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## **Day 1, July 6—Pumice Flat Campground, Reds Meadow Road**

I arrive at the kiosk at the Minaret Summit entrance station and show my senior pass to the friendly ranger. An erasable board lists the Reds Meadow Valley campgrounds with how many campsites remain available at each one. There are several sites at Agnew Meadows by the trailhead. Aware of the boggy location of the Agnew campground, I ask the ranger how bad the mosquitoes are at Agnew. She replies, “Pretty bad.”

What about Pumice Flat? She says the mosquitoes are nowhere near as bad. I tell the ranger I think I’ll go to Pumice Flat. She smiles and replies that’s probably a good choice. She asks me what is my return date from my backpack trip out of Agnew. She writes down the date on a piece of paper and instructs me to show that to the ranger upon exiting. I ask where I can pull off and phone my wife. She points out the Minaret Summit side road just past the kiosk and wishes me a good trip.

I pull into the side road, get out of the car, and phone my wife, Barbara, at this last chance for voice communication. I tell her there are lots of campsites in Reds Meadow Valley and everything is going well so far. Having dealt with it twice this season, the Yosemite construction is a planned-for annoyance. It begins just east of Olmstead Point. Following a pilot car, a single lane leads the caravan past Tenaya Lake to Tuolumne Meadows. At Tuolumne, the other lane is being paved.

The rest of the drive over Tioga Pass is the spectacular yet familiar routine as the car winds down three thousand feet. At the bottom, I turn right on highway 395, still marveling at the view of the peaks ahead and to the west. The decrepit abandoned house by the road is still there, a thirty year running joke between Barbara and I that someday it will be ours. At the bottom of the big hill after June Lake, I exit at the Mammoth Scenic Loop to bypass traffic-filled highway 203 through Mammoth Lakes. I don’t see a single car until turning right onto Minaret Road. There’s a beehive of parked cars and pedestrians around the Mammoth Ski area and its huge parking lot. The road again becomes empty until I reach the kiosk at the entry to Reds Meadow Valley.

At the bottom of the narrow, winding Reds Meadow Road, I drive past the Agnew Meadows turn off, recalling this drive from over twenty years ago. At Pumice Flat Campground there are only three or four occupied campsites. The three sites to the right of the entrance are all vacant. I choose campsite #2 since #3 is by the creek with bushes so more likely to have mosquitoes. I erect the tent and sit down at the picnic table, contemplating this trip to Garnet and Thousand Island lakes.

I first visited Thousand Island and Garnet in 1998. I hiked past them, pausing only to marvel at their immense size for a High Sierra lake and awe-inspiring view of Banner Peak rising at the far end. Many photographs by both amateur and art gallery exhibitors beautifully capture that view. Nearly all of them fail to represent the essence of the scene's spirituality, that sense conjured within by witnessing something greater without.

For my 50th birthday in June 2001, I did almost this exact trip, hiking to and camping at Garnet and Thousand Island with Barbara and our son Gordon. I've wanted a final return visit for years. I've cancelled two reserved permits: One because I decided to go elsewhere when an alternate permit opened up, and the other because I had to wear a 24-hour heart monitor for the month of July 2020. This year, I'm going to do it while I still can. How many Sierra backpacking trips are left for me at my age of 71? I tell myself, don't count possibilities; take it one trip at a time. Focus on this trip, not possible future trips.

At this point in my life, I'm gravitating to car camping. Last year, I was thinking car camping was an adequate substitute until I went backpacking. Once I was in Dusy and Palisade Basins, I comprehended the profound difference between a drive-in campground, no matter how beautiful, and wilderness serenity and solitude. Explaining what wilderness conjures in our human essence seems impossible. It is beyond human language, more complex and profound than mere words.

I like it at Pumice Flat. Camping here makes me want to return at some future time. The other campers are far away, out of earshot except when the children yell, as all kids seem compelled to do around water. After dinner, I walk

around the campground and discover a day-use parking area a little beyond the camping area by the Middle Fork of the San Joaquin. I take photos and wander back along the Reds Meadow Road to the campground and my campsite where I write by Luci light. Total darkness falls as I crawl into the tent.

