

July 15, Mosquito Flat Campground

I pick up my wilderness permit at the Mammoth Lakes Welcome Center. The ranger runs through the major points of the permit litany as a series of questions. How far do I camp from water? How far to go to the bathroom? etc. When my answers are correct, she gives me the permit to sign with a you-know-what-you're-doing smile.

Permit in hand, I phone home from one of the picnic tables on the way to the parking lot. This is the last definite cell phone reception location for the next few days. After the “stay safe,” “I love you” farewells, I drive down highway 395 to Toms Place and up the Rock Creek Road to its narrow conclusion at the Mosquito Flat parking lot. There's a vacant parking space near the far end by the trailhead.

I load up my full pack, camera, tripod, two canvas bags of food and clothes, and cross the bridge over a roaring Rock Creek. No one is in the three campsites at the near end. I try the campsite to the right I stayed in two years ago. Due to its lack of a breeze, it's unoccupied by anyone except mosquitoes. I check further up and see a tent in the farthest site. I see not reason to disturb the occupant by taking the one next to him and head to the first site at the point of the near end. A good breeze blows through the picnic table. A father and son cross the bridge and take the other breeze campsite nearby.

Since I am across the creek from the parking lot, if I wish to, I can observe all the coming and goings. The roaring creek drowns out any noise. I really love this campground with its feeling of backpacking solitude once the late afternoon day hikers and returning backpackers vacate the parking lot. I wander the area with my tripod as evening descends.

In near darkness, I sit at the picnic table enjoying the sounds of the creek and thinking about this trip to Pioneer Basin. The unknowns are snow conditions. Otherwise it's a familiar location. I experienced Pioneer Basin with my wife Barbara and son Gordon in 1994, spending three nights at a marvelous campsite on the peninsula at the far end of Lake 10,862. Since that visit a quarter century ago, I've been over Mono Pass one other time

to visit Grinnell Lake, Second Recess, and Upper Mills Creek Lake. This is one more time, in all probability my last time in Pioneer Basin. This trip is about renewing, confirming, and sustaining. I need to take in and savor each particular place, each and every particular moment.

Now that I'm 68 years old, time has caught up to me and is passing me by. In the twenty-first century digital world, I am an anachronism. There is no way to deny it. Except for carrying lighter weight equipment, I backpack as I did in the 1970s. My major concession to modernity is using a SPOT-X messenger to reassure Barbara and Gordon I'm safe and, if necessary, contact search and rescue. Otherwise my attitudes about modern society and wilderness were formulated by the two premier environment and nature philosophers of the nineteenth century, John Muir and Henry David Thoreau. Contemporary thinkers and writers fail to combine Muir and Thoreau's originality and concrete immediacy with timeless reflections.

Now, I need to simply appreciate the timeless moments, those moments when I exist within that particular moment. I need to integrate my personal experience of those particular moments into the larger, universal stream of moments.

July 16, Mosquito Flat to Fourth Recess Lake

I awake at 5:15, roll over, and doze until 5:45. I'm not feeling as all-fire confident as I felt last night. The first morning doubts are everywhere, from leaving the car to whether or not I can still do this.

The sun hits the parking lot just after 7:00, transforming the cars, vans and trucks from shadowed hulks to glaring distinct vehicles. A few people have already arrived. I fit everything in the pack, remembering to keep handy lunch and a couple of bars for snacking. I put a food container in the trailhead bear box, throw out my garbage, lock up the car, make a final visit to the vault toilet, fetch my pack from the campsite, and head up to Mono Pass.

There are lots of people on the trail, mainly day hikers, until I reach the junction. The wooden sign says "LLV" and points left and "Mono Pass"

pointing right. As soon as I am on the Mono Pass Trail, the other people disappear. I meet no one on the way to the Ruby Lake junction and stop there for a snack. Afterwards, I begin climbing the long switchbacks to the pass and meet a couple, probably in their fifties, admiring the magnificent view of Little Lakes Valley, Ruby Lake, and Bear Creek Spire. I notice horses moving up the switchbacks below. Soon they are making their way up the switchback I'm on so I find a good place to step aside. There are two men and one woman from the Rock Creek Pack Station. Shovels are strapped to one of the horses. They are friendly and we joke about them clearing the pass for me. A group comes down the trail. They are returning from Pioneer Basin. They say only the upper lake is still frozen. The switchback rounds a bend. The packers are stopped there. Ahead is snowfield. I follow the footprints of the group who were heading down. The trail reappears and then disappears as it goes over or through the snow.

