





## Day One, August 1, 2023, Hodgdon Meadow

This trip to the Vogelsang area of the Yosemite wilderness is, in part, a journey to the past. My first High Sierra backpacking trip was to Fletcher Lake and over Vogelsang Pass in 1978. My wife, Barbara, and I camped at Fletcher again in 1979 and 1981 along with camping on Lewis Creek below Vogelsang Pass in 1982. Twenty years later, Vogelsang Lake was my final campsite for the long trip that became the basis for my book, *A Summer in the High Sierra*, which concluded with a return trip a decade later to Vogelsang in 2008. I suspect this may be my final trip to this area so inevitably this trip becomes reflection on that past as well as forty-five years of wanderings in the High Sierra. I hope this trip will not feel like an elegy.

I originally planned the trip's route for July 6, but Tioga Road remained closed so instead I went to Little Lakes Valley. For these August dates, the original plan was to go over New Army Pass to Sky Blue Lake and explore Miter Basin for the first time. The "unprecedented" snowpack led to cancelling that trip. A report on July 25 said an ice axe was necessary for New Army Pass and Sky Blue Lake remained locked in ice. I don't own an ice axe and if I did, I wouldn't know how to properly use it.

On July 26, I logged onto Recreation.gov and at 7:00 a.m. managed to get a permit for Rafferty Creek, the trailhead for Vogelsang. It seemed fated to observe the forty-five year and twenty-five year anniversaries at the place that in many ways, for me, exemplified the High Sierra.

The drive to Yosemite on August 1 is the tried and true route on highway 120 though the Priest Grade is closed. This puts me behind a pick-up truck that is obviously not familiar with the road. Their bewilderment causes their speed to vary to the point of nearly coming to a complete stop on the hairpin turns. I keep my distance as we wind up the switchbacks. Fortunately, no one is behind me. The truck turns off 120 in Big Oak Flat. In Groveland, I stop in the city park for lunch as on so many previous trips, another nod to the past.

The Yosemite entrance ranger sees my senior pass and asks if I want a park newspaper and map with sufficient doubt to cause me to think she

already knows the negative answer. The ranger at Big Oak Flat wilderness permit pick-up is very nice. When she asks if I've ever been backpacking in Yosemite, I reply "Yes, since 1978." She also asks if I have ever been out and back on the Rafferty Creek Trail and I again reply "yes." In my mind, I recall 1981 when Barbara and I camped at Fletcher Lake and had breakfast at Evelyn Lake before exiting through Lyell Canyon.

The ranger adds the rules are all still essentially a hundred feet for almost everything, no fires, and carry out all trash. It's the most polite running down the rules I've ever received except for the time I slid the reservation e-mail print-out across the counter, was wordlessly handed the printed reservation, put check marks next to each item on the laundry list of backcountry rules, and signed the permit without actually speaking to the ranger beyond "good morning" and "have a good trip." In my experience, most rangers are very good at sussing out people. If you convey the impression that you actually know what you're doing, they keep the litany to the legally required minimum.

This time, I sign the permit, she wishes me a good trip, I say thank you, and walk back to the car. I fold the permit to fit in the front zip pocket of the camera case so I will always have it with me. Exiting the parking lot and crossing the Big Oak Flat Road, I head down to Hodgdon Meadow Campground and pull into campsite #8, about as good as I can expect in this campground. There seems to be an extra bear box between #8 and #10. At least there's a box with #8 on it and one with #10 below with an unnumbered bear box between the two sites.

This year's momentous snow accumulation led to camping at Hodgdon for the first night acclimation. The other Yosemite Tioga Road campgrounds are still closed. Many of the Inyo National Forest first-come campgrounds on the other side of Tioga Pass also remain closed or have campsites off-limits due to "hydrology issues." When the Hodgdon campsite opened up due to a cancellation, I played it safe and grabbed the reservation rather than hope for a first-come campsite on the other side of Tioga Pass. I long ago gave up sleeping in the car in the trailhead parking lot as Barbara, and I did in 1982.

