

My Favorite Mountain Memory

By Shannon Love

When I was a child, my family went backpacking in the Cloud Peak Wilderness every summer. I lived for these trips, looking forward to them all through the long winter of cold and boredom.

This story takes place in my 10th summer, our third trip into the mountains. This particular trip, the grownups had decided it would be fun for us to journey up the highest peak in the area, aptly named Cloud Peak. We had already hiked to and set up camp on the shores of Misty Moon Lake, at the base of said peak. Local wisdom claimed that it was only a “day hike” from the lake shore to the peak. I think it is possible some people’s definition of “day” differs, but we will get to that later.

Our little troupe consisted of my Dad, my cousin, Mark (age 12), my Dad’s friend, Bill, and his son, Sean, (age 11), and of course, myself. We had a hearty breakfast in camp, and packed for our hike. We brought day packs that held ponchos for rain, a bag of raisin and peanut trail snack each, a light jacket, and such other items the adults thought might be necessary. We certainly didn’t need the jackets as we started out, as the sun was well in the sky and it was a beautiful day for a hike.

Up, up we went. Us kids loved the boulder fields, exclaiming at the ones that were larger than houses. Somewhere there exists a picture of me, Mark and Sean, pushing at one that appears to be precariously perched on the side of the mountain. It was actually quite solid, but it looked super cool! As we climbed higher, we came across fields of snow, amazing to see in the height of summer. We skidded across the slick surface and threw snowballs at one another. It was tremendous.

The sun was no longer just “high,” it was starting to tilt well to the West, but we were all eager to reach the peak, which was, by then, in sight. Let me note here, that mountain distances tend to be a bit farther than mere mortal distances, but we persevered. At last we reached the summit. The view was nothing short of amazing. In the long, magical glow of the late afternoon sun, I could see the glint of a frozen lake far, far below. My Dad held my feet, as I lay on my stomach and gazed down at it, snapping a few pictures on my Kodak. We all signed our names and ages on the paper at the peak, (sealed in a jar), and began to turn our thoughts toward heading back to camp.

I suspect the adults felt some concern as they realized how late it was. I recall that I didn’t give it a second thought. One always goes faster downhill, right? We had a blast, especially when we reached the snow fields and were able to “ski” across. Us kids declared to the now worried adults, “That saved a bunch of time, didn’t it?”

Soon it was dusk and cooling off quite nicely. Bill was regaling us with tales of his new flashlight, “The best one money could buy,” he claimed. “Why, you could throw it in the lake and see it from the bottom! People in the town 50 miles away would be able to see it like a beacon!” We would have plenty of light to continue our descent. So we stopped on a ledge in the dusk and had our snack while we waited for Bill to get out the famous flashlight.

He went through the day pack once, then again, then again, even finding an ancient piece of aluminum can in a crevice, left there who knows how many years ago. The flashlight was not there.

Well, Sean, Mark and I thought this was OK. A campout on the side of the mountain sounded like a great adventure! Of course, it was a little chilly. Dad and Bill sort of bookended us kids and arranged the ponchos over all of us and we hunkered down for the night. Now, an alpine night, even in the summer is not just chilly — it is rather cold. I tried putting my head under the poncho and using my breath to warm the air, but that just caused condensation to rain down on me, so I gave it up. I spent a lot of time watching the jewel strewn sky. We counted shooting stars, and although I wasn’t comfortable, I was very happy.

Finally the sun came back up and we finished our hike back to the lake. I don’t know about everyone else, but I hit my warm sleeping bag and slept like a rock for several hours.

I never did see that flashlight!

You just read my daughter Shannon’s fond memory of a childhood adventure. I remember it a little differently: here’s my memory of the same event.

My Scariest Mountain Memory

By Buckskin Jim

Every year there are reports of people coming to a tragic end in the mountains, usually because of an excess of hubris and a lack of planning and common sense. Way back in the last century, when I was young and strong and overly self-confident I was in a group that nearly became one of those statistics.

In late June with my 10 year old daughter, Shannon, her cousin, and my friend Bill and his young son I set out to climb 13,000 foot Cloud Peak in Wyoming. The Forest Service map showed a marked hiking trail up the south face to the summit that we had been told was a long day hike from our base camp at Mistymoon Lake, which was itself well above timberline and a long day’s backpack from a trailhead. It probably was a “long day hike” for experienced adult hikers starting at dawn. But three-fifths of our group were not adults and we didn’t start at dawn.

The sun was already melting the frost off our tents when we awakened at Mistymoon. By the time we got the kids up and ready and had breakfast the sun was well-up. You know how it goes. We all carried a daypack with trail snacks and a light jacket.

Bill and I each had a plastic poncho and he had a good flashlight. In that time and place you didn't need to carry water: the abundant snow-melt was perfectly safe to drink.

As we climbed up from Mistymoon the smooth, plain trail soon became a series of rock cairns spaced at intervals among the boulders and fields of melting snow. The trick was to stand next to a cairn and scan the skyline ahead for the next cairn. The sound of running water was everywhere, even below us, out of sight under the boulders. The snow fields were wet and dense enough for easy walking but you had to be careful about breaking through into voids between the boulders. Between and under the snow fields were expanses of boulders, some the size of cars. Hopping from one to the next could be slow going, especially for the kids. Sometimes a Buick-size boulder would shift a little as we moved across it. We laughed and chattered happily in the sunshine: it was lots of fun... We were clueless.

