to dashboards to medical devices.

Another engineer convinced me that we should start our own business called Octagon in 1984. We did, he screwed me and I left. I came up with a more advanced design and started Vesta.

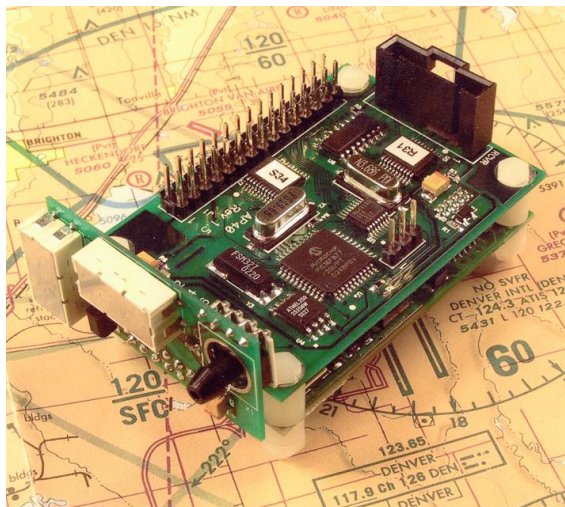
I was a geek in dweeb heaven. Besides having a line of standard products we developed an easy-to-use software environment that allowed our customers to program the system themselves. In spite of this, many customers frequently employed us for special projects to integrate our SBC into their machine. We got to do bomb disposal robots for the military, oil pump controllers for the oil patch, exercise machines, weather stations, greenhouse controllers, agricultural irrigation systems, GPS mapping data loggers, undersea robots – just about anything you could imagine and a few you wouldn't such as talking to dolphins, the “eyeball bonker” (measures the intraocular pressure) and the “ejaculator” (for the VA for vets with spinal cord injuries). These projects were what I called “biff bam boom” meaning I knew what to do and could get these projects done in a matter of months. Burnout was not a problem.

It took about 5 years to get Vesta stable enough that I could take some time off. After working 80 and 100 hour weeks I was seriously ready for time off. The company was wildly profitable and I was so lucky to hire Cyndi. Cyndi became my general manager who could run the company when I was gone. By the 90s I was gone a lot. Jacque and I would take off for a month with the confidence that Cyndi would handle anything that came up. I was not the kind of small business owner who would call every day to make sure things were ok. When I was gone, I was gone.

The big payoff was during the ski season. I would hit I-70 at 7 AM on the way to work. If it snowed that night I would turn right and head for the condo at Copper Mountain. If the snow report was grim, I turned left and went to the office. I could ski powder all morning and, about the time all of the good powder was skied off, head back to work for the afternoon.

In the late 90s, I began to think about life after Vesta. In search of a hobby, I bought an RC model airplane kit. Even before I had completed building the model, I was thinking about all of the things I could do with a microprocessor in the model airplane. This was also the time that GPS (Global Positioning System) became widely available.

I was intrigued by the idea of creating a self-piloting aircraft. This was also the time that Rocky Flats, the plutonium trigger facility near Boulder, was getting a lot of resistance. Flying over Rocky Flats was illegal, if you flew your Cessna over Rocky Flats, they would get in their jeep with .50 caliber



machine guns mounted to the back and chase you away. It was my concept to fly over Rocky Flats, snap a few photos and publish them just to sort of jab my finger in the Fed's eye.

I started designing an autopilot for drones. I talked to several existing autopilot manufacturers who assured me that attempting to fly a plane with the existing sensor technology (solid state gyroscopes and accelerometers) was impossible due to gyro drift. Those manufactures were selling autopilots using spinning gyros that weighed 20 pounds and cost tens of thousands of dollars. I planned on selling mine for \$2,000 at a cost of \$200. The development took years but was ultimately successful. The drone autopilot project enabled me to sell both companies in 2001 and I retired. Unfortunately, the buyer of my companies was not as business savvy as I had hoped and both went downhill fast. I never felt any remorse about selling or seeing the companies that I had built sink into oblivion. I did feel bad for the employees though.

The development of the autopilot was challenging and fun, but I was in conflict with the FAA. At this time, the FAA was having somewhat of an identity crisis with respect to "drones" and model airplanes. I could test my autopilot by claiming I was just flying a model RC (Radio Controlled) airplane, but the FAA was very clear that anything

commercial was not allowed to fly under the model airplane waiver. Ultimately, the FAA effectively shut down all drone flight in the USA. This is one of the principal reasons that DJI, the Chinese leader in the drone industry today, was able to achieve its market dominance.

I was able to provide a nice office setting for my employees; everyone had an office and good computer equipment. My motto was “my job is to make you successful – that way you will Vesta successful.” Because our office space was rather generous, I converted a large office to a Karate Dojo (workout area). There were three regular participants in the Dojo, all named “Steve”. One of the wives as a commercial artist who created the logo for “Steve Do”.



The Dirtbag Life

The description “dirtbag lifestyle” was coined to describe the climbers, mostly in Yosemite during the 70s. They lived in (or under) their cars, ate anything they could scrounge and climbed every day.