So far, Hodgdon is better than expected. At the moment, it's relatively quiet. I walk around the campground, scouting out possible campsites. The best ones are at the end of the loops. Maybe I'll consider this for the future in spring or autumn. That future is tenuous. I can dream about future trips, but I know it's only a dream until I make it reality. I now know that any backpacking trip in the Sierra might be my last. Now, it's really one trip at a time as I live one day at a time.

When I return to my campsite, I remind myself that Yosemite, unlike most other Sierra locations, gets a high percentage of foreign tourists. The two sites to one side of me are now taken by two families traveling together in large RVs who are speaking a Slavic language. At another nearby campsite, the occupants are speaking German and another site French. I am reminded of when Barbara and I travel to new, unfamiliar places. We're outsiders who don't know the particular place the same way these people don't know Yosemite. They only have the guidebooks and website to go on, just like us when we are outside California. The mistakes we make are similar to the mistakes made by foreign tourists we see in Yosemite and SEKI. Essentially, we're all strangers in a strange land. We need to realize the rules are there for a good reason and venturing far off the beaten path is primarily for those more familiar with the location.

After dinner, I go exploring. I decide to not seek a destination and wander where whim takes me. I go past the group campsites and follow a trail down to the meadow that gives this place its name. The trail becomes less distinct once I reach the broad flat area with its high grass. I first try to follow a tramped down path to the left, but it quickly ends. I return and follow the path to the right. It curves around along the edge of Hodgdon Meadow. The sun is evening-angle low, shining on the bushes, flowers, and grasses. A dandelion sits in sunlight, its gray fuzzy top a perfect sphere. Lupine are scattered over the meadow. A month ago, this must have been glorious with the flowers in full bloom, not dried out as many are now.

I follow the path through the high grass along the edge of the meadow. The path eventually enters the forest, the campground to the right. I choose



one of the myriad paths that now appears and follow it so I can avoid cutting through someone's campsite. The path climbs to the campground road and I return to my campsite.

A Japanese family has arrived in campsite #10. They've set up their tent about ten to fifteen feet from my picnic table on an uneven slanted area. I point out there is a large level tent area down below by their bear box. The woman for whom speaking English is difficult, conveys they need to be near their car; that's why they chose the unlevel location. She recognizes how close it is to my picnic table and asks if that's okay. I reply it's fine with me as long as they are comfortable with it.

As we talk, the woman's tone of voice and darting eyes convey irrational fear. It is obviously extremely important to be close to the car. I've learned that when one confronts irrational fear it is best to accept it unless it impinges on something more than one's sensibilities. I do mention that leaving one's food in the car may result in a bear breaking in to get it; this is Yosemite after all. As it's getting dark, they remove their food and put it in their bear box down below by the unoccupied level tent area.

I sit at the picnic table facing the forest. I remember camping here on Columbus Day weekend in a snow storm when most campers were abandoning their campsites; almost no one was here. Being October, the following days were warm and sunny. Barbara, our son, Gordon, and I spent a day hiking at Hetch Hetchy and another day at Glacier Point, walking to Sentinel Dome and watching sunset on Half Dome.

Recalling that trip leads to confidence about tomorrow. I learned in July in Little Lakes Valley that one cannot anticipate conditions based on past experience. Concurrently, I also have hiked the route to the Vogelsang area many times and know I can deal with whatever I discover over the next few days. When darkness comes, I crawl in the tent and fall asleep to the distant sound of my Slavic neighbors conversing around a picnic table.