I meet another group coming down, a party of men and women in the late teens or early twenties. The last hikers of the group are making their way across a path in the snow above. When they pause and wait for me, I tell them to continue. With aplomb, they cross the snow, drop down some rocks and reach where I'm standing on the snow-covered trail. We exchange greetings before I climb up the rocks to where the footprints head diagonally up towards the top of the pass. Once in the narrow path of footprints, I do my best to not slide down the steep slope to the left. It's slow going, complicated by the descending hikers taking longer strides than my short up-slope steps. When I reach the crest of the pass, I feel a huge sense of relief that dissolves at the expanse of snow before me.

What is essentially a use trail appears above where I stand. I cross over the snow and reach the rock and scree path heading above the snow below. Soon the snow below becomes patches. Three or four use trails head north over the rock and scree. One use trail heads diagonally down towards the south end of Summit Lake. It joins another use trail until they merge with the main trail. I follow the main trail along the shoreline of Summit Lake, ice floes still covering much of the water.

At the north end, the trail once again diverges into various groups of footprints across suncup snowfields. I follow one set of footprints, attempting to step on the suncup ridges instead of the ditches in between. The walking is tedious and tiring. At a small crest, I come to an overlook of a beautiful small valley with one direction heading down to Golden Lake with the Mono Pass Trail heading left and up towards Trail Lakes. Snowmelt puddles are scattered across the valley. No sign indicates the Mono Pass Trail heads left and up over a snowfield. I've been over this trail several times so there is no doubt where to go, but what about people on their first trip? I wonder how many people wander around trying to figure out which way to go.

I make my way through the puddles and pick a set of footprints to head up the snowfield. The snow clears at the top of the ridge. Far below, one of the Trail Lakes sparkles. I realize the trail goes along the ridge to my right and head towards a large boulder where I intersect the clear path. To the north, the lakes of Pioneer Basin are laid out below Mount Hopkins, Mount Crocker, Mount Stanford, and Mount Huntington. I follow the trail as it gradually descends to a spectacular viewpoint of Mono Canyon where it begins the series of long switchbacks down to Trail Lakes.

On the final switchback above Trail Lakes, I keep to the main trail as use trails head off to the campsites by Trail Lakes. The trail twists down until it intersects another obvious use trail from the final lake. The small meadow beside the creek emptying from Trail Lakes is especially beautiful. A series of switchbacks begin twisting down to Mono Canyon. Patches of snow cover the trail with various use paths circumventing the snow. Near the bottom, is a small meadow where Barbara, Gordon, and I camped many years ago. Below the meadow, the trail reaches the crossing of Golden Creek.

Slightly above the wade crossing, a log lays over the creek. I don't trust my balance, so I cross at the wading point. On the other side, the trail heads up and along the ridge high above the creek. Below, I can see the old trail along the water. Since I am tired from the suncups, this section seems to stretch on before switchbacking down to the junction with the trail to Fourth

Recess Lake. I turn at the junction, recross Golden Creek, and follow the path through the forest, eager to reach Fourth Recess Lake and a campsite. Water finally appears in the distance. I come to the northern end of the lake. A use trail heads up to the left. I spy a tent and consider camping nearby until I realize there are at least three separate occupied tent sites. I'm tired and simply want to find a campsite, but don't want to join the crowd if I can find some solitude. I head south above the shoreline. I'm ready to give up and stay at a clear area that will serve the purpose, when I notice to the left and slightly above a log that seems to demarcate a tent area. Investigating, two large tent areas sit in a lovely location above the lake. Satisfied and relieved, I set up the tent. It's been a long trying day, but I'm at Fourth Recess Lake in a great campsite with relative solitude.

I eat an early dinner and enjoy the late afternoon and evening light on the lake and the spectacular waterfall that tumbles down at the south end of Fourth Recess Lake. This waterfall is the lake's primary distinction, worth the side trip off the Mono Pass Trail. The light on the cliffs above transitions to a soft glow. As darkness comes, I crawl into the tent and soon fall asleep to the sounds of the waterfall..