Yvon Chiounard was one of them. You know Yvon – his company, Patagonia is famous for quality outdoor gear and supporting the wild places left in the Chilean Andes. I didn’t know him personally, but I knew his pitons with the little “C” enclosed in a diamond emblazoned on the steel shank. I had several in my rack. Or how about the RURP (Realized Ultimate Reality Piton)? This sad little piece of steel was supposed to save your life by stopping a fall. I had one of those too, I only used it once and it did pull out, but maybe it slowed me down enough so the next one held.



His book “Dirtbag Billionaire” describes how he got into the business of fashioning pitons for his friends because no one else made better pitons. He didn’t want to be in a business and as soon as he could, he would go off climbing.

I didn’t know about dirtbags back then. We were just called “Ski Bums” in the wintertime or “that hippie guy living in his van” in the summertime. “Hippie” doesn’t capture the passion that motivated the dirtbags. In the summertime, my passion was backpacking and rock climbing. I liked the rock climbing because you were the master of your fate; you evaluated the danger involved in the next series of moves and you endured the results.

Because I had an engineering degree, I could always find a good-paying job, so I would bank every other check and live off the other.

After a couple of years, I would have saved up enough to do whatever I wanted.

I always considered myself very fortunate, even in the leanest of times. I never suffered from wanting what I could not afford, I simply adjusted my wants to fit within my means. I had developed a personal philosophy that meant living lightly. Trouble is it's hard to change some engrained personality traits; now I have no shortage of funds, yet I still deny myself many pleasures – gives me something to work on.

How to Have an Epic Adventure

Don't get me wrong here – epics are not necessarily good. In fact, usually they are pretty bad, but unforgettable nonetheless. Generally, they fall into that “5 days a year” category I mentioned at the beginning.

The first rule in “How to have an Epic Adventure” is always get a late start. Starting late greatly reduces your options as darkness sets in. This is closely followed by the second rule; never bring a flashlight. Thirdly, perseverance always helps, when you're in over your head – dig a little deeper.

George and I were on a climbing trip in Colorado. We had been banging about in his VW camper, camping and climbing in southwest Colorado.

We had just spent the night near Ophir near Telluride. We awoke to the sight of a beautiful sheer rock wall nearly a thousand feet high. The Ophir Wall. I was apprehensive, George was not impressed, “couple of pitches” he said. A pitch is one rope length or about 150'. We lazed around camp until after lunch then started the uphill approach. We bouldered the first 5.4 pitch, not bothering to rope up in order to save time. The wall was definitely more than a couple of pitches. We roped up after the first pitch and George started the lead. The pitch was 5.6 or 5.7, hard, but fun. Then came a couple of 5.8 pitches, much harder. Then came a 5.9 pitch. We were climbing faster now; the sun was getting low. I wasn't fooling around as I followed George up pulling out the nuts and cams that he had clipped our rope to, yelling for “tension” whenever I thought the pull of the rope would speed my ascent. I cleaned the last 5.9 pitch just as the sun was setting.

The plan was to traverse about a half mile and rappel down a short wall to the slope leading back to the car. Rappelling is a fast and easy way to get down. We arrived at the top of the wall and threw the rappel ropes over into the darkness – nothing. You are supposed to hear the ropes hit the bottom. Rappelling down off the end of a rope hanging in space is not good mountaineering technique. We would not be rappelling.

We had to find our way down. No flashlight. It was ok for an hour or so as the dusk slowly transitioned to dark. The stars came out, but the going was really rough – boulders and talus slopes. We slipped and stumbled our way down, arriving back at camp at about 3 AM.

You would think that I would learn, but there must be something built into one's personality profile that draws us inexorably towards this epic thing. Not long after the Ophir wall, Jacque and I were headed out of town for a mountain bike ride. Reynolds Park is a seldom-visited Jefferson County Mountain Park that has good bike trails which we had not visited before. We got a late start after work (first rule – check!). It was raining lightly as we drove out of town but decided to push on (perseverance rule – check!). The rain had stopped as we biked up the trail. Jacque had suggested turning around, but I wanted to get to the top (perseverance – double check!!). We missed watching the sunset from the top, but there was still enough light to see the trail as we started down.

Remember the rain? Well, it was still very cloudy so when night fell, it was dark. I mean dark, dark. No flashlight – check! I could barely make out the trail ahead of us. I kept talking to Jacque so that she could follow the sound of my voice. We were walking our bikes, no hope of just coasting downhill. Suddenly we both smelled something. Bear! Jacque saw the dark shape pass between us. We both shuddered a bit and continued feeling our way back to the car.

Mountain Biking

Jacque wanted mountain bikes. I did not – dumb idea. I rented a couple just to convince her what a bad idea this was. Our friends Cary and Sue took us to the Three Sisters open space park near Evergreen, Colorado. In retrospect, the trails there were pretty tricky, but I didn't know that. After pedaling for a while, I spied a nice flat rock. Without knowing anything about what mountain biking was about, I thought it would be a good idea to get up a good head of steam and see how much air I could get. Not much, but enough to bury the front wheel, soar over the handlebars and end up rolling down the trail. After a couple more of these “endos”, I leaped up and declared “I love it!”