## **Day 2, July 7—Agnew Meadows to Garnet Lake**

I am up at 5:30 though I didn't sleep much after 4:00. At Agnew Meadows, there are lots of people at the trailhead parking before 7:00, obviously getting past the entrance kiosk to Reds Meadow Valley and thus avoiding taking the required shuttle bus. As I unload my pack, camera, and trekking pole and lock the car, four separate parties head up the River Trail.

I follow them a few minutes later. At the double log crossing past Agnew Meadow, I allow two other groups who had caught up cross first. There's no reason to exhibit my old-age tentative balance. After they nonchalantly make their way over the logs, I follow at my much slower, take-each-step, pace.

I descend down to the Middle Fork of the San Joaquin, coming across three different small groups of day-hiking fishermen stopping at likely spots along the river. Ohlaine Lake is pretty in the morning light. Until the junction with the Shadow Lake Trail, I am moving along at the standard backpacker's pace of two miles an hour; I think I am hiking at a better than expected pace. Once the gradual ascent begins after the junction, I revert to the expected snail's pace.

At a lovely spot overlooking the river, I stop for a snack. A young couple passes by followed by a packer with a string of horses. When I come to a three-way junction, the couple are perusing their map, trying to figure out which way to go. There are no signs to help with navigation. I recall in 2001 there was also no sign at the Garnet Lake Trail junction. I put down my pack as they ask me about the three trails. I reply, "I think this one is Garnet Lake and the that one," pointing to the one on the right, "goes to Thousand Island. I'm going to cheat," and get out my GPS. The blue triangle indicates I am standing at the Garnet Junction waypoint.

As I am showing the couple the GPS readout, another couple appears from the middle of the three trails. They tell us that it is merely a trail to a campsite despite its obvious heavy use. Behind them, the woman packer appears, having dropped off her resupply. The young couple take the right hand trail to Thousand Island, the couple from the middle trail follow the packer to Agnew Meadows, and I take the left hand trail to the river and Garnet Lake.

The river flow is not high, more late August than July. I see one way to rock hop across. I opt to wade, taking off my socks, stuffing them in the water bottle side pocket, and carefully wade across by a log that helps with balance. Once across, I find a convenient rock to sit on and put on my dry socks.

The steep trail up through the forest twists and turns. Since it is not a packer trail, the switchbacks are minimal. In a couple of places, the trail divides before the short segments come back together. The path eventually heads back towards the Garnet outlet creek as it cascades down to the river. The trail comes to a level area with cliffs above. There is an avalanche leading up to the lowest point of the cliffs. A faint trail winds up through the tumble of rocks. A man is coming down. After exchanging greetings, he asks if I've ever done this before. "This wasn't here when I was here in 2001," I reply.

He offers some pertinent advice for climbing a ledge, which I follow. At the top, I look down on Garnet Lake and, to the right, the bridge over the outlet creek. There's a sign informing hikers that this trail is not for stock. A woman makes her way towards me and asks if this is the John Muir Trail (JMT). No, I reply; it's there, pointing to the trail from the bridge; this trail goes down to the San Joaquin. She thanks me, finds the JMT, and heads left to Shadow Lake.

I cross the bridge, enjoying the outlet creek as it passes under me. At the far end, a pair of logs form the path off the bridge. I look for a better exit that does not require me to overcome my shaky balance. One of the bridge supports allows me to sit down and gently lower myself down to the rock slab below.

With Garnet Lake to the left, I follow the JMT until it turns right. A use trail leads down to the lake. It soon disappears in a small avalanche. The path

continues on the far side of the rocks. Continuing on the use trail, I remember in 2001 a relatively straightforward walk near lakeside until we found a lovely campsite. A more prominent use trail appears from the right and I follow it. This is much easier walking. It would have been better if I stayed on the JMT a little longer instead of taking the use trail down towards the lake. I assume this trail is the one the GPS map terms the “Garnet campsites trail.”