We stopped for lunch next to a tumbling stream of melt water. We were all getting tired from steady climbing in the thin air. Bill and I discussed the fact that the sun was about at its zenith, the day half over. We had to leave ourselves time to return to base camp before dark. Despite this brief flash of good sense, we convinced ourselves to keep climbing. We had set the goal of climbing to the summit and didn't want to give up. The kids were doing surprisingly well; having a ball, in fact. The days are really long in June: twilight lasts until nearly 11:00 p.m. Going back down would be faster than climbing up, etc., etc. We might be very close to the summit. "Let's climb just a little farther to see if we can see the top."

We climbed to the next cairn and, sure enough, we could see what looked like the summit some distance above us. We set out with renewed energy and when we reached that spot it turned out not to be the summit... But we could see it just ahead. After repeating that exercise in self-delusion a few times, we finally did reach the final cairn at the very top of Cloud Peak. At the bottom of the cairn was a Mason jar containing the names of people who had made it to the top. We added our names to the list and took lots of pictures. On the north side of Cloud Peak was a sheer cliff. Lying down and peering over the precipice, we could see a small glacier among the rocks and snow far below. Eddies of snow were blowing across it. Standing again, we took more pictures in all directions. To the north and east we could see all the way out the distant plains. To the west the sun was low in the sky. Bill and I exchanged a worried look. "Ok, kids. Time to go back down." Going down was not really any quicker than climbing up. While we made a little better time slip-sliding down the snowfields, descending over the boulders was actually slower.

We were still in the rocks and snow as the sun sank to the horizon. I looked at Bill, "We don't have enough light left to get off this mountain." Bill grinned, "Not to worry. I brought a really good flashlight. I can adjust the beam from a spot to pick out the route to a flood to walk

by. It's got a 12-hour battery, it's waterproof, and built to withstand being dropped from an airplane. When the daylight runs out we can stop for a break and I'll dig it out of my pack."

The light really started to fail as we crossed a football field-sized snow field. Arriving at the boulders at the edge of the snow, Bill took off his daypack. "Time for that flashlight." Reaching into an outer pocket of the pack he pulled out a large candy bar. "Oops! Wrong pocket." He searched through the entire pack, then went through it again. "Uh....Jim? I guess I don't have that flashlight after all."

That's when it finally dawned on us that we had really screwed up. We had brought three kids to the middle of this high altitude expanse of rocks and snow; it was getting dark, and cold...and we were stuck. The kids looked exhausted but were still in adventure mode. They looked up at me with the unspoken question, "What's next, Cap'n?" I forced a smile. "You kids finish the last of the snacks and share that candy bar. Bill and I will figure out what to do."

We took stock of our situation. It was impossible to continue over the boulder fields in the moonless dark. Our pant legs and boots were soaked from the snow-melt and the temperature was dropping toward freezing. We each had a dry light weight jacket and Bill and I each had a plastic poncho. We had to stay where we were until daylight and sitting or lying on the snow was out of the question. We had to bivouac in the boulders. There was no other option.

We managed to arrange some of the smaller rocks to make small platform with just enough room for us all to lie down. As is usual in the mountains, the day's warm upslope breeze was now blowing downslope, off the ice and snow. It was a completely tainted place to spend the night: 'taint warm, 'taint smooth, 'taint level, 'taint comfortable, 'taint optional.

With one poncho under us to keep the wind from blowing up through the rocks and the other one over us we lay down with our feet in our daypacks for the extra warmth. Bill was on the downhill side and I was uphill, the kids packed snugly between us. Sleeping was out of the question: it was simply a matter of trying to stay warm until daylight.

The kids seemed warm enough, and Bill wasn't complaining (he wouldn't) but I, on the uphill side didn't have enough poncho to effectively block that cold downslope breeze. That, combined with hunger and fatigue meant I was gradually losing body heat. We had to keep the kids safe at all costs so I determined to just hang in there until dawn. The kids were watching for shooting stars and Bill was pointing out constellations, so I knew they were all right.

After what seemed hours, everyone was quiet and I didn't seem to notice the cold so much. Then I had an idea. Why hadn't I thought of this earlier? I'd simply feel my way down off the mountain, return to base camp, get our sleeping bags and bring them back up to my stranded companions. I got up and began tightening my bootlaces. Bill asked, "What's up, Jim?" I told him my plan to rescue us all. "I'll be back with the sleeping bags in a couple hours."

“You can’t do that. Get back under the poncho.”

“Nope, I can do it. Be back in a couple hours.”

Bill had to physically restrain me. “Jim, you’re hypothermic. It makes you so you can’t think straight. Trust me, it’s just not possible to go down the mountain in the dark.” He forced me back into our little nest. “Here, you take my place and I’ll take the upwind spot for a while.”

“Well, maybe you’re right.”

“Damn right I’m right! It’ll be daylight in a couple hours. We can hold out for two more hours. “

Out of the wind and with the warm kids against my back, I almost dozed off in spite of the rocky bed.

Eventually, the stars began to dim and we could make out the hulking shapes of the surrounding boulders. I was recovered at least to the point I was thinking straight again. We were all cold and stiff but able to move about, folding the ponchos and organizing our daypacks. By this time it was light enough to pick out the trail. We slowly and stiffly made our way down toward base camp.

Presently the sun rose, our stiff muscles loosened up and we came down from the rocks and snow onto the smooth trail to our camp at Mistymoon, two or three miles away in the sunshine. I gave my daypack to Bill to carry while I ran ahead down the trail to make cocoa and start a hot breakfast.

After a hot meal and dry socks we all burrowed into our sleeping bags for some much needed sleep. As I was drifting off I heard Bill exclaim, “Here’s my flashlight! It was in my bed the whole time.”