July 17, Fourth Recess Lake to Lake 10,862

I awake at 5:30. It is a beautiful cloudless morning with no wind so there are vivid reflections on the still water. With its surrounding high cliffs, Fourth Recess Lake feels hemmed in. I'm eager to get out into the wide open High Sierra of Pioneer Basin.

The walk out of Fourth Recess Lake is definitely the half mile on the map. Three people who are camped in the crowd at the first set of campsites are at the Golden Creek crossing. One searches for a rock hop across and two others join me wading. Once across, the three look around the area while I head for the Mono Pass Trail. I run into them again when I pause at the junction with the trail to Pioneer Basin. The three of them are heading down the canyon to dayhike Hopkins basin.

I head up to Pioneer Basin. The climb begins in earnest when I come to a creek. When it levels off in the forest, snow covers the path. At one point, the trail must do a right angle since I lose the path. Rather than backtracking and searching, I decide to head up through the forest until I see the path again. At the top of a long low ridge, the trail reappears. One direction heads southwest and the other northwest so I follow it. This trail is not on the USGS map. From the path's deep ruts, I surmise this is a packer trail to take people to lake 10,862. From looking at the Harrison map, this is the 1.2 mile trail to the upper lakes of Pioneer Basin. Since this is a more direct route than the trail on USGS maps through the lower lakes, I continue heading north following Mono Creek until the trail fords the creek and heads west. There is an easier crossing where the water is calm beyond the fast current of the designated crossing. I take this and head back to the rut of the packer trail.

Crossing a broad meadow, I fall into hiking rhythm, my eyes on this sublime High Sierra timberline scene with its meandering creek and distant ridges and peaks. My mind drifts into contemplation and slips into the transcendent state of walking alone in wilderness. Whether or not I'm truly more perceptive and wiser in this state feels irrelevant. I connect to the wilderness, to life itself, with palpable immediacy.

At the far end of the meadow, the trail climbs up along the creek, which is a lovely series of cascading falls. A small snowfield blocks the trail. I head down to the water and look for a crossing to the snow-free far side and end up wading the shallow creek. Heading up, I come to a small meadow and then a lake. At a large rock by the lake, I stop for lunch, appreciating the pristine lake and view back down the larger meadow valley. The trail follows the lake's south shore, then crosses the creek below a waterfall. At the top, the creek is covered by a large snowfield. Rounding a curve, the trail comes to expansive lake 10,862. A lovely campsite sits opposite one of the lake's islands. I follow the shoreline until snowfields block the path.

Heading up and over, the picturesque island at the north end of the lake is to the left. Walking over snow-free rocks, I spy the campsite on the peninsula opposite the island where Barbara, Gordon, and I stayed in 1994.

It appears snowless and unoccupied. I decide first to check out the possibility of camping at the next lake up the basin, designated Lake 11,026. I don't remember the precise view when we hiked up there in 1994. I head down to the inlet creek, hop across, and make my way up the rocks above the creek. From the map it was difficult to discern if the single contour line means the view is blocked. Now I see that the outlet creek curves around a small ridge on its descent to lake 10,862, impeding the view to the south. Camping at the upper lake would not offer the same stunning view of the Mono Divide as the campsite on the peninsula.

I head back down, avoiding snow fields until I am slightly above the peninsula. A snowfield in the low area separates the peninsula from the land above. From a certain perspective, the peninsula appears to also be an island. At one end of the snowfield separating the peninsula from land, melting snow has created a bog near the lakeshore. I cross the bog, take a couple of steps in snow, then climb up to the peninsula. The campsite and area around it are snow free. I'll camp here, the same campsite stayed at in 1994.

The area has changed in the intervening quarter century. The whitebarks have grown and multiplied. It's interesting to see these subtle changes that occurred while the big picture remains. Mounts Stanford, Crocker, and Hopkins dominate the northern and western horizon while the distant Mono Divide the southern.

The picturesque island and view makes this a spectacular, one-of-a-kind campsite. The Mono Divide stretches across the southern horizon from Mt. Morgan to Mt. Dade to Mt. Abbot to Mt. Hilgard with Mono Rock jutting out below the higher peaks. This view is etched in my memory. It seems even more stunning here-and-now. This is one of my favorite views not only in the Sierra, but the world. There is something almost other-worldly about it. It is truly beyond any words to describe the feelings. I make attempts to capture it in a photo with the hope to convey at least some of those myriad feeling's.