Once, after an afternoon ride, Cary, Sue, Jacque and I were sitting at the Dairy Queen when Cary mentioned something about Moab. “What's Moab got to do with mountain biking?” I asked. “It's the best in the world” says Cary. “What are we waiting for?” I asked. I organized a trip for the four of us to go to Moab and sample The Slickrock Trail. In retrospect, Cary may have been right; the biking there is like nothing else in the world. The Slickrock Trail is best described as a series of gymnastic moves that you sort out on your bike. Traction is fantastic – you can ascend and descend things that are too steep in tennis shoes. The trail is about 12 miles long and horrendously difficult. We didn't know anything.

So, in the fashion of all great epics, we got a late start – about 11 AM, just as it was getting really hot. Many of the problems involved straight-on ascents or descents. The descents were easy but the ascents required not only 110% of all your leg power, but also a careful stance so that your bike did not flip over backwards. We all fell. Soon we all had serious “owies” and decided to stop for lunch. Cary had put bananas in his bike pack tied down with a bungee. The bananas had melted in the heat and squirted out both ends when the bungee squished down in the middle.

We got back to the condo in early evening, sat down and sighed, too tired to eat. No one said anything; just a sigh would randomly escape from each of us.

Jacque and I started taking our bikes on all kinds of trips around Colorado and nearby states. We loaded them up for a month-long trip to New Zealand where we found the biking to be very rustic. We would take long car trips biking in the morning then driving to a new campsite in the afternoon. Our bikes took us to some of the most beautiful outdoor places in the states. On our last trip together, we drove through British Columbia biking, camping and hiking every day.

One day at the tennis court, Jacque told me she was constipated. Next day, she went to the doctor. Bad. Cancer. She endured several operations, but after a couple of months of chemotherapy, she was pretty much ok. For a while. After a bit over a year, the cancer returned. Although she was healthy on the outside, we both knew what was happening on the inside.

We traveled a lot. I was fortunate in that I could leave Vesta in Cyndi's capable hands so Jacque and I could use all of the time we had left.

Eventually, when she started falling down, she called it a day. I was not well afterwards. There's sadness. There's great sadness. Then there is grief. Grief was very physical for me – I felt like a giant vice was crushing my chest. My hands were shaking. I would leave work and ride my bike – it helped. I wrote a mountain biking guide book about all of the trails Jacque and I had discovered together as a sort of therapeutic exercise. It helped too. Our friends appreciated it. Here is the last page:

Jacque said "Let's buy mountain bikes." I said "Nah, we'd ride them a couple of times, then they would gather dust and then I would have to sell them."

"Buy mountain bikes." She said.

So, we bought two. We loved it. We loaded them in the car and took them everywhere. We biked trails in Utah, Montana, Arizona, New Mexico, California, Nevada, Montana, Idaho, Alberta, British Columbia and New Zealand. We especially enjoyed our new excuse to get out into the Colorado mountains, to see the birds, the flowers and the animals. Jacque loved watching the deer. In a way I was right because by the end of the first summer I bought a new bike and did have to sell the first one.

We spent every summer weekend and many weekday evenings on our bikes - it was exercise in its most concentrated form. Soon we were both more fit than ever before in our lives. Biking became a lifestyle. Then one day Jacque said "Take me for one last ride."

We drove to the top of Mount Falcon and rode the easy trails to the ruins. She was so weak that I had to ride beside her and push her up the gentle grades. We stopped to sit on a rock in the sun surrounded by a dusting of early October snow. It was a cold. We could see a Steller's Jay in the treetops and watched some deer foraging in the snow. I like to think they came just to say good bye.

Jacque died two days later. At her memorial service one of our close friends told us how her 7-year-old daughter asked if Jacque had her bike with her in Heaven. Yes, I think she does. I've been back to that rock. The jay is gone. The deer are gone. But most of all, Jacque is gone. Before she died, I told Jacque I would put together a little book of the trails that we discovered and the tricks that we learned so that others might benefit from the delightful times that we shared and wonderful gift that she had left for me. Jacque liked that.

I spread her ashes in a mountain meadow filled with Elephant Heads and Monks Hoods that grew along one of our favorite high-country trails. I am sure the deer visit her every day.

