

2010

## *Merry Christmas!!*

Inspiration. That's what it takes to write my annual holiday novelette. This year I looked at my sandal strap tan lines. Ah yes, chasing the endless sunshine across the country; the campfire smoke tearing the eyes; those wonderful blue jays and bison and bears (oh my).

But let's not get ahead of ourselves.

Nancy and I are still working in Safeco under the Liberty Mutual logo. Her big news is completing her CPCU designation (that's one of those important insurance things). I got mine in 1999, not because of my love of insurance, but because I wanted an expense paid trip to the annual conference (which was in Boston that year – the fall colors and hiking were fantastic). This year the conference was in Orlando, and Nancy has been talking about Disneyworld for years. With a nice piece of the trip paid for, we packed up the entire family for a September week in sunny Florida. I'm not a real big fan of the entire mouse ear franchise, but the kids loved it. Walt D really liked spreading his theme parks around in FL, but we did our best to get to all of them since the odds of coming back are pretty slim. With 95% humidity and 95F temps, the pores got a really good workout. We even got one good thunderstorm (six inches of rain in two hours) just to make us miss home. At this stage of my life, I can say my curiosity of the coastal southeast has been, for the time being, satisfied.

Somehow I'm still managing to telecommute full time, although I go in the office once a week to keep a face with the name. It's been about four years since I struck this arrangement, and my current managers finally asked "Why?". Hmmm. Nevertheless, it was time to create a real office working space better than the spare room. After much consideration, I found the perfect match for my outdoor personality: a canvas platform tent. I found a tent maker out of Denver that generally makes stuff for elk hunters, guides and resorts. Passed them my specifications, built a raised platform out in the green belt, ran to it power and cable, made some serious awning and splash guard modification for our wet Pacific Northwest climate, and Presto! My new T-office (tent – office). In the summer it opens up like a big screen room. In the winter it's heated to a toasty 80F. I threw a couple of cots and flat screen in it, so it makes for a cozy movie night with the kids and very comfortable backyard camping. The only issues so far are during a hard rain it sounds like I'm in a snare drum taking heavy firing a machine gun. And then at work they just issued us web cams for virtual meetings. If I show too much background, it looks I'm calling in from on an African safari.

Jaclyn has some big changes this year. Mainly in size and attitude. She's about an inch and a half short of meeting me eye to eye, while stripping the kitchen pantry of food like a feral goat. She is in her last year of middle school in honors, which has given her irrefutable worldly knowledge about everything (except how to take out the trash), and great aptitude with the television remote control and digital recorder. The doctor hasn't confirmed it yet, but I'm almost positive there is a leather magnet in her butt that is keeping her glued to the sofa. Fortunately there is ample soccer practice and games to get her outside, but I'm pretty sure high school is going to be just a challenging for me and Nancy as it is for her. The bright side is she enjoys the various school projects



demanding by her classes, and sometimes I can get her back into the garage like in the old days. That three foot paper mache replica of an Easter Island statue will be a real keeper when she moves into that first dorm room. Good times.

Mitch has come into his full stride as well. This year he got glasses, which combined with his bowl hair cut makes him an easy Harry Potter clone. It's doesn't help that he is deep in the fifth book, quotes characters non stop, and that scar he got on the forehead a couple years ago is now really paying off. In school he joined the ranks of what is called the called the Highly Capable program, which provides smaller class size and advanced work. Jumping from second to forth grade math has been a little challenging, but at least it's keeping his mind busy (less time for designing pipe bombs or learning to misspell 'manifesto'). The thing I miss most is that his curriculum means he'll skip state capitals. I've taken so much pride over the years of screaming out Montpelier and Raleigh in trivia games. Mitch also got the Cub Scout bug. Maybe it's just a uniform thing, but he really enjoys the pack meetings and earning patches with the other kids in his den. Shortly after he was born I got an engraved pocket knife for him, just waiting for the day he was mature enough to handle sharp objects. From what I'm seeing of his natural scouting ability, I'm thinking he might be old enough to handle it in about another twenty years.

This year for the family trip to the grand daddy of all national parks: Yellowstone. I even towed the tent trailer. The route was down thru Idaho, in from the south, then home via Montana. It was just under two weeks of pure Americana. We camped at Craters of the Moon NM, walked the lava fields, crawled thru cave-like lava tubes, and saw amazing stars. Next was the EBR-1 facility (energy breeder reactor – first generation of peaceful atomic power). We got to hit buttons and spin dials on the old control panels, walk all over the nuclear core, and bask in pure 1950's science. But no visit to Idaho would be complete without seeing the Potato Expo and Museum. Other than finding out some fascinating facts about russets, we also made them back up their saying "We Give Free Taters to Out of Staters." As for Yellowstone, we set up camp in Grant Village off the shore of Lake Yellowstone's West Thumb. From there for five days we radiated outward. The history there is rich and we absorbed it all. There were countless thermals, canyons, waterfalls, wildlife, and millions of tourist who were a danger to themselves and others. I pride myself on being able to fix anything, but I can't fix stupid. I was able to successfully offset my feelings of utter helplessness with lots of day hikes, big campfires, and a constant stream of Forest Gump quotes.

Well, that about it. I could go on and on, but let's end on a high note. Merry Christmas to you and yours, and a happy holiday season to all.

*Dave, Nancy, Jaclyn, Mitch*

PS: Photos on card L-R: Kids in front of the post office at Fort Yellowstone, family above Lake Yellowstone, Kids at Disney wild animal thing.