I refer to this area as "Robber Baron" basin. According to *Place Names of the Sierra Nevada**, R. B. Marshall of the USGS during a 1907-09 survey

“named four peaks for the pioneer railroad builders.” Helping to confuse Sierra travelers, Mt. Stanford here is named for Leland Stanford while Mt. Stanford to the south was named by Bolton Coit Brown for the university in response to Joseph LeConte’s naming of University Peak for the University of California. One suspects all these names were bestowed more to curry favor with the then-current powers-that-be than honor someone the namers truly believed worth being immortalized.

Now, the peaks of Pioneer Basin are possibly better known than the men for whom they were named. The men themselves have largely been relegated to the dust bin of history. Only Leland Stanford is much remember and that is more for the university that bears his name. Crocker Bank disappeared in the 1980s when it was taken over by Wells Fargo. Hopkins is best known for a luxury San Francisco hotel. Collis Huntington is largely forgotten except for the art collection he left the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. One would think that today’s robber barons would take notice of the fact that no one particularly remembers the wealthiest men of the past. At the same time, the men and women these robber barons scorned, such as John Muir and Susan B. Anthony, are the people still remembered and revered.

After dinner, I enjoy finding photos until the sun disappears behind the Hopkins ridge. This moment makes the struggle to get here worth it. It’s the reason I do this—to experience these timeless moments. The sun shines on the Mono Divide the same as fifteen minutes ago. I wait for the instance when time moves and the light of sunset transforms the Mono Divide.

As the angle of the sun changes, the light on the distant peaks is suffused in an iridescent glow. The streaks in the sky transform into pink, red, and orange bands that create a profound sense of peace and wonder. The petty concerns of day-to-day life dissolve. All that exists is here-and-now. I now fall into the state of wilderness grace within a day. It used to be two or three days before I existed in that state of transcendence. Slowly the light fades and the clouds become shapes in descending darkness.

July 18, Lake 10,862

I am awakened by coyotes. The eerie howls seem to come from more than one place, echoing over upper Pioneer Basin. Rather than fear, wonder and excitement rush over me until I drift back into deep sleep.

Mt. Hopkins and Mt. Abbot get the day's first light. There are some reflections of the peaks, ridges, and the setting moon. The only sounds are birds, insects, and the gurgling of the distant creek. It is a marvelous morning on this peninsula in Pioneer Basin. I sit writing, drinking coffee, gazing on the Mono Divide, unaware of the passage of time. The increasing heat as the sun's angle diminishes and obliterates shadows tells me the day slowly progresses.

It's a follow my whims day. I have nowhere in particular to go. I depart the campsite and begin my exploration of upper Pioneer Basin. The views to the south expand as I climb the small ridge behind the campsite. I reach the point climbed to yesterday, head down to the creek, and leap across. Climbing a little ways, I reach a snowfield, and recross the creek. Soon I am at lake 11,026. The water sits in a near perfect oval, Mt. Huntington rising above to the southeast. As I surmised yesterday, the view back towards the Mono Divide and lake 10,862 is partially blocked. I walk by the shoreline to an unmapped inlet creek and follow the creek up. The meadow grass and small rocks down to the lake are lovely. Reaching a broad plateau below the high ridge that runs between Mt. Stanford and Mt. Crocker, I walk to the west slowly, taking in the melting snowfields with their tiny creeks, fields of blooming flowers, especially lupine, meandering through boulders and rocks haphazardly scattered across the landscape. The world feels right here in upper Pioneer Basin.

I head around a large snowfield and come to a view overlooking the basin's partially frozen uppermost lake. Heading down to the lake, I find a large rock to sit on and take in the blocks of ice on the dark blue water below Mt. Crocker with its steep snowfields. Afterwards, I meander along the shoreline and outlet creek as it dramatically plunges down in a series of cascades to meet the outlet creek from lake 11,026; the two creeks join to become the inlet creek of lake 10,862.

Clumps of whitebark shrubs cause me to leave the creekside and zip-zag down the slope of rocks and benches until I am above the peninsula. I scout out views for sunset photos. The snowfield has been melting below the peninsula so I can walk through the bog while avoiding puddles to reach my campsite.