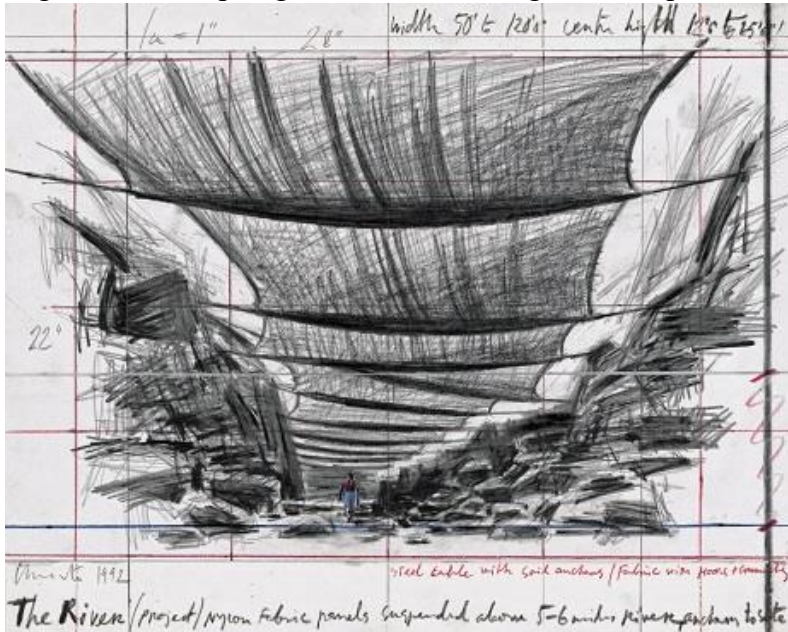
Happy trails, gentle sweetheart



Over the River

Sometime around 2010, the artist Christo proposed hanging giant “silvery, luminous fabric panels” over the Arkansas River in Bighorn Sheep Canyon between Salida and Canon City. Many residents of Salida, being an art-oriented community with lots of starving artists, reveled at the idea of the estimated 250,000 well-to-do out-of-town visitors which were forecast to see the project.

Many other residents of Salida, being an outdoor recreation-oriented community, were not as enthusiastic. One river guide likened the project to “hanging pornography in a church”. My personal feelings were mostly aligned with the peregrine falcons and bighorn sheep.



*Christo's
concept drawing*

These differences of opinion were manifested in bumper stickers and testy exchanges in the editorial column of our local paper, the Mountain Mail. This was my contribution:

Author offers a different OTR scenario

Dear Editor:

The sky is what?

So, picture this scenario. A family is driving through Bighorn Sheep Canyon on the way to Denver to get treatment for a rare, and potentially deadly, flesh-eating, brain-rotting, excruciatingly painful disease that has stricken their 6-year-old daughter.

The daughter is wearing a beautiful, floral print dress and a lovely ribbon in what is left of her hair – the disease also makes her hair fall out.

As they round a bend in the road – where there are no oil tankers crashing into the river – the poor, wheezing sick little child casts her gaze upon a beautiful, shimmering patch of fabric, part of the “Over The River” art installation.

She is immediately smitten by the transformation of her favorite river into a fairytale patchwork of lustrous fabric and water glowing under a hot July sky.

“Daddy, daddy, (wheeze, cough) what is that?” she cries. “It’s beautiful!”

Her father tears up as he explains what Christo has conjured up for their driving

pleasure. Their father was out of work until Christo came and brought jobs and tourism dollars to Chaffee and Fremont counties.

The influx of tourism dollars allowed his old boss to hire him back to work in a slow economy, to wash dishes for \$7.50 per hour.

Without this work her father couldn’t have afforded the gas money to drive to Denver to get treatment for the flesh-eating, brain rotting, excruciatingly painful disease. The beautiful girl with the ribbon in her hair would be dead because Daddy can’t find work.

Sure, you might be inconvenienced by all the excitement surrounding “Over The River.” But think about your neighbors, who still have to work for a living.

Think about your neighbors getting the chance to make a little more money, so they can save their daughter’s life. She is a beautiful little girl.

Please, don’t be so selfish the little girl has to die.

**Jeff Schweitzer,
Chaffee County**

‘An equally likely sequence of events’

Dear Editor:

If you could imagine that ...

Last week the readers of The Mountain Mail were asked to imagine a possible scenario. I would like to present an equally likely sequence of events.

“I’ve got a spike on one of my instruments.”

“Ignore it,” replied the Captain.

The bridge of the Vorgon scout ship did not contain what looked like instruments; instead it resembled the inside of a long dead cow. Nor were conversations anything that we could recognize. What we would see were waves of light that flowed from one lump to another in the collective slime that covered everything.

“There it is again. Sir, it’s the Omega signal!”

“Ah crap!” flashed the Captain. This is the one signal that he could not ignore. Every scout ship was equipped with this special detector.

“Snotty, get ready for a course change.”

“Aye, Captain,” replied the Chief Lump in Charge of Motion.

The ship blinked out of existence as it changed its quantum entanglement vector and shot straight toward earth.

The instrument reading became clearer as the scout ship hovered in the skies over Salida. There was an unnatural shimmering above the Arkansas River. “Sir, there’s no doubt about it – it’s ICE9.” ICE9 was the most feared substance in the universe, capable

of instantly transforming any water it contacts so that it exists in liquid, solid and vapor phase simultaneously.

“We’ve got to go down to confirm this,” flickered the Captain.

Von Kurt was driving his son Little Trout to Colorado Springs for his weekly chemotherapy treatment doing about 52 mph when he rounded the curve at milepost 49.

“Ah crap!” he exclaimed and slammed on the brakes. Just ahead, hovering about 3 feet above the pavement was what looked like a giant log.

It wasn’t exactly a collision, more like a merger and emergence. When the car lurched out the other side of the floating log, Little Trout was cured and Von Kurt was gone. Without its driver, the car plunged into the river and sank.

“Captain, we’re under attack!”

“Snotty, get us out of here.”

The scout ship blinked and was gone.