Soon the “Garnet campsites” appear to the left. A couple of tent sites sit on a level area the required hundred feet from the lake. To the left, higher up in the breeze, is another campsite. There is a lovely view of Banner Peak and a perfect rock for leaning against below the tent area. A peninsula is a short way up the lake and probably also has at least one campsite. At this point, I do not have the energy or desire to investigate the peninsula and its possible campsites. I’ve found this place and that’s that.

After erecting the tent, a man and his grown-up son appear from the “Garnet campsites trail” looking for a campsite. We have a brief conversation about Garnet, the view, and campsites. They reject the sites by the lakeshore and head off to the peninsula. They return and take a site about a hundred feet away separated from my view by a stand of whitebarks. I am unaware of their presence. They seem to want to appreciate this place in solitude as much as I do.

The wind continues, keeping the mosquitoes away. There are clouds of mosquitoes in the bushes by the lake below. There is something distinctly immense about Garnet Lake. There is not the sense of intimacy as at Picket Creek Lake or the off-trail Dusy Basin lakes despite those lakes’ grand vistas.

After dinner, I follow the use trail below my campsite around the small bay to the long peninsula jutting out on Garnet Lake. Part way out is a picture-postcard view of Banner Peak. I hope my photos manage to convey something beyond, some essence. After sunset, I return to my campsite and jot down notes until approaching darkness renders writing unreadable.

I say good-night to Garnet Lake, crawl into the tent, turn on the Luci light, arrange my stuffed t-shirt pillow, and am soon sound asleep.

## **Day 3, July 8— Garnet Lake to 1,000 Island Lake**

I awake at 5:15. By 5:35, I'm on the peninsula. A couple of minutes later, the first light appears on Banner Peak. A golden glow slowly makes its way from the topmost crags down the face of the mountains, expressing joy at the rebirth of another mountain morning. Dawn, sunrise and early morning in the High Sierra are always magical. Only rain could cause it to not be a magnificent morning.

The emotions conjured forth at each sunrise, each sunset are distinct. We realize it is something from deep inside the core of our being. It is not our immortal soul as our various formal religions declare. It is something beyond immortality. It is something beyond the delineation of words. It is beyond mere human characterization or classification.

What we perceive is a fleeting glimpse of the essence of life itself. All the definitions and distortions evaporate. It is a glance at infinity. Then this momentary awareness comes crashing down and thrusts us back into the limits of human biological existence. The glimpse of the timeless universe dissolves.

Today is an unknown day since I am climbing the ridge separating Garnet and Thousand Island instead of following the JMT. The way is clear on the map, but I do not know if reality will conform to the map, Steve Roper's High Route narrative, and the numerous trip reports. One does not really know until one experiences a location first-hand. What is one person's experience is not necessarily someone else's. Unless one is following a clear use trail, cross-country travel is an adventure. Even if in retrospect one concludes the provided description is accurate, we may ascend by a slightly different route. When one person has a straightforward climb, another may come across a cliff-out and so create a different climb. Each one of us discovers something new and different in the wilderness.

I head west on the "Garnet Lake campsites trail," following the path until it divides. One path heads down to the lake and additional campsites. The other continues well above and away from the water until it disappears

at a rock outcropping. I head over the outcropping and continue walking, choosing what seems to be the best way diagonally up, passing through sparse forest. I enjoy the minor route finding quandaries since the ultimate goal is obvious and time is not an issue.

After a little walking, I continue at the same altitude straight across to an open area where I come on a faint use trail. I deduce this is probably created by people following Roper's High Route. It heads up to the low point on the ridge separating Garnet and Thousand Island Lakes.

I soon reach the broad top of the ridge and see the sparkling water of Thousand Island Lake. Continuing over the broad ridge, the immense grandeur of Thousand Island Lake appears stretched out below, an awe-inspiring sight. I find some rocks in the scattered pines, put down my pack, and enjoy a snack. I walk over the broad overlook, taking photos, and trying to spy possible campsites on the southwest end of Thousand Island. A band of trees stretches above the lakeshore. I assume there should be one, if not several campsites among those trees. There are three small lakes just to the west that probably offer more secluded camping, but I want to be on Thousand Island itself.