There is something magical about allowing the time to slowly pass on a sunny afternoon. In the High Sierra wilderness, the day-to-day concerns of contemporary society seem irrelevant. I spend the afternoon taking a bath/swim, checking out the various flowers populating the area of my campsite, writing, and simply gazing at the view. The wind picks up, once more from the southwest. As the sun dips below the Hopkins ridge, I enjoy photographing the last light on the island and my campsite. The Mono Divide remains in sunlight. It's a cloudless sky with the wind rippling over the water.

As day's last light angles on the Mono Divide, the wind begins to decrease. Unfortunately, that brings out the mosquitoes. Climbing a little way up the ridge above the peninsula. I enjoy taking photos even if the light is not ideal. Being in this place is inspiring, no matter how spectacular the sunset.

It has been a marvelous day, one of the best ever. Tomorrow will be another day doing nothing except being in this place. One more day, as Thoreau put it, spent "as deliberately as nature."

July 19, Lake 10,862

I don't get up until almost 6:00 after dozing off at 5:15. The moon sets behind the Hopkins ridge, its reflection on still water. I enjoy experimenting with various photos.

I don't call them "shots." That implies a hurried lack of deliberate composition. They're conscious photographs, not snapshots. I try not to take snapshots, except for my private memories of a particular place, though to another's eyes, all my photos may appear to be no more than pretty pictures, not photographs.

How can one evoke the myriad reactions conveyed by the scene before me? The Mono Divide rising over the water, the ridge on the far shore with its

collections of scattered whitebarks, the millions of small to immense boulders and rocks. Each of those elements speaks to me, telling of the geologic past, immediate present, and maybe even the future. Personal thoughts and memories flood my mind, bringing forth conflicting emotions.

Above and beyond it all is a sense of tranquility. I am at peace with life itself. For a few moments the past, present, and future become one. It is not a higher consciousness. It is an aware consciousness. Thinking in terms of higher or lower is inaccurate as well as pretentious. Higher and lower consciousness indicates gradations of value when no value is warranted. Being aware is not a value. Being aware is a state of being. It is existing in the moment, being receptive to all aspects of life simultaneously.

This place brings forth those reflections. The magnificence reminds us of our insignificance. We who have only been on this planet for a relatively brief time are confronted with eons of existence. It's existence that will continue beyond human habitation. Humanity's sense of our importance within the cosmos is totally out of kilter with reality. Even if we inflict nuclear holocaust or climate catastrophe on our planet, the granite peaks will remain.

These are heavy thoughts and healing thoughts on a Friday morning in July amidst the Sierra wilderness at its most magnificent. These are the thoughts that solitude conjures with nothing to distract or separate one from being in the here-and-now.

I decide to explore the shoreline on the north and west sides of the lake. There is a sand beach on the north side that is inviting. I can see why the couple of campsites above it would be popular once the snow melts and the sites dry out. Beyond the beach is what I call Hopkins bog—a myriad of pools, grass, and tiny shrubs caused by snow melting above on Mt. Hopkins. The ridge area Barbara, Gordon, and I climbed up to explore Hopkins glacier in 1994 is now buried in snow. Back then, we walked on the glacier's bergschrund in the cleft below the summit. The current steep, deep snow discourages me from returning to see what of the glacier remains.

I zig-zag through the tundra and rocks of Hopkins bog, stepping across the snowmelt creek. Beyond, a large snowfield stretches across extending to

the shoreline by a rocky point jutting out into the lake. I head up the snow free rocks, zig-zagging among whitebark shrubs. To avoid bushwhacking through the shrubs, I find myself high above the lake. I eventually come to an overlook of the lake's southern bay. This seems a good point to turn around and head back. I sit down, eat a bar, take photos, and simply linger, appreciating the stunning scene all around both near and far.

On the way back, I head down, zig-zagging through the shrubs and lower rocks, cross the snowfield and find myself on the other side of the point. I go to the point's far end, appreciate the unique perspective, and head back around, crossing the snowfield at a new location. Arriving at Hopkins bog, I choose a different way through the pools. I see a fish in the creek even though I am twenty yards up from the lake. This seasonal snowmelt creek contains several trout darting through the water. I follow the meandering creek to its outlet and spy several fish darting out to the lake. They move so quickly, I lose sight of them in the deeper water away from the shoreline. I wonder if the fish swim up this seasonal creek every day or if this is unusual.

On the other side of the bog, I walk on the sandy beach, meander up, and discover a snowmelt tarn with a large snowbank and a small creek exiting and flowing down into lake 10,864. The snowfield below the peninsula has shrunk further. Seeing this area in transition is fascinating; changes occur daily.