Captain presented his instrument readings and aborted field observations upon his arrival back home.

Sadly, the consul concluded that even though the evidence was inconclusive, the consequences were so grave that the planet must be destroyed in order to protect the remainder of the Universe.

**Steven Sarns
Salida**

Carol

Teri pulled me out of my misery from Jacque's death. She liked the idea of mountain biking but insisted that if she was going to mountain bike, the only way to learn was to race. Teri had a lot of testosterone, she was, as we would joke, the son I always wanted but never had (she was also a lot younger than me). So, we raced. We were both quite successful – had a rack full of medals above the kitchen table. But after a couple of years, we split up.



Good ol' Ford E150 in Baja

I started dating Carol a few years later. Carol was a gentle soul. She loved traveling and road trips. Carol did not ski, but I had injured my back and had given up skiing. Carol had never owned a car, so biking was an integral part of her life, although mountain biking was not.

Carol had a Master's degree in early childhood education with an additional endorsement as a fluent Spanish speaker. She had spent several summers in Mexico living with Mexican families in order to improve her language skills. She loved any excuse to return to Mexico. I had always enjoyed traveling around in Mexico, so headed for Copper Canyon. The trip was fun, the Tarahumara Indians interesting and the geography amazing.

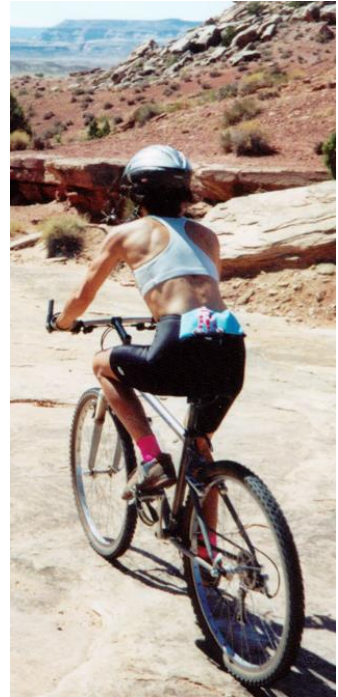
Many years later, Carol and I were in the San Juan Islands between Vancouver Island and the mainland, hoping to rent a sea kayak to paddle around. I went into a rental office and inquired "How much to rent a sea kayak for the day?" They replied "Do you know how to do a deep-water

self-rescue?" I allowed that I did not. Their response was – get lost. But, in parting, I asked "Just so I know – how do you do a deep-water self-rescue?" "The first thing you do is to push the kayak upright to drain as much water as possible...yada yada yada"

We walked across the street to another rental office – "Do you know how to do a deep-water self-rescue?" "Sure" I said. "The first thing you do is to push the kayak upright to drain as much water as possible...yada yada yada". As I said, I never suffered from a lack of self-confidence.



Sea kayaking in the Channel Islands



Her sisters called her "Muscles" because she had such good muscle definition

Our next trip was a month-long trip down the Baja peninsula. The old Ford van that my father had converted into a camper was perfect for this trip. Being basically an F150 Ford pickup truck, the van had plenty of road clearance and going off-road was easy.

Baja is a unique place. After leaving the border area and the resort towns of northern Baja, the drive becomes a cornucopia of endless deserted beaches and camping sites. Sometimes, what looks like a deserted beach turns out to be owned by a local ejido (community land ownership) whose member would come to collect a few dollars. The water was cold and clear and the fishing was good.

We turned around in Todos Santos after visiting a hole-in-the-wall museum with a bunch of Frida Kahlo paintings. South of Todos Santos is dominated by Cabo San Lucas traffic and Baja loses all of its local charm.

Carol had a cat that died when it was 20 years old. After several months, I called the Green Valley animal shelter as asked if they had any cats. “Cats? We’ve got 80 cats”. Tears streamed down my cheeks when I went to check it out. All of the poor animals. I frequently think I have more compassion for animals than for people. I brought Carol back the next day, intending to select a kitten. She picked up one and I another – that’s how we ended up with two cats.

Carol and I had many trips and many laughs together. She was a real outdoors girl – going off alone to explore the gulches and mountains behind our home. But she was plagued by health problems for many years. Although she



visited many doctors, none could pinpoint the problem. I am convinced that some of her friends thought she was imagining it.

Then in the spring of 2013, she had an endoscopic exam in Tucson and was told she had an ulcer. Great news, I thought, at last something that is understood and can be medicated. We soon left for Salida, but the prescribed medications did not seem to have any effect, so a second endoscopy was done. Basically, the doctor came out, looked Carol in the eye and said “You’re dead.” It was only a few weeks later that she died from stomach cancer.

Never Again

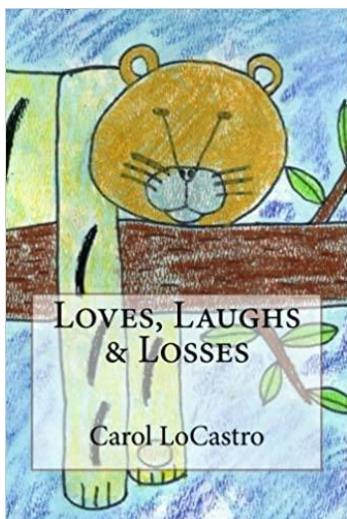
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There is a flower
whose sweet fragrance
I will never again inhale.