I return to my pack and begin the long trek down to the lake. It's all simple class 1 walking around the small ridge that juts out from Banner Peak. I am enchanted by the orange color of some of the rock surrounding Thousand Island. A geologist could elucidate and enlighten concerning these colorful rocks. I see one group camped above the lake as I head down towards the far end of Thousand Island and the long line of trees seen from the ridge.

A peninsula juts out into the lake. There's a tent area at the near end much too close to the water to be considered legal. I find a rock to put my pack down near the line of trees and head up to search for a campsite. Following the lines of trees, first on the far side, I don't see a campsite except a couple of level areas on top of flowers and other vegetation. I continue all the way down the line of trees and find nothing that would be considered a legal campsite. Finally, I give up and head back along the near side to retrieve my pack, which is now out of sight at least an eighth of a mile away. As I walk, I detour up to



the trees at likely locations and find nothing. I eventually reach my pack and sit down to contemplate what to do. The area down by the inlet creek looks the most promising.

On the way, I meet a Sierra High Route traveler who has come from Twin Island Lakes. He says the way between Twin Island and Lake Catherine was rather dicey, but extols Bench Canyon, which I agree with. I adored my two nights in Bench Canyon and have been hoping to return, though I realize that is probably not going to happen.

I cross the inlet creek, come to a large peninsula jutting out, and explore it for a campsite. I find the tent sized bare ground of a legal campsite with a lovely view of the lake. Unfortunately, the wind roars at gale force; it almost knocks me over. I sit down, back to the wind, look to the shoreline a hundred yards away, and spy a couple of other possibilities. The first one is a large area of flat rock amid erratics, but no tent area. About two hundred feet away is another possibility with a definite tent area. I head over. The lakeside use trail goes by about fifty feet away with the lake another fifty or so feet below. I put down my pack and reconnoiter down the lake for about another eighth of a mile. I see no other campsites except possibly much farther up the lake. I want to camp at the west end of the lake away from the hordes on the JMT. I return to my pack and decide this is as good as it gets. I am too tired from battling the wind to keep looking and this is definitely a well-used campsite.

What ensues, especially in retrospect, is a comic attempt to erect the tent in that wind, a real life Buster Keaton routine. The tent stakes will not pound into the rocky ground. There are several large rocks obviously used by previous campers to secure their tent. I put one on each corner, placing the largest one on the corner receiving the strongest wind. After attaching the poles to the body of the tent. I am attempting to hook on the rain fly when an immense gust lifts the tent. The tent stake under that largest rock pops out along with that corner of the tent. The rock may be the biggest, but it does not lie flat enough to hold down the stake or the stake loop. It requires all my strength to prevent the tent from blowing away.

While standing on the errant corner and thinking of the tornado sequence in Keaton's *Steamboat Bill*, I try to find another rock. By this time, the rest of the tent has rotated around. I find a suitable replacement rock and place it on the corner. I spend about thirty minutes keeping one hand and arm gripping a tent pole while rotating the tent and placing the rocks back in their proper position. This is when solo backpacking has one of its major drawbacks. Another person would make this much simpler and easier. Of course, no one has happened by on the lakeside trail for the last hour to render assistance.

I get the billowing rainfly in the correct direction and attach it to a corner. As long as the tent does not decide to blow away, it's a matter of attaching the rainfly's other three corners correctly. When that's done, I stretch out the vestibule and place an immense rock saved for this purpose to hold it down. I find another large rock for the rear and reinforce all the rocks. When another immense gust occurs, everything remains in place. Satisfied the tent will stay put, I position my pad, sleeping bag, and clothes in the tent. Exhausted, I sit leaning against the long wall behind the tent with a superb view of Banner Peak and the southwest end of Thousand Island Lake. It is finally time to relax.

I enjoy the rest of the afternoon, munching on snacks and wandering around this corner of the lake. After dinner, I find places to take photos of the light on the uncountable islands, Banner Peak, and its neighbors. The west-facing edge of Mt. Ritter reflects the day's last light as the moon rises to the left of Banner Peak. Pink clouds fill the sky to create a magnificent sunset. The days' efforts are more than rewarded.