That afternoon, I sit on a rock opposite the island, feet dangling in the water. The temperature of the water is too cold to leave my feet in for very long so I alternate placing them in and out of the water. With my deteriorating eyesight and cold blooded reaction, I no longer do the long swims of my past. Compared to the changes in hiking speed and stamina, this is a mild result of aging. In 1994, Barbara, Gordon, and I swam out and around the island. Now I am content to appreciate it from here along the shoreline. The afternoon passes, the occasional wisp of a cloud passing by. I feel a transition in the weather today. By late afternoon, the clouds increase in size and frequency.

On the first afternoon here, I became aware of what I believed was a pika going in and out of a hole a few feet above the shoreline. (Someone seeing a photo realized it was actually a Beldings ground squirrel, not a

pika.) That afternoon, the animal quickly scurried off when seeing me. Now on the third afternoon, this cute resident seems to be used to my presence. Instead of scurrying off into the whitebark bushes, he continues to explore the ground for food and even poses for photos.

For my last sunset in Pioneer Basin, I climb far up the ridge rising toward the upper level of the basin. A coyote wanders to my right, unaware of my presence. Is he/she one of the ones I heard the other night?

It's been a spectacular three days. I saw no one. I heard no sounds except wind, creek, birds, coyotes, and insects. I experienced this place in all its moods and changes. Nothing much occurred, but everything happened. It might be hard to pack up tomorrow and begin the hike home. When darkness comes, I linger, not willing to end this day.

July 20, Lake 10,862 to Trail Lakes

I awake to a thrilling dawn and a spectacular sunrise with some lake reflections. In the still wind, the bugs are annoying. I put deet on all exposed extremities so that mosquitoes fly all around me or land on my clothes and head net without causing harm.

The last coffee is poured. For a short time I sit and enjoy this unparalleled view. Upper Basin, Marjorie Basin, Kaweah Basin, Picket Creek Lake, the Upper Kern, Red Devil Lake—these are the places where the view from the campsite extends for miles and miles in a scene like no other in the world. Rare are the immense views that take one in and imprint themselves forever on the consciousness. It doesn't answer the questions that plague one. It only makes the questions irrelevant. It is one big "YES."

I leave lake 10,864 about 9:00. Wading the inlet creek, I follow the shoreline trail, which is now snow free. Since I'm still in my Reeboks from the inlet creek wade, when the trail goes under water for a couple of steps I stay on the trail. When I am opposite the island and peninsula, I finally put on my hiking shoes. Still following the shoreline, I make my way to where the trail curves opposite the other island by the outlet creek hiked up four days

ago. There is still a large snowbank covering the creek where any trail heading south down to the lower lakes of Pioneer Basin would commence. The packer trail I ascended remains snow free so I follow it.

I head down past the small waterfall to where the trail appears on the other side. Wading the creek, I intersect the trail. Shortly, the path crosses back and forth to the other side and passes by the small lake. The immense meadow below the lake is an enchanting timberline wonderland. Walking through the meadow, I soon come to Mono Creek and choose one of the calm areas to wade across and find that it's deeper than expected, damping my shorts.

The trail passes above Mono Creek until it turns left and heads down to the forested level area. There's only remnants of the snow encountered on the trip up. It's easy to see exactly where I lost the trail when there's a right angle turn. The walk first up and then down to Golden Creek provides the opportunity to take in the trees and other surroundings. I stop for lunch at one of the campsites at the Mono Pass Trail junction. If the goal is to keep "signage" at a minimum, the Forest Service is succeeding. The wooden sign at the Mono Pass Trail junction is the only one I've seen, except at the Fourth Recess junction. Unlike the metal signs in SEKI and Yosemite, there's no mileage.

After lunch, I hike past the Fourth Recess junction and take the switchbacks up to the Golden Creek crossing. At first, the switchbacks head back in the wrong direction before shifting towards the ridge running above Golden Creek. These long switchbacks remain annoying, especially knowing that a shorter route for hikers, not pack stock, would be possible.

The Golden Creek crossing has slightly changed with the snow melt. It requires carefully choosing each step in the swift current. The snow patches on the switchbacking climb up towards Trail Lakes have largely disappeared. About two-thirds of the way up, I finally see the first persons since heading up to Pioneer Basin four days ago. Two men are resting by the trail on their way to Pioneer Basin. Since they are the first people I've seen in four days, we get talking. I let them know about the packer trail heading to lake 10,854, which is on their National Geographic map. Being a weekend trip, they can only spend the one night in Pioneer Basin.