There is a tree
whose cool shade
will never again shelter me from the sun.

There is a river
whose wild waters
will never thrill me again.

There is a smile
whose loving warmth
will never again grace my eyes.



After Carol died, I collected all of her poems and drawings and published a book for her friends. The drawings brought her poems to life. I think they liked it.

1,339 Women



Barb on our way to Smith Lake

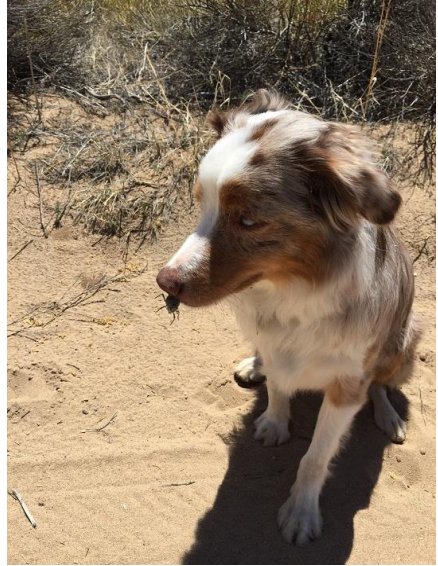
Carol's death was not as hard on me as Jacque's. After Jacque died, I was a mess for nearly a year. When Carol died, I was able to prepare myself for the grief that would come. I got on match.com to see what the field was like in Salida. Not much. My search criteria were pretty broad; woman, within an hour's drive, not much else; Turned out there were about 7 women around. I dated a couple. Then I thought to try Green Valley / Tucson area. I got back on Match.com and put in all sorts of criteria; certain age range, spirituality, education, assets, retired... The results came back "There are 1,339 women waiting to meet you." I packed up the cats and headed for Green Valley.

Soon after we met, Barb and I went skiing. I had not skied for 12 years, so I was a bit apprehensive, but it all came back in a flash. I bought

a new pair of skis and marveled at the progress ski technology had undergone. Barb was instrumental in finding a doctor to operate on my back, which was totally successful, but served to highlight the need to replace a knee – “parts falling off” as I have come to describe the process of aging.

One day Barb said “Let’s get a dog.” I was not too keen on the idea, but our little Australian Shepard has been a joy, perhaps bringing the same kind of joy that sharing a child would bring. Joey has been a marvelous, eager to learn little doggie.

There was a recent brain research study about the names of family members. They discovered that our brains have a module that contains all of the family members’ names. My mother used to call me by the family dog’s name, well, it turns out that the family dog is included in that folder, but curiously, the family cats are not.



Cats make me calm; dogs make me smile.

Wishes

ss

I wish I could sing
I wish I could play a Guitar.
I would write a song for you.

I would sing a song of good fortune,
of kitty cats and little doggies,
of ice and snow and cactus flowers,
of once buff bodies that can
still sing songs of their own.

I would sing to you of love.

My Life in Cars

Not long ago Barb came up to me and said “Do you recognize this blouse?” “No.” “It was the blouse I wore when we first met...” Oh oh...

Maybe its guys, but I seem to remember events in relation to the car or motorcycle I had at the time

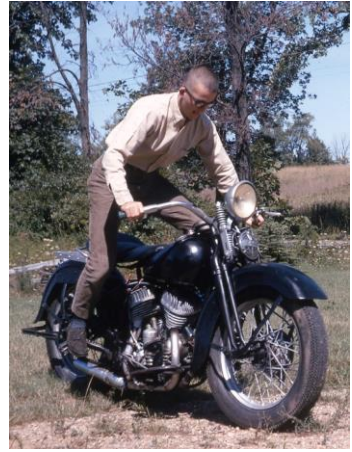
1964 – One of my father’s friends gave me a sweet little 2 HP lawnmower engine. I bought an old girl’s bike for \$5 and mounted the engine onto the frame. The engine rested on a motor mount made of oak. There was a V-belt going to a jackshaft with a chain sprocket on the other end for gear reduction. The owner of a local bike shop gave me an old 3-speed rear hub that I attached to the rear wheel. One of the 3 speeds was broken which became “neutral”. Put it in neutral, start the engine, get a running start and jump on. It went about 25 mph.



1954 Cushman – When I started school at U of Michigan my mother drove me to Lansing to buy a Cushman Eagle scooter. Father was very not happy about this turn of events. Later he would say “Only the scum of the

earth rides motorcycles.” That would be me.

1946 Harley – I saw a dead motorcycle in someone's back yard and bought it for \$45. The problem turned out to be the ignition coil that would run for a couple of minutes before shorting out. New coil – problem fixed. Not. Father had a fit and demanded I sell the bike. Much shouting.



1958
MGA –
I bought
a beat-
up
MGA.
Spent
the
summer

fixing it up. This was a time in my life when I fancied myself as “Fangario, the Spanish Gran Prix driver”. I had a little pigskin driving cap. Father was very happy I was no longer riding a motorcycle. Not for long. I can still remember seeing the oak tree coming, can't remember actually hitting it though.

