

Gold in the Pan

Man evolved in the wilderness; all else is artifice, ephemeral, for the nonce.

The year was 1970; my friend Jim and I were 23 and young, in college, off for the first part of the summer, and primed for adventure. Jim was a graduate student at Duke University, I was still at Washington University in St. Louis. At Duke, Jim had made a friend, Dave, who raved about a special primitive area in the Rockies where he had snagged a summer job and would again work the summer months as a wilderness patrolman for the Forest Service, rock climbing in his off-hours. He invited us out to trout-fish in the Bridger National Wilderness in Wyoming. The Forest Service provided Dave with a horse and a pack mule, and Dave promised to pack some of our gear the sixteen miles into our chosen base camp, easing the backpacking loads needed for eight days in the backcountry. Growing up in St. Louis, Jim and I had never even seen a trout. The Wind River Range promised an appointment with fish. We liked to spin cast for smallmouth bass from canoes on spring-fed Ozark streams and thought, what the hell, let's give it a go. After all, in the western Appalachia of Missouri, smallmouth *were* called trout; only largemouth were bass.

So, Jim and I piled into (and slept in) his VW micro-bus and headed west on the 1,200-plus mile drive to the Elkhart Park Trailhead above Pinedale, Wyoming. Along the way, in our first experience with altitude, we climbed 12,941-foot Star Mountain in Colorado, breathless at the summit. Puffy wind-blown cumulus cast undulating shadows on the surrounding peaks and valleys as they sailed east. Further west, preferring backroads, we encountered the baffling travel puzzle of the then partially dirt track of Utah State Route 1364, which seemed to disappear as it passed through the lush grasslands of the sinuous Green River below Flaming Gorge. Eventually arriving at Elkhart, we met Dave, a wonderfully welcoming and personable fellow. After salutations and inquiries about our journey, he packed onto the mule what gear he could and set off on his rounds while Jim and I hiked the Pole Creek Trail towards our pre-determined meeting point, Cook Lakes.¹ After our late start, we figured one and one-half days of trekking with a night of camping along the way. It was late June, and the mosquitoes made us miserable, but the big, biting deer flies were worse. We thought the insects would thin out as we gained elevation, but the higher we went, the more we got.

We climbed from 9,350 feet, gained 1,770 feet, lost 940; the 2,700 combined proved arduous for lowland first-time school-boy backpackers carrying heavy, mostly borrowed gear. For example, our cumbersome spring-loaded "pop-up" tent with intricate albatross-wing-like umbrella ribs must have weighed 20 lbs. Our intended itinerary was to detour north on the Seneca Lake Trail to not only experience the grandeur of the lake but also the backdrop of Fremont (the highest in the state) and Jackson Peaks, avoiding a treacherous crossing of Pole Creek, a path that Dave strongly advised. But first, we thought, why not a refreshing swim in Hobbs Lake? What a disaster. Diffident, I only waded into the cold lake slowly, but Jim boldly plunged into the leech-infested waters and emerged covered with them. A good hour of burnt hot match tips to leech bottoms scorched them off, but not before the horrors of maniacal blood-sucking. Having come for adventure, we got more than our share.

Circumnavigating the majestic setting of Seneca Lake basin, we were to hang a right at the junction with the Highline Trail to cross over Lester Pass down to the Cooks. But we tired of the bugs and the view-less switch-backed trail in Lodgepole Pine. We struck out cross-country to seek a breeze, to ease the pestilence, choosing open meadows interrupted by only the occasional copse of Aspen. Convinced we were better route makers than the trail builders, our contemplated route was over either of two saddles.² The wrong choice revealed our arrogance, leading to a dead-end cirque. Bewildered for perhaps an hour, we tried to find the proper way, not at all sure we could retrace our steps

¹ Dave spent most of his time running hippie clans off campsites where they had overstayed the 14-day limit (they would backpack in 40 lbs. of rice for the summer. If they caught fish, they had protein.) The Forest Service had issued Dave a radio where he could respond to reports of trekkers, campers, and fishers in need. He had to report his whereabouts to the Service once a day, but they never knew where he was really was, so he could go where he chose and report otherwise. Nowadays, I am sure the radio has a chip that reports whereabouts via GPS.