I return to my campsite to send the final SPOT message of the day. The SPOT does not turn on. Barbara will be in a panic if she does not receive a message. The "at the campsite" sent when I arrived here went through just fine. What is going on?

A group of three men are camped a couple of hundred yards away. Maybe one of them has an In-Reach or SPOT? I walk to their campsite, apologize for disturbing them, and ask if one of them might have an In-Reach or SPOT, explaining my wife will be upset if she does not hear from me. Yes, they all carry

satellite devices. The one with the In-Reach with Bluetooth hands me his phone to type in my message. I confess to being a clumsy, slow text messenger whose fat fingers make numerous typos that require correcting, which I soon prove. The owner takes back his phone and asks me what message. I tell him, “SPOT dead. Using neighbor In-Reach. Will hike out tomorrow.”

The message goes through. I thank the men and walk back in the dark to my campsite by the light of the moon.

## **Day 4 July 9— 1,000 Island Lake**

I have an uneasy sleep and wake a little before 5:00 a.m., remembering that there is a method to reactivate the SPOT. Lying in the tent, I push the power and select buttons, holding them down and counting “one thousand, two thousand, three thousand. . .” until I reach twenty. Nothing happens. I continue holding the buttons. Finally, the screen appears. The unit is back on. I just needed to do what SPOT calls a “hard reset.” Why I didn’t remember this earlier serves as a good example of the tunnel vision one can succumb to when solo in the wilderness.

I go outside and send Barbara a text to tell her the SPOT is working again. I receive a message from Barbara sent last night telling me not to hike out today; enjoy the trip. She knows I am safe and there are other people around to offer help.

By the lakeshore, I take sunrise photos, though the wind prevents any reflections. After breakfast, I notice my neighbors are up, walk over, and inform them I succeeded in getting the SPOT working using the reset procedure. I thank them again for their assistance and wish them a good hike back to Agnew Meadows.

Today I hope to go to Lake Catherine and finally see that spot on the map I’ve been wondering about for so many years. One place on a map can leave us with indifference and others call saying “come to me.” Each of us has our own places that beckon. For me it is Kawaeah Basin, Upper Basin, Lakes Basin, Pioneer Basin, Bighorn Plateau, Precipice Lake, Cotton Lake, all the way back to 1978 when I picked out Fletcher Lake on a Wilderness Press map.

The climb up from Thousand Island Lake is a stroll in a timberline wonderland. The headwaters of the Middle Fork of the San Joaquin wind through stands of whitebarks, rocks, and slabs. A use trail follows the creek, sometimes indistinct, sometimes a trench. Further up, the use trail ends at a talus field. Beyond, I spy an indistinct use trail at two locations beyond the talus. I choose to the right. I learn coming back down, I should have gone left. The talus is not difficult, though time consuming since each step requires intense concentration. Talus fields are one Sierra landscape I'm now sick of dealing with.

I get through the talus to meadow grass and small rocks. At that point, I see five men who must have come up from the left. They are half my age, move much more quickly, and are full of energy. None stops to say hello, much less converse, despite my saying hello. The only response is a nod from one of the men. They each make their way through the small talus field at the bottom below the final climb up to Lake Catherine, which is at the top of a steep snowfield.

The front person of the group heads straight up the snow. The others follow on slightly different routes. The climb looks possible and not overly difficult. The descent does not. The steepness could cause me to lose control coming back down. Controlling my speed may not be possible; careening into a talus pile does not seem a good idea. As a solo hiker for twenty-five years, I've learned to listen to my instincts. Right now, my instincts tell me to not try to descend that snowfield or talus alongside alone. I've been airlifted out by helicopter once; I do not want to ever do it again.

I sit down on a large flat, greenish talus slab. The view here at what the GPS says is North Glacier Pass is marvelous. Lake Catherine is directly above, about a hundred feet away. I don't need to go there. I am close enough to that point on the map to satisfy my curiosity. I don't need to engage in risky behavior to enjoy being here. It was a minor adventure to get here and a lot of fun.