1960 VW microbus camper – Very short lived. I bought this from one of my professors, gassed it up and Harold and I headed for Colorado to ski. The trip turned out to be an epic.



Old Rambler – Winters with a motorcycle were cruel, so I found this car for \$20. It ran for a while, but one night the left front wheel folded up under the car. My girlfriend at the time, Wanda, was pretty heavy, so I had her go sit on the right back tailfin which took enough weight off the front end to lift the tire enough to drive. We got home.

1958 Velocette Venom – What a machine! 500cc single cylinder, very stylish. After the camper fiasco, I went back to motorcycles – much more economical.



1965 Rambler station wagon – 6 cylinder “economical” engine got about 18 to 20 mpg with a top speed of about 70 mph. I would drive it into out-of-the-way places when the urge struck Anna and me. Occasionally, a stick would reach up and figgle the transmission shifting forks so that the transmission would lock into whatever gear it was in until I got under the car and beat the shifters back into place. We drove it to California when we graduated and spent many a night sleeping in the back at the ski resorts with the catalytic heater going full blast. Anna drove it back to Ohio when I was in the Coast Guard and one day we went skiing in western New York. On the way there, Anna put it in the ditch where the snow packed tightly around the engine. We pushed it out of the ditch, jumped in and took off for a great

day of skiing, well not real great because my friend Bill from the Coast Guard broke his arm that day. Returning to Cleveland that night, I noticed that the lights were going dim. Unbeknownst to us, the snow had broken off one of the alternator wires, so we had been running on the battery all day. We stopped at a store to get some food for Bill and when we got back in the car, the starter went “click, click, click”. I heard a moan from the back seat where Bill was lying down, cradling his broken arm. I said to Anna “I’ll push, you pop the clutch when it gets rolling.” I heard another, louder, moan from the back seat. Bill was an accomplished auto mechanic and knew well the low probability of my plan working. But it did work! We got Bill home but had to turn the lights off to get ourselves back home. Eventually it was stolen. We lived in a crummy white-trash section of Cleveland and one day it was gone. This didn’t bother me very much so I did not report it to the police right away but eventually did call it in. The police dispatcher immediately asked “where is your wife?” When I explained that she couldn’t possibly have it because it has been gone for a month or so, the dispatcher got rather rude.



1958 Ford van – while Anna and I were living in California we bought an old green panel van. Anna painted a swamp on the sides with bullfrogs and a giant bullfrog’s ass on the back. We used to drive it the beach to surf. We’d park at the top of the

cliff overlooking Steamer Lane at Santa Cruz, read the Sunday paper and watch the surf.

1962 Triumph Bonneville 650 cc twin, classic English piece-of-shit motorcycle. Great lines. Anna jumped on her Suzuki X-6 Hustler and I on the Triumph and we headed for Virginia Beach for me to report for duty at the Coast Guard Officer Candidate School.

1970 Honda 450 – so when the Triumph started seizing up in the middle of Utah, I knew I had to replace the beast.



1972 Honda 600 Coupe – this car was so small that when the engine needed rebuilding, I put a block under the engine and with the help of a friend, lifted the body off. The engine was a 600 cc air cooled two cylinder – just a bit smaller than the old dead 650 cc Triumph motorcycle.

1969 Renault – Push button automatic transmission. Inside was a tiny little Frenchman who said “first we decrease de gaz, then we push de little clutch in, den we wait a moment for de engine to slow down, wee, wee, ah, now we change de gears (clunk), ah, now we can engage de clutch and off we go.” All of which took about 3 seconds. It had an electric clutch with brushes that wore out!



1960 Dodge van – This had one of those big oversized V-8 engines in a compartment between the driver and the passenger (the “dog house”). I had converted it into a camper and was powering up a hill in Utah one hot summer day when the engine suddenly started screaming. Oh oh. I pulled over, checked the dip stick – no oil. Dump in 4 or 5 quarts, start

her up and keep on rolling. I left it in Jackson Hole with Crista but when I returned, she had sold it for money to go to a detox program.

Opel Kadet – I probably paid \$200 for this rusty but reliable little car. This is the car that Diane and I drove to California on our trip around the world.



Citroen 2CV – The nickname Duex Chevaux refers to the small, air cooled, two-cylinder engine, like “two horses” which is about all it had. I bought it in Tehran and drove it up to the ski resorts in the winter and mountains in the summer. I think James Bond drove one just like mine in the

movie “*For Your Eyes Only*”. I left Tehran about 6 months before the Shah fell from power, consequently I was able to sell it. Many of my friends however were not so lucky.

Opel Kadet II – I found this nearly the identical car to the one that I sold at the San Francisco airport years before as we were embarking on our around the world trip. I bought it in Munich and sold it to a friend in Paris before starting home.



VW bug – I don’t remember how I got this rusted out thing but it lasted until driving home for Christmas from Jackson Hole. Someone in a big Mercury station wagon fell asleep and rear ended me on I-80 south of Chicago. After getting the fishtailing under control, I looked back at the trail of parts laying on the road and knew that its life was over.