² We should have trusted the trail builders followed the Indian paths, who in turn followed the buffalo trails.

to the trail. Obstinace pressed us on to the once we found it, a rather obvious pass. (Caltopo.com is a good website to follow our route.) Opened out before us was the grand scale of the high basin below, brimming with lakes, including the Cooks, with the crest of the Rockies beyond. Would the lakes keep their promise of an abundance of trout? You see, for us, fishing represented more than just sport because, for food, we had only packed in rice and dried potato flakes, apple sauce, trail mix, and cereal. If we did not catch trout, we would not eat much protein. What with the mosquito feast and the idiotic paucity of our provisions, it would have been a great time for a diet, but we were already rail thin to start.

Still way above the tree line and just below the pass, several tarns bedded in a lovely setting. We decided to set up camp there for the night but first, catch fish. Getting out my spin rod, I cast blindly into the largest pond with no luck. Impatient, I meandered down the outlet stream to a much smaller tarn, only 3 feet deep. Sure enough, at the opposite end were three large trout. They saw me; I saw them. I tried a Mepps. Indifference. Other spinning lures to no avail. I had bought on a whim a large dry fly on maybe a size twelve hook. Apathy. The deer flies were biting me mercilessly through my raggedy rolled-up turtleneck sweater. Swatting them and thinking, why not, I slid a deer fly over the imitation fly. Now, *this* was appetizing. I watched, mesmerized, as the trout deftly, ever so nimbly, stripped bait fly after bait fly off the artificial. One deer fly may have caught a bit in the hackles or had a tough exoskeleton that did not want to split off. The fish snatched more of the insect to get a better grip, I naturally tugged back. The point of the hook slid into her lip. She pulled away, tightened the line and set the hook. She was big and beautiful and I was smitten. Without a ruler, I measured from the tip of my little finger to my elbow. Later, with a tape, I counted 18 inches; 20 would be too much to believe. The big fish had a radiant golden color to its sides: my goodness, the rare California Golden trout for my first non-bass trout (*Onchorhynchus aguabonita*). *Agua bonita*: pretty water. I should say so. (Aqua Bonita is the name of the tributary of the Kern River in California where they were originally found.) Now we had fish for dinner. Never once over the ensuing half-century has it gotten any better than that, retrieving that fish in that place, with dinner procured and our pantry relieved. The mouth-melted bright pink flesh we ate with our fingers. Hunger made the better cook, but the fish *was* delicious.

Was I fly fishing, or was I not? Yeah, I know. I was bait-casting with a dead animal, nothing more than a much-maligned meat fisherman. Now, however, I figured that if a fellow had a proper fly line threaded down the ferrules of a willowy fly rod, and he knew how to smoothly roll out that line with the appropriate fly, he might be able to use insect repellent and avoid the plague of trout-enticing insects, all the while catching trout more efficiently, accomplishing something truly elegant in the bargain. Well, I decided that when I got home, I would go to art school. I enrolled in a fly-casting class.

The Continental Divide traverses the spine of the Wind River Range, which runs northwest-southeast for about 100 miles from Dubois, east of Jackson, down to Atlantic City, Wyoming. Found there is 13,802-foot Gannet Peak, the highest summit in Wyoming. Grand Teton (Big Nipple) interrupts the list of the 15 highest mountains in the state, all the others from the Winds. The chain sports 30 summits over 13,000 feet. This topography is evidence of the considerable precipitation caught in the easterly flow of weather across the nation, critical to the preponderance of glaciers.³ Tarns, streams, and thirteen hundred named lakes proliferate, arguably the most outstanding alpine habitat for trout, certainly in the state if not the entire contiguous U.S. or even the world. The lakes lie in a ninety-mile-long bench; except for one riverine gap, the watershed is above 9,500 feet, much over 10,500 feet in elevation. One discovers “an unexpectable physiographic setting which after the steep slopes of a dry Wyoming basin is lush and paradisaal to the point of detachment from the world. Alpine meadows with meandering brooks are spread across a rolling scene, in part forested, in part punctuated with discreet stands of conifers and lakes peaks that seem to rest on them like crowns on tables.”⁴ Glacier, trickle, tarn, creek, pond, stream, lake, torrent; then off the bench to big lake, river, and so forth. Some stream cascades are hundreds of yards across, traversed by hopping from one alpine grass tussock to another, the tufts so thick as to make the stream disappear from view. But you could hear the cascading water beneath your feet.