After a snack, I cross back over the talus and head down, this time more to the right. Striking the trail, I follow it past where I first originally intersected it, crossing the Thousand Island inlet creek—the headwaters of the San Joaquin—far above where I did on the way up. I aim for the giant erratic to the right of my campsite and am soon back by my tent. It's 2:00.

I while away the rest of the afternoon, essentially doing nothing except jotting down notes and gazing on the view. The wind has been the worst I've experienced in all my years in the Sierra in terms of being so strong for such a long period of time; the huge gusts have not stopped for two days. It has been like standing at the top of a pass except I have been lakeside. My emotions have run the gamut from despair to ecstasy, all in the last few hours. One moment the SPOT is dead and I have to hike out tomorrow; the next moment it's sunrise on Banner Peak and it's neighbors. I feel turned inside out and outside in. There's no even keel, no sense of normal.

If you want normal, stay away from wilderness. Wilderness is being too cold, too hot. Wilderness is no bathroom, digging a six-inch hole, and packing out used toilet paper. Wilderness is freeze dried or uncooked meals. Wilderness is wondering what you will see around the next bend and over every rise. Maps and even other people's photos posted on the internet only represent, not palpably show what you will actually see, hear, touch, and experience.

Wilderness also offers a deeper spiritual experience than found in any church, mosque, or synagogue. It is not imaginary information provided by some sort of personified great being. It is real, touching the depths of what it means to be alive. It not something prescribed, it is something direct. It is in-this-moment experience. Put aside the hope for forgiveness and eternal life and exist in the here-and-now of the ultimately unknowable universe.

This is my last day ever at Thousand Island Lake, which makes for a total of four nights here. That places it with Vogelsang Lake, Picket Creek Lake, Lake Marjorie, and Lake 10864 in Pioneer Basin, four of my favorite places to camp. It's 7:15, the period when the days' last light shines on the trees, rocks, islands, meadows. The light slowly creeps up from the shoreline, above the trees, and up Banner Peak and its neighbors. I move all along the shoreline, hoping to capture the fleeting magical moments at the end of a High Sierra day. The sun disappears beyond the horizon. There's a faint glow in the western sky.

A pink glow on the horizon slowly transforms to deep blue. So the day ends. I will treasure this magnificent day always.

## **Day 5 July 10— 1,000 Island Lake to High Trail campsite**

I awake at 5:00 than fall back asleep and miss the first light at 5:40. However, I am on the shoreline at 5:45. At that point, the light is at its best, the peaks reflected in the still water. I revel in the magnificence of the new day. The reflections of the peaks, ridges, scattered islands attain the essence of a transcendent sunrise in the High Sierra. This is a fleeting moment of bliss. This is one of those moments when the questions that perpetually perplex us become irrelevant.

On my final morning forever at Thousand Island Lake, I am in solitude with no campers in sight. It's a warm morning. I take off my polartek pants and sit in shorts. A few dabs of deet discourage the mosquitoes that awoke in the warm sun.

The silence is all-encompassing. Only the distant gurgle of the inlet creek and the buzz of mosquitoes are audible. The surrounding peaks stand reflected in the placid water. Each island and protruding rock mirrors itself amid the mirroring peaks. This is as near to perfect as it gets, a few moments in the solemn silence of wilderness with the still water mirroring all surroundings. Time seems to stop. Enjoy this moment, breathe it all in so it remains inside the core of my being. I awake from my transcendent reverie to finish the coffee and begin the journey home.

As I stuff the tent in its stuff sack, the breeze picks up, telling me to head up the lakeside trail to its junction with the JMT. After a quarter mile or so, the trail heads left to get around one of the numerous small bays of the lake and goes by a tarn. At a junction, one trail heads right and another left. I take the lefthand one on the assumption that will be the most efficient for intersection with the JMT. After walking around another tarn, the path heads right, towards the lake and goes down a short slope. I see two men with fishing poles who take a trail that appears on the right where they head down to the lake more along the shoreline.

