

Hiking and Camping

My first experience hiking was to satisfy a Second Class requirement as a Boy Scout. It was a five-mile hike, which I recall was mostly on dusty gravel roads with no substantial altitude gain. There *may* have been a few other hikes I did as a scout, but the Scout Troop that I was in was more into car camping in Michigan woodlands than just walking.

Car camping persisted as an occasional activity for me for the next ten years or so. To be fair, it wasn't *all* car camping. I wrote elsewhere about my *horse* camping experience when I was a camp counselor at the D-Bar-A boy scout camp. It involved a cantankerous horse named Mohawk. After that, I recall a car trip to a small Michigan lake when I was an undergraduate with four guys I knew in high school. And then I enjoyed a solitary week-stay on the wooded shore of Lake Charlevoix while I decompressed from learning Classical Mechanics. On returning home from that trip, I was told that my father had his first heart attack just a few days before. A bit scary, but he survived another thirty years.

My conversion to hiking and backpacking happened sometime during my days in graduate school at the University of Michigan. I joined the Recreational Equipment Co-op as an early non-Seattle member, #23427. A big deal for backpacking at that time was the Kelty backpack. (They still exist in various two-hundred dollar versions.) Being impecunious, however, it was cheaper for me to spend some time in the student shop making my own version of it. I used a cache of aluminum rods for the frame, which I had found tucked away in the spectroscopy lab I was assigned to for writing my thesis. I used this home-made backpack for more than a decade, but it was definitely heavier than the Kelty pack (or any of the other backpacks I bought later in life).

At this time I met Maggie and she became an enthusiastic fellow backpacker. I came to visit her in Worcester, where she was working for the Telegram-Gazette after her graduation. On a weekend she had off, we drove up to hike the Green Mountain Trail in Vermont. The most memorable memory was when I set out to cook her blueberry pancakes for breakfast. I had packed two-days worth of pancake mix in one plastic bag. Not know that, Maggie poured out the whole bag into the pot of milk I was expecting to mix things in. So, we had a *lot* of pancakes that morning (and none the next day).

We survived, got married, finished up my thesis in Ann Arbor, and went to Baltimore for my first post-doc. Here we did a lot of week-end backpacking on the Appalachian Trail in Maryland and Virginia. On these over-night hikes we would usually use the trail shelters instead of our little tent that the Conservancy volunteers had provided every eight miles or so. However, in the Shenandoahs, we *did* use the tent, and one night a bear thought Maggie smelled too good. He (or she) tore open a bit of the back of the tent. Maggie's yelling, which also woke me up, scared it away.

On the Maryland hikes we met a fellow enthusiast, Frank Tomsik, a native Baltimorean, with whom we often hiked. Despite being the son of a butcher, he liked Dinty Moore Beef Stew from a can. We remained friends with him until he died, at way too early an age. These Appalachian Trail excursions continued when, for my second post-doc, we translated to Washington DC.

My post-doctoral appointments only supported us during the academic year, leaving summers open. We were lucky to get some financial support to attend the Physics Summer Schools in Boulder, hosted by the University of Colorado in 1964 and 1965. This was the first time that either of us had been west

of the Mississippi. The Rocky Mountains were quite an attraction for us, quite different from the softer Eastern mountains we were used to. The school, to take a break from four full days of lectures, organized Wednesday afternoon hikes in the nearby mountains, often to the nearby Rocky Mountain National Park.

As we had the weekends free, we also continued our habit of spending them on backpacking jaunts in these beautiful mountains. It was at this time that we improved the quality of our boots and our equipment. One big purchase was a down-filled double sleeping bag, designed and made locally by a Mrs. Holubar from whom we bought it. (Her company apparently still exists.) This bag was a lot more comfortable (and warmer) than the woolen single bags I had bought at an army surplus store. (Cheaply, of course, at about the time I built the Ersatz-Kelty backpack.)

It was toward the end of the School that one of these weekend treks got us to the top of Longs Peak. After the 1964 School ended we drove up to Wyoming to hike in the Yellowstone and Grand Tetons National Parks. It was late in August on a hike in the Tetons to get over a pass that we got trapped in a snowstorm. We hunkered down in our little tent for three days, rationing food and reading a paperback we had luckily brought along. When the weather warmed enough and the snow had melted sufficiently, we backtracked to Jackson Lake where we had started from. We were met along the way by a rescue party that had come up to find us.

We came to Los Alamos in August of 1967, with me in a cast on my ankle from a skateboarding accident (a separate, longish story.) As soon as I could get my foot into a boot, we started skiing. Skiing isn't exactly like hiking, but at least it is outdoors. When spring came we began hiking about in the local area, and soon were back into backpacking on many, if not most, weekends. In our second summer we did something a bit more ambitious than just over-nights; we walked with Bill and Sally Pratt across the Pecos Wilderness from the Santa Fe Ski Basin to a town called Gascon on the eastern boundary. They might not have been our best choice of hiking companions as the Pratts are a lot more talkative than we are. This three-day trek was serviced by an airplane drop of supplies (which may have included toilet paper) when we were tenting at Truchas Lake.

Over the next thirty years or so we had many weekend backpacking trips. In the area it was in the Jemez and the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. We also had some longer excursions in Colorado, where we mostly stayed in wooded areas. We did, however, "conquer" three or four more fourteeners (since Colorado is where they are). I don't think we ever had any serious injuries or other mishaps on these trips. There was once a close call, up by Aspen, when we had to wade across a rushing mountain stream. We had set up a guide rope from one tree to another on the other side to help with the crossing. When it was Maggie's turn to cross, she started out on the downstream side of the rope. Somehow the current was strong enough that she let go of the rope and was carried about twenty yards downstream before she caught her footing. Darragh Nagle and I both plunged in and were able to help her get eventually to the other side. If she had started out on the upstream side of the rope, of course, none of this would have happened. We all did dry out and continued on back to the car.

Other than that, from time to time, we had to wait out a long rain trapped in a small tent. After one of these waits, we walked out and went into Santa Fe to buy some (heavy) rain suits, coats and pants. We never had an occasion to use them – they sat idle in a closet for decades until they disappeared in one of our garage sales. We *did* plan to use them in England when we were planning to do a long hike along the South West Coast Path in Devon and Cornwall. That trip had to be aborted because of an outbreak of the mad cow disease.

In 1973-74 we were in Switzerland. (I was visiting the Swiss meson factory.) This gave us the opportunity to take many day-hikes. These Wanderungen were basically social get-togethers with our Swiss friends. For these, no backpacks were involved. The Swiss Alps are also very beautiful, a little different from our Rockies, and sometimes they were be tricky for us to walk in.

Well, as time marched on, we got a little older. And Maggie's hip was beginning to bother her. So we eased off the backpacking in favor of car camping. We'd get our, now bigger, tent settled for the evening, have a nice campfire meal, and sleep a little longer. The next day we'd take day hikes in the area. We'd return to the campsite for a second night on the ground and head for home the next morning.

As the hip got worse, and there were other health problems coming up, we sold our house in Los Alamos in 2019 and moved to an assisted-living apartment in Santa Fe. In the downsizing, almost all of our backpacking equipment was sold or given away. The end of an era.