Gremlin – so after hitchhiking the rest of the way back to Michigan for Christmas, my father said “Bye” and left the next day. I was left stranded. My uncle gave me a ride to Detroit



where I searched the want ads and found this old Gremlin. This was one funny looking car. The hood extended way out in front like a typical American car, but the back end looked like someone whacked it off with a chain saw. Who would call a car a “gremlin”? Gremlins are problems – things that go wrong, but this car turned out to be super reliable. One day, I pulled into my grandmother’s house and she told me that there was smoke coming out from under the hood. I opened the hood to discover that the oil leakage had caught fire. The closest thing was the pig slops. I grabbed the bucket and pitched the pail full of kitchen scraps on the engine. The fire went out, but smelled like apples peels for a long time.

Datsun B210 – another \$200 car that did not run very well when I bought it, but I discovered a hidden fuse in one of the wiring harnesses that, when replaced made it run like a charm.

SAAB 99 – This was a very nice sweet driving little car until the engine developed a ticking noise. I wanted to fix it so I bought a shop manual. The first sentence said “your car has the highest quality engine made by Triumph of England”. My heart sank.

VW bug 2 – George, my climbing partner, got a new Volvo, so I bought his old VW. This was a nice one and lasted a long time.

Ducati 250 Mach 1 – This bike was, in its time, the fastest stock 250 in the world – provided you could get it started. It was a bear to start. Eventually it ended my love of motorcycles when an old drunk made a left turn in front of me and I went sailing over the hood. After that I stayed off motorcycles for a long time.



Toyota Tercel 4WD station wagon – I bought this car new in 1985 and promptly fell in love with it. To this day, I don't think I have driven a better car for nasty conditions. You could pull up the emergency brake while doing about 20 mph on a dirt



road and get the car completely turned around Smokey and the Bandit style without ever going into reverse. There were many times that I watched through the windshield as the countryside went by (sideways) but the car always seemed to get the front end out in front. But the real feature was the very low range creeper gear. This together with the 4WD meant that it was a very off-road capable provided that you minded the limited road clearance.

BMW 320 – I needed more class (still do) so I bought this to pick up clients at the airport. Nice, fast, smooth. Got better gas mileage at 80 than at 50 – rare. But it was not very off-roady. Coming out of the Colorado Trail trailhead at Fooses Creek, I heard “clunk” – hit a rock. No problem, do it all the time. Then the oil light comes on. Ah – probably just the

indicator but I'll get out and check. Oil is pouring out of a gaping hole in the aluminum oil pan. I guess that I am just not a BMW kinda guy.

Ford E150 van – This was a van that my father converted to a travel van. They used the van extensively to travel to Alaska and the Yukon on summer fishing trips. My father's health deteriorated so they were no longer able to use the



van. They gave it to Jacque and me. We loved it, using it for summertime camping, mountain biking and travel. The beauty of the 1985 E150 was that it was essentially an F150 pickup with a van body, so it had lots of road clearance. Additionally, the F150 had to be the truck of choice in Mexico, so getting service as easy. One time in the Baja, I heard something banging around in the engine compartment and discovered that a shock absorber has broken in two. I pulled in to a service station, the guy looked at it and said – “tomorrow, \$20”. Wow!

Toyota 4Runner – I would have waited a year for a RAV4, but Jacque was dying and I wanted to get a new car for us to travel in. We had a few nice trips before she died late in 1995. Here it is in 2023 and I am still driving it! About 10 years ago I vowed to replace it as soon as I could buy a driverless car. Still waiting.

Bombardier Neighborhood Electric Vehicle – I bought this for Carol to commute back and forth to her pottery studio. It was well suited to life

in Green Valley. The batteries were old lead-acid technology, so it never went very far even on the best of

Honda Fit – I bought this car more for Carol than for myself but we both loved it. Should have been called The TARDIS (Dr. Who) – “it’s bigger on the inside than it is on the outside.”



Suzuki DR200 – I bought this 200 cc 4-stroke motorcycle for riding down Happy Jack Lane into Salida. Carol was always after me to get rid of it and get “more age-appropriate transportation”. She refused to ride on it, but finally she did - when the funeral home called to say that I could pick up her ashes ... At 100 miles per gallon, it served my purposes admirably around Salida. Loved taking it to the high mountain lakes to go trout fishing, thinking eco all the way. Eventually, one day as I was riding home in rain, I asked myself “Why am I doing this?”, only to discover that it was probably just about saving a few bucks in gas. Interesting how we change as we get older.



Toyota Prius – So now I ride in cushy comfort. I am sure that by the time I buy my next new car, it will be fully robotic. I am still looking forward to that.



Mercedes Sprinter van – 4WD, diesel engine and a *heater* for cold nights plus a very comfortable bed. I did a very minimalist RV conversion that I am very happy with. It even has its own “Barbie garage” as one of my friends calls it.

Subaru CrossTrek – I finally sold the 4Runner in 2025. Hated selling it, but it lacked the safety features the I felt I needed. So, I bought a CrossTrek – with X-MODE! It did not save me from this one. Fortunately I’ve got great neighbors who did.