The lefthand trail heads up a short hill, back down, and eventually comes to the larger JMT, a three-way junction, and a sign. One way heads

left towards Island and Donahue Passes, one way right to Shadow Lake. The middle path says PCT so I follow it. By following the PCT signs, I will also be going to Agnew Meadows. At the next sign, it says Reds Meadow as well as Agnew.

I meet two men coming up the trail. One remarks it's nice to meet another person with white hair. We get chatting. One of them is 72, the other 74 years old. They give me optimism for future backpacking. When I ask about campsites along the High Trail, they say there are a few, some with the view of the peaks. I mistakenly don't ask the follow-up question about water availability and access.

The trail continues its gradual climb. The intersection with the Clark Lakes Trail appears from the left. Soon the High Trail breaks out into the open with magnificent views of the Ritter Range and below to the canyon of the Middle Fork of the San Joaquin. The side creeks, which I remember as tumbling torrents in June 2001, are now mere trickles. At one of the side creeks, I recall a campsite. The creek is nearly non-existent and I don't see a campsite. Farther on, I pass a campsite with a view, but decide the creek is too far away. It's only in retrospect I perceive I should have camped there. I meet a packer heading up the trail as well as other hikers, most going to Thousand Island Lake.

I realize I need to find a campsite or commit to walking the rest of the way to Agnew Meadows. I reach a rise that descends down to a creek on the left. About a hundred feet down is a large camping area with a spectacular view of the peaks above the canyon. I go down about a hundred yards to the creek crossing, fill my water bottles, and head back up. A woman is setting up a tent to the left in a single campsite halfway up. No one is at the large camping area, which has at least four possible tent sites. I choose the farthest one with the best view.

After setting up the tent, I lean against a rock and take in the view of the distant Ritter Range. A woman appears coming down the trail and asks if it's okay to camp here. I tell her it's okay with me though I wake up at dawn, which might be annoying to near neighbors. She chooses the farthest tent site from mine.

As I'm eating dinner, a young woman comes up from Agnew Meadows and, without a word, sets up her tent at the site next to mine. If I snore loudly, she may hear me I joke to myself. So much for a semblance of solitude on my final night.

After setting up her tent, the woman goes inside and makes a phone call. I move about taking sunset photos far enough away to not overhear. I still pick up enough conversation to know that she is doing the PCT and trying to reassure the people she is talking to. One is not in the wilderness when conversing on one's phone inside a tent. She talks for nearly an hour, missing the magical sunset.

One wilderness maxim should be never miss a sunset except when it's raining. Sunsets tell us so much if we open our inner being to listen, watch, and learn. If one becomes attuned to the wild, one apprehends more than any person can teach. Wilderness communicates something intangible, yet palpably real. If one is socializing, one is not completely open to the infinite window of wilderness. One only completely comprehends the subtle, complex communications of the wild when human interference is minimal or absent.

One spends a day, or better two or three days, seeing no one or perhaps encountering a passing hiker with only a "hello" and "have a good hike." Those are the days when one drifts into another realm of awareness, another level of consciousness. Nothing separates one from the experience of being alive in and with wild nature. One acquires what John Muir termed his "fey" aspect.

As darkness falls, the other campers are no longer speaking, having retreated to their respective tents. For a brief moment, I am in the solitude of silence. Today taught me I don't see what others see. I don't hike as others hike. I don't visit the wilderness quite the way many others do. It has been a long, strange day. Now it is 8:45 and getting dark. The moon is the brightest object. The blue sky is dissolving into black



## **Day 6 July 11—High Trail campsite to Agnew Meadows**

I awake at dawn and head up to the overlook at the top of the rise to photograph the days' first light. No one else is up yet, though I hear stirrings in my immediate neighbor's tent. I marvel as the day begins in solitude. The view extends from the Ritter Range to Volcanic Ridge to Inyo Craters. When the sunlight comes to the overlook, I head down to my campsite.