When the last great ice age of the Pleistocene retreated some 11,000 years ago, the glaciers left no fish in the carved-out lakes, as the solid ice froze out any semblance of previous populations. With the glacial retreat, migrating fish could not navigate the tumult of the glacier left stream falls to reach the wilderness mesa. It took the Great

³The Wind River Range was buried for millions of years, partly from their own alluvial flow and partially from volcanic ash from the Cascades and Sierras. Following the uplift of the Laramide Orogeny, the plenteous rivers and streams of the late Miocene carried away the sediments revealing the mountains in an epochal event known as the Exhumation of the Rockies.

⁴ John McPhee in *Rising from the Plains*.

Depression to re-introduce them. An out-of-work railroad man named Finis Mitchell loved these mountains, and for a time to make a living, “my wife and I bought a tent, borrowed horses and saddles [from local ranchers] and started our Mitchell’s Fishing Camp in the Big Sandy Openings ... on Mud Lake.” He took wealthy dudes from the east “fishing on the horses and was sure they caught their fish. Our guide service was for free. ... We charged a dollar and a half a day for horses. We kept the dollar and gave fifty cents to the people we borrowed the horses from. ... We also served meals [cooked by Emma] in the tent for fifty cents a meal.” The Fred Beckey of the Winds, Finis climbed all but 20 of the 300 mountains in the range, including eponymous 12,482-foot Mitchell Peak.⁵ But his emoluments were in trout. Ensuring that his clients caught fish, Mitchell and his father horse-packed fingerlings in milk cans, every one containing a thousand small fry, two per each of six pack animals. For oxygen for the fish to survive, they allowed the trout water to slosh about, with each can topped with porous burlap. Twelve thousand per trip, they stocked the lakes with over two and one-half million small fry. They aimed to stock each of the 1,314 named lakes, successive waters with alternating species - brook trout here, rainbow there, cutthroat in another, Dolly Varden also, lake trout in the deepest waters, and in some of the higher lakes when available, California Golden. The achievement offered just about any fresh-water variety of trout within the radius of a short, day hike from properly placed base camp and a sporting chance at the grandest of grand slams for the determined species-bagger, all within a week. The Bridger National Wilderness (and its neighbors, Popo Agie and the Fitzpatrick) proved a better habitat for the Golden than their Kern River, California original. (The world record for Golden Trout came in at eleven and a quarter pounds caught in none other than the Cooks Lakes, the site of our main camp.) Perfect habitat for trout, better yet, for *homo piscari*.