## **Day Two, August 2, Tuolumne Meadows to Vogelsang Lake**

I am up at 5:30. I stuff the sleeping bag in its compression stuff sack and take down the tent. At 6:00 when quiet hours officially conclude, I open the clanging bear box, fetch the pack, bags, and bear can, and take them to the table. While eating a muffin and drinking orange juice, I add two Luci lights along with one nearly empty and one full fuel canister to the already stuffed with food bear can. I hear stirrings in the neighbor's tent. The woman emerges and gives a friendly hello on her way to the bathroom across the road and up the hill. When she returns, her husband and daughter emerge from the tent with another friendly good morning.

By this time, I've finished packing and take my pack up to the car. I doublecheck the campsite, start the engine, back out, and follow the loop road out of the campground. At the Big Oak Flat entrance the bathroom is being cleaned. I remember Tuolumne Grove has bathrooms. When I get there, the parking lot is empty except for a family eating breakfast from the tailgate of their truck. On the way to the bathrooms, I almost point out the picnic tables until I see a table next to their truck. They obviously prefer standing and eating by their tailgate.

Traffic is light on Tioga Road. The traffic light at the construction just past Olmstead Point is green. While the Sunrise Trailhead parking is full, there are only a couple of cars at the pull-outs and picnic area at Tenaya Lake. I drive through Tuolumne Meadows and notice the speed limit is now 25 miles per hour everywhere, not just while passing the store and currently closed campground. Most drivers ignore it. I turn off at the Wilderness Center/Tuolumne Lodge and drive to the Dog Lake Trailhead parking lot. There are only a few cars so I find a spot with possible shade.

I hoist on the camera case and pack, cross the road, and pass the familiar, unique Yosemite trail sign indicating the John Muir Trail with the 11.9 mile distance to Donahue Pass. The wide trail passes above the Dana Fork, up the small rise, and over the bridge above the Dana Fork. The bridge is intact, seemingly unaffected by the immense spring runoff. Soon I reach the two



bridges that span the Lyell Fork of the Tuolumne as it divides around the rocks. This has long been one of my favorite Yosemite locations. Barbara, Gordon, and I used to come here in the 1980s when Gordon was a toddler and enjoy a leisurely lunch along the Lyell Fork.

I wonder how many of my fellow hikers are aware of how much the trail has been rerouted between here and the Rafferty Creek bridge. I recall walking up the deep ruts of the old trail passing much closer to the Lyell Fork instead of through the forest. Emerging from the forest, I see the bridge ahead, turn right at the sign, and begin the ascent from Lyell Canyon to Vogelsang. Since I was expecting this initial switchbacking climb, I try to enjoy the expanding views while plodding along at snail pace. When I come to the top of the switchbacks, I find a good place to rest, snack, and take in the emerging view of northern Yosemite.

I had forgotten the gradual, steady uphill slog from this point to Tuolumne Pass. All I'd remembered was the expanding views looking back down Rafferty Creek. As I plod up the trail, the crest and signs of Tuolumne Pass seem much farther than in memory. Shouldn't I be there by now? At last, the signs appear, directing people to Booth Lake or the Vogelsang High Sierra Camp. Again, in my memory the mile hike up along the rim with Booth Lake shining below was a delight. This time, while I enjoy seeing Booth, the hike feels like a continuation of the slog. When I see the humongous cairn and signs at the junction of the High Sierra Camp and the trails to Evelyn Lake and Vogelsang Pass, I feel a sense of relief. I get a second (or is it third?) wind as I make my way on the trail through the empty High Sierra Camp.

The Fletcher Creek crossing requires wading. Part of the trail on the other side is through mud. A little further up, snow covers the trail. It's obvious from the wet footprints people exit the path and make their way up the slabs to the right. At the top, the trail reappears until it reaches the Vogelsang Lake outlet creek. I wade the outlet, restrike the path, and head up to the right to scout out a campsite. There is no one here, so I can choose where I want. I pick a place that is above the lake with a magnificent view. The Sierra Crest rises around Mt. Conness and the neighboring peaks of northern Yosemite. Below, Fletcher Creek

valley extends past shining Booth and Emeric lakes with the Cathedral Range rising above dominated by a direct view of the Choo-choo Ridge to the left of Rafferty Peak. While I usually appreciate the Sierra's whimsical names, this one seems woefully wrong for this string of fascinating castle-like ramparts. Choo-choo seems more like trivialization than whimsy.