Appreciating the lovely meadow below Trail Lakes, I follow the clear side trail to the lowest lake. No one is here. I climb up by the falls descending from Neelle Lake to check if the campsite with the magnificent view we stayed at in 1994 is still here. No, that area no longer contains a campsite; it was probably deemed too close to the falls.

I head up to see if there are campsites above the larger neighboring Trail lake. I come across a great campsite, private with a spectacular view. It is a bit far down to the outlet creek and lake to get water, but that's okay. This is far better than anything I expected. I'm above the first lake, way off the trail and far from the sites in the trees below. From the broad rock ledges above the tent area, there's a spectacular view of the peaks around Pioneer and Hopkins basins.

Clouds increase as the afternoon passes. A few thunderheads billow, but remain white clouds, not ominous gray and black hulks. To my surprise, I remain in solitude. No one else camps at any of the many campsites around Trail Lakes, despite it being Saturday night. I assumed there would be at least a couple of other parties camped at this relatively easy to reach spectacular overnight location. When I go down to take photos, I wander at will, enjoying this beautiful setting by myself.

At the overlook above my tent is a perfectly placed rock to lean up against and take in the expansive view. Pioneer Basin appears much differently from this perspective, more spread out than it feels when in the basin. There are so many major peaks to see. Instead of getting out the map to pick them out individually, I am content to look on them without designating human names. The magnificent scene and the silence of solitude immerse one in wilderness. The evening transitions from final light on the distant peaks to twilight to near darkness.

Today has been a wonderful transition from the isolation of Pioneer Basin back to civilization. The hike, this campsite, the view, and the solitude permit me to absorb the High Sierra wilderness one more time.

July 21, Trail Lakes to Mosquito Flat

It's a stunning alteration from the first glint on Mt. Stanford and Mt. Hopkins through the light slowly striking the other peaks, moving down the flank of Mt. Hopkins until Pioneer Basin and Mono Canyon are bathed by first light. Only this area here at Trail Lakes remains in shadow. I sit at a loss for words on this final morning.

I have lived in Sierra transcendence for the last four days, in solitude except for the two men on the trail yesterday. To me, the transcendence began with the hike up to lake 10.862 and it's continued until now. I will do my best to remain in it, but the climb to the pass will take over and I will begin meeting many hikers; appreciate it now.

I wish it was possible to live always in this state of grace. It's what the monks and masters were seeking. In the past, one can hope that some of them found it. In the last century, the shutting oneself from the outside world and living the simple life in spiritual grace has been attempted, but rarely successfully. The outside world ultimately infringes. The forces of history eventually engulf even the most isolated places. Now, in the twenty-first century, there is no place outside the repercussions of human activity. Even the Arctic, Antarctic, Amazon rain forest, and Himalayas suffer the ravages of climate change and human exploitation.

I will pack up and head up and over Mono Pass and so make my way back to civilization. It's been a joy.

I climb the long switchbacks above Trail Lakes, reveling in the expanding views of Pioneer Basin and the Mono Divide. The trail is much clearer through the snow down to the plateau before beginning the climb to Mono Pass. The snowfields crossed a few days ago have mostly disappeared. I only walk over one small snowfield and that is because I don't see a good reason to take the snowless detour around it.

At Summit Lake. I begin meeting various people, from solo backpackers to young couples to small groups to larger family groups strung out along the trail on the far side of Mono Pass. Once more, I stop at the Ruby Lake

junction to have lunch. On the final descent to the Little Lakes Valley junction, I enjoy the view of Bear Creek Spire and other peaks above the verdant valley with its sparkling lakes stretching below.

Since it is Sunday, the final portion of the trail beyond the junction is full of people. Arriving at my dusty car, I get the food from the bearbox, my bag of clean clothes from the car, wash off the trail dust in Rock Creek, and put on a clean t-shirt. Back in the car, I head down the road to Rock Creek Lake Resort with its pay phone to call home, and good burgers, great beer, and even better pie. It's time to head home.

* Peter Browning, *Place Names of the Sierra Nevada: From Abbot to Zumwalt*. Wilderness Press, 1991.