Copious glacier snowfield melt provides the water to sustain the fish in lakes deep enough to survive freeze-out. The ecology? Neatly circular: you eat the fish, the fish devour the insects, and the insects consume you. We had gone native, primitive men in a primitive area seeking meat. The easiest catch was Brook Trout; some lakes were so teeming with them that we snagged more than we caught on the hook, probably even then illegal. Could one claim that we seized fish *by hook or by crook*? Forgive me. We certainly caught more than enough fish to survive. Mostly Brook, but also Rainbow, feisty Cutthroat, and Bull Trout, and a few more of the rare Golden. After the harsh winter of the high country, the fish were ravenous and on the bite, for anything, at any time of day or night. We were certainly fed enough to explore the higher country above us. One day, we attempted to clamber up to the high cirque above the large lake that drained into the Cooks, thinking we could circumnavigate this “walled lake” in the process. At 10,450 feet in elevation, the mountain impoundment is encased by massive thousand-foot granite slabs or ‘walls’ absent trees and any other substantial vegetation. Wall is appropriately named as it deceives accurate distance reckoning by the lack of visual referent. The high mountain loch is framed by massive thousand-foot granite slabs or ‘walls’ absent trees and any other vegetation. The lake circumference is much farther than the mile or two that we had estimated. I remember enormous office-building-sized boulders lying around, shot off by the push of the over-hanging ice field at the crest of the steepest precipice as if the glacier was playing marbles. We reached higher terrain above Wall that led to the amphitheater of an unnamed lake at 10,842’, with the not-so-insignificant Tiny Glacier threatening from above, just below the Continental Divide. To add to the aerie intimidation of the landscape, along came a thunderstorm with penetrating lightning bolts and thunder. Truly frightened, we retreated, but not before encountering mule deer bounding down the rocks below, overlorded by a many-pointed rackety buck. When the herd paused, blending into the scene and staring with each cupped ear flared into a foot-long ellipsoid, their image vanished with or even without a careless glance away. The tempest soon subsided to halcyon, and contentment born of serenity ensued. “When a pine needle falls in the woods, the eagle sees it; the deer *hears* it; and the bear smells it.”⁶

By the way, Dave had told us that the mosquitoes did not annoy him because after two weeks, the human body adapts, and their bite develops no welt or itch, and he just let them take his blood without any complaint. But Jim and I had to find at least three perches at the campfire to lose the bombinating swarms every few moments or so.

⁵ Seattle’s Fred Beckey did climb extensively in the Winds, including Gannet Peak (the highest) and Warrior Peaks in the Cirque of the Towers, and accomplished several first ascents, including the north face of the 1000-foot Class III 5.7 North Face of all places Mitchell Peak with Patagonia founder Yvon Chouinard. Also, the first ascents of the west buttress of Musembeah Peak and Bomber Lake Arete at 74. In the 1998 American Alpine Journal, Cameron Burns wrote that “in his mid-70s, Fred looked pretty old while walking the trail,” but “when he climbed, however, he had the grace and style of a 20-year-old” and led via 5.6 slabs right on the very crest of the arete (II 5.6).”

⁶ In Canada, attributed to First Nations Peoples.

As we had left the trailhead for the first day of our trip, Dave took me aside to say, “Mark, you are going into true wilderness for eight days, and since you have enough time, I challenge you to do something for me. Not in the first day or three, but gradually try to distill your experience, first into a sentence and then refine to a word. When you are certain of it, you will forget about it, and when you come out of the country, I will tell you the word.” I thought, “*Right*, out of three hundred thousand words in the English language, you are going to guess one word, one single word that I come up with. Even if we had great minds, they never think *that* much alike. This place is too fantastic for that; one cannot even describe it in a paragraph.” I forgot his challenge, but surprisingly, in a couple of days, I started to think of a way to describe what was happening, meditating. (We did a lot of meditating without knowing it.) And it did indeed distill into one word. There was no other. Precisely, succinctly that one word. Then, as he had predicted, I forgot about it. When I emerged, Dave approached and asked if I had thought of the word, and I remembered that, yes, I had, asking him to tell me. He *did*. Desolate. He *knew*. Now that I think back about it, it is hard to comprehend, but in that moment, it was precise, appropriate. Why *desolate*? Why not awesome, grand, superlative, magnificent, or even otherworldly? I surmise that ultimately, we are social creatures who build, create, and make culture. True wilderness is entirely devoid of human culture, i.e., desolate. The Wilderness Act of 1964⁷ states: “A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.” Desolate does not mean ugly. After all, one of the most cherished places on earth is Desolation Sound, just north of Georgian Strait, on the watery way to Alaska. To quote Finis Mitchell in his book *Wind River Trails*, mountains are “the best medicine for a troubled mind. Seldom does man ponder his own insignificance. He thinks he is master of all things. He thinks the world is his without bonds. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Only when he tramps the mountains...communing with nature, observing other insignificant creatures about him...does he awaken to his own short-lived presence on earth.”