Both women are packing up. I let the woman doing the PCT know that Tuolumne Meadows Campground is closed, but the store is open. She is polite, but not interested in picking my brain even though I've hiked nearly all the PCT in Yosemite, portions of it numerous times. I wish her a safe, good journey as she heads up the trail. The other woman is heading south to Cottonwood Pass and wants to hear about the JMT, especially the Evolutions, Mather Pass, and Pinchot Pass. I wonder if this is partly due to a generational reaction. Biologically, I'm old enough to be the one woman's grandfather while I'm more the age of the Cottonwood Pass woman's father.

I am now in solitude. I don't expect that to last. I hear the distant buzz of a chain saw. I don't yet know what to make of this trip. On one level, I never want this trip to end. However, except for the cross-country hike from Garnet to Thousand Island, I was almost constantly around people. That changes the feel of the wilderness. These moments of sublime silent solitude are brief occurrences, such as now.

The chain saw ceases. Only the buzzing of insects and a very slight breeze disturb the immense silence of the wild. I sip the final cup of coffee before beginning the last stage. I am fortunate to have this moment of bliss. This view is thrilling, amazing, a fitting conclusion. Take in and absorb the serene silence. Once broken, begin the journey home.

The chain saw renews buzzing in the distance. A trail crew hikes up the High Trail, each with helmets strapped on their packs. The leader carries a shovel with which he shoves aside rocks as he continues walking.

I take the tent down, put everything in my pack, and head down the trail. I soon leave the trees and reach an overlook of Agnew Meadows with

the peaks rising behind me back up the High Trail. As I head down the series of switchbacks, I see a large pack train coming up. As they get closer, I realize it's a group of rangers. I am ready to get my permit out of the camera case as they round the switchback below and I step aside. They pass by with a friendly hello, but do not ask to see my permit. I guess when one is a friendly white-haired backpacker, they assume you know and obey the regulations.

I finish the switchbacks, follow the trail behind the pack station, and reach the road. A large group of teenagers and their leaders are making their way to the trailhead parking lot where the leaders assemble them and check their packs. After unlocking the car, I remove the garbage from the top of my pack and take it to the dumpster while the group receives instructions. As I load the car and position things on the passenger seat for the drive home, the group heads up the River Trail.

With the trailhead parking clear, I start the car and amble back down past the pack station to the junction with the Reds Meadow Road. Winding up the road, a convenient pull-out allows me to avoid the Reds Meadow shuttle bus. At the top, the ranger in the kiosk takes my dated slip of paper and wishes me a good day. I pull into the Minaret Summit loop road, park, get out of the car, and discover the phone does not receive a signal, unlike six days ago. Why is that? Deciphering the vagaries of cellular phone service is one of the many mysteries of contemporary life.

Back in the car, I drive past the hordes of parked cars at Mammoth ski area and find a large empty pull-out where three bars appear on the phone. Barbara answers on the second ring. When we finish commiserating, I head down highway 203 through Mammoth Lakes and buy gas. The high price is typical of the Eastern Sierra, but less than Tioga Gas Mart at the bottom of Tioga Pass.

The thrilling climb up Tioga Pass is uneventful until I reach the Yosemite entrance station. A woman ranger is outside the kiosk checking day-use permits and entrance passes. She checks off my name from a list, glances at my senior pass, and hands me a dated slip for my windshield. The RV in

front is asking the ranger inside the kiosk a lot of questions. I wait at least five minutes before I can move forward; the ranger waves me through. The RV heads for the pull-out by the small parking lot.

At Tuolumne Meadows, the road is now paved. The single file behind the pilot car now begins west of the Visitor Center. I take my place in the caravan, turn off the engine, and appreciate being in such a lovely place to wait for the pilot car to return to escort us all past Tenaya Lake to Olmstead Point.

It's a lesson in traffic patterns when the caravan stretches out after the Tioga Road reverts to its 45 mph speed limit. Some cars respond by driving at 40 miles per hour while others pass them at speeds to kill the bears whose compatriots are memorialized by bear warning signs. Somehow we all make it to the Crane Flat junction, some turning left to Yosemite Valley and others to Hodgdon Meadow and San Francisco. I assume we all make it home safely.