## *Mountain Man Year in Review*

The 15<sup>th</sup> annual snow camp kicked off January in style. We finally made it to the coveted Methow Valley, snow lover's paradise in north central Washington. In true SK fashion, we rented an unheated 12x12 cabin in a trailer park. Other than burning old Xmas trees for heat in a washing machine tub burn barrel, we got in some great snowshoe miles in the 20°F weather. A couple of the guys even did wine tasting and most enjoyed some live jazz while sipping micro brews at an old school house turned tavern. I guess we are showing our age.

Orcas Island in the San Juan Islands was another continued February tradition with Jaclyn. Temps were pretty kind this year, but we got a good dose of rain over our four day camp at Moran Park. Her legs are really stretching out these days, which means next year we are doing some real miles. And she's taking some of my daypack weight. After seven years of doing this trip, I think her time with Dad is waning. But we still have one or two left.

May brought shrimping in the Hood canal. I made Jac pull up the pots from 200 feet just to build character. The weather was unusually sunny and almost pleasant. And those little fella's tasted fine with butter and garlic over heat. But they did get me in the end: I lost my wallet. But I'm thinking the risk of identity theft is pretty among shellfish whose eyes explore when they come to the surface.

Mid May also found me re-tracing the famous Press Expedition of 1889 - first party to cross the heart of the Olympic mountain range. It took them six months of hardship to cover the 48 miles. I and a hiking friend did it in just over 50 hours. Of course, we had a trail and our gear stripped to the bone, but the various barefoot river ford crossing, the hours post holing and route finding at Low Divide pass, tough spring mountain weather, and the twenty mile day out of the chute still gave the body a good dose of ache.

June was the Lake Quinault Cancer bike ride. Thirty miles deep in the rainforest that happens to hit a 80°F day and full sun. This year I decided to break down and get a t-shirt, something I do sparing to avoid t-shirt overload. The random color this year was hot pink. Oh well, at least it takes the attention away from my kilt.

July found me hiking in the Blue Mtns in the southeast portion of the state in the Toucannon area. Our 35 mile route was cut short when at the five mile mark the trail just vanished. We understood this was primitive wilderness area (mostly horse packing), but several hours of exploring games trail and orienteering brought us no nearer the prominent trail on the map we were seeking. Since water was dependant on locating natural springs and the risk of missing them going cross country was too high, we modified the trip and salvage it by visiting the Oregon Butte fire lookout. It was a fine place to pitch a tent or two with splendid views. Amazing how dry the country was this early in the summer.



With summer in high gear, it just flew by. I actually ended up taking off three weeks in August. The big family campout in Kelso was hot, sunny, with the usual inner tube time in the river and coals under the dutch oven. I also found myself on top of Mt St Helens. Although I've been to the active volcanic summit several times over the years, this was the first with an actual permit (required) on the actual route (suggested). With an alpine start we began our ascent on a perfect morning. Low clouds socked in everything under four thousand feet, giving us airplane views and a pristine sunrise vista. Crampons bit the snow crust with solid traction, making the elevation open and enjoyable.

After Yellowstone came the kid hikes. For the younger kids, it was the Washington coast. The best weather you can hope for is generally 65°F, partially cloudy, and light wind. Instead we got 85°F, open skies. Between tree climbing, tide pool exploring, sea stack scaling, and poking at a massive dead sea lion, the kids also got to actually SWIM in the ocean. Crazy. With sandy beach stretches and ancient Indian petroglyphs, it was nine miles and a long weekend that made a lot of memories for growing kids. For the older kids, it was Headlight Basin and Ingalls Lake at the base of Mt. Stuart in the Alpines Lake Wilderness. A couple thousand feet of gain and solid upper digit miles from the trailhead, nary a complaint was heard. Which is surprising, because it was literally freezing. Packing for summer in the middle of august, we didn't quite expect the heavy cold front that kept daytime highs in the mid 40's with a 10mph wind from the north, and the upper teens for the lows on very clear nights. At one point I had to climb in my sleeping bag at two in the afternoon just to warm up. In the end we walked away with great views, good stories, and a group of kids that just loved asking their Dads question from old Trivial Pursuit cards from the 80's.

Then there's Yosemite. This one took a plane and rental car and a lot of trail mix. Someone hatched an idea to climb Half Dome, and it took seed with three of us. Even doing the cable route makes for a long day. Twenty years of experience made this trip enjoyable. An alpine start to avoid the 85°F morning temps, wrapping knees on the downs to reduce impact, swapping socks and using antiperspirant on the feet to keep them dry and friction free, taking a filter and hydrating continuously, all paid off tenfold. We spent an hour and a half on top and gazed over magnificent sheer faces of granite. I try not to remember the rest of the week in the Yosemite Valley. The people, development, the public pool with a permanent sign that reads 'If you have had diarrhea in the last week please do not swim.' John Muir is rolling in his grave. But like Yellowstone, some of the unique and majestic beauty can still shine thru if you can filter out the distractions and capture his vision.

The fall hike found us in a Indian summer on an early October weekend at aptly named Larch Lake. The tamaracks were in solid gold as the forest drank in the last long rays of a distant summer. Hills were fire red with heather, and the subtle whiff of sweet decay as the annuals dropped their faded canopies. Miles were easy and camp was good, with mirror reflections at our lakeshore camp. For the first time someone actually did some fishing, and adding a little pan seared lake trout to the menu was a nice change of pace.

I think I've rambled enough. Keep hiking, my friends. - dw