The memories of the experience continue to sear, reverberate, haunt. Thirty years on, I contacted Jim and invited him to accompany me on an anniversary return trip. Not knowing any wilderness patrolman there, or anywhere for that matter, we contracted with an outfitter to help us travel on horseback up to the bench. Never having ridden a horse, I was a little concerned for my safety. Because of the time and expense, I did not even consider riding lessons. This proved fortuitous because I consulted a slim volume titled *Some Horses*, discovering writer Tom McGuane. The book taught me a lot and soothed nerves, removing doubt. It was very well written. Of course, I had not suspected that the author was the only man ever inducted into not only the National Cutting Horse Hall of Fame but the Flyfishing Hall of Fame and that he had written several nationally recognized novels, most notably *92 In The Shade*, nominated for the National Book Award. He also wrote screenplays, the best-known for the film *Missouri Breaks*. McGuane has published several collections of essays and currently writes fiction for the *New Yorker*. His best articles on fishing assembled in *The Longest Silence* are *de rigeur* reading for all literate fly fishermen.

Having an unimproved technique such as mine, McGuane learned to make flyfishing second nature by remembering to practice casting. He placed a rigged fly rod on his porch and trained every time he came home. My yard was not big enough to accommodate a back cast but I ignored the problem and stood by the gate allowing the back cast to roll out across the street behind me. Disconcerting for some car drivers to see a fly line emerging from between the shrubbery across their street path. I sure heard about it from one irate lady who was frightened enough to slow her car which allowed the back casted fly line to wrap her antenna.

On the return trip, Jim, his 14-year-old son, my friend Tom and I entered from the northwest via the New Fork Lakes trailhead, but not until the desiccation of late August, expecting the bugs to be gone. They were mostly absent, but so were the fish, fattened all summer on piscatorial fare. We caught a few, but the trout were hardly on the bite, never ravenous like before. Having labored up the steep mountain trails all summer, the horses were in terrific shape. Even though they afforded us exceptional mobility up high, we were tethered to them, having to be fed, watered, hobbled for the night, found in the morning, tacked out; saddled up to ride them. Still, we took advantage of the access we were afforded and rode up the Highline Trail from our base camp at Summit Lake into the Elbow Lake drainage to fish. After catching a few, we then scrambled up 12,978-foot Stroud Peak. An astonishing panorama unfolded, even for the Winds, with a view of Mt. Oeneis, named for the genus of alpine butterflies found in the range. On the last morning of the trip, this high up in the mountains, of course, it snowed. The horses shivered and there were not enough gloves to go around. Riding out we happened upon a herd of Elk, like ghosts in the misty woods.

⁷ https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/fseprd645666.pdf

As we descended, the inclemency passed, and the weather warmed. Our steeds were impatient to see their buddies back at Elkhart and challenging to restrain. We were soon back in the desert and besieged by civilization.

If you go now, the range is so popular that you must have a permit. Of course, we would not chance it today without better gear and probably would be too timid to go, at least the way we did, on the fly, rather ‘dirtbag’ style, without highfalutin freeze-dried meals and Arc’teryx rain gear or GPS, all that makes adventure stale and unexciting. We could have benefited from Finis Mitchell’s quaint, then yet-to-be-published “Wind River Trails.”⁸ We would have learned about the Golden Trout from the internet and seen them in cell phone selfies on Instagram, just like all the hordes who have practically fished them out. We cherish the innocence of our salad (rice) days, the wanderlust that comes from not knowing and unprepossessing, the grace bestowed by wilderness, and the dignity that comes without pretense. Strike that. Let’s just say that we lived in the moment; frankly, that’s about all there was to do.

⁸ Still in print since 1975.