There are thunderheads over the crest, but not here. I find a rock to lean against and take in the view; I feel I earned it. This may be my last time camping at Vogelsang Lake after four previous nights so I want to properly appreciate it. Three people come up the trail, hesitate at the outlet creek, realize they must wade, and cross to the other side. They search for a campsite and find one that is out of sight further along the cliffs.

After dinner, I wander around taking photos of Vogelsang Lake, the surrounding area, and the magnificent view to the northwest. The sun sets about 8:15. Lightening flashes appear in the thunderheads over the Sierra Crest. I am too tired to write. What will happen tomorrow is now an educated guess. I just need to play it by ear and enjoy being here.

### **Day Three, August 3, Vogelsang Lake to Bernice Lake**

It's a lovely dawn and sunrise with the moon setting beyond the ridge extending from Vogelsang Peak. The first light falls on Vogelsang Peak, Rafferty Peak, and the Choo-choo Ridge. The subsequent slanting morning light creeps down the gradual slope from Tuolumne Pass through the Fletcher Creek valley far below.

Tuolumne Pass' significance becomes obvious from here. The water on one side flows to the Tuolumne River. The water on the other side flows to the Merced River. The Merced and Tuolumne were the two glaciers that created the Yosemite of today. The Merced Glacier carved Yosemite Valley and the Tuolumne Glacier Hetch Hetchy, the magnificent valley that has remained hidden under water since San Francisco inundated it by building O'Shaughnessy Dam and ignited an environmental movement that succeeded in preserving so much of the remaining Sierra wilderness.



The Sierra we know was created with the receding of the glaciers at the end of the last ice age. This land has remained relatively unchanged for well over 10,000 years. Only the relatively brief (in geologic time) impact of humans transformed certain sections with our highways, dams, buildings, and, more recently, climate change destructions. Here in the high country designated wilderness, we still live in the land created by those receded glaciers.

Today is an unknown day in terms of where exactly I am headed. I am planning to camp at Gallison Lake or Bernice Lake. My memory of Gallison is that the low ridge may block the magnificent view to the south of the Clark Range. That's what the topo map also indicates. Will I get over snow-covered Vogelsang Pass? I realize I shouldn't worry about the pass. In all the previous times I've been here, it has not been difficult, even when snow was present. This year will have more snow than in the past, but the steepness of the slope is not an issue and I will follow previous footprints.

I think back to my first time over Vogelsang Pass in 1978. Barbara and I camped at Fletcher Lake and day-hiked over the pass to Lewis Creek valley. That trip was a textbook of an inexperienced first trip in the High Sierra. At that time, no internet provided information. Advance knowledge was entirely topo maps, guidebooks, and word-of-mouth tales. The only Sierra guidebooks were the Wilderness Press ones and *Starr's Guide to the John Muir Trail and the High Sierra Region*, first published in the 1934; the most recent edition was from 1974. I purchased the Wilderness Press pocket guide to Tuolumne Meadows. Fletcher Lake sounded like a good destination so we went to Fletcher Lake.

We had external frame Kelty Packs and Eddie Bauer down sleeping bags that zipped together. The weight of our packs and sleeping bags was never considered; the packs holding all our gear and the sleeping bags being warm was all that mattered. Our clothes were shorts, cotton t-shirts, long sleeve flannel shirts, wool sweaters, and wool jackets. For food, ramen noodles with a raw carrot were the standard dinner since we could not afford the few freeze-dried meals available. We carried an orange and bagels for breakfast, a small jar of peanut butter with a few slices of bread for lunch, trail mix for snacks, and hundred proof Wild Turkey to imbibe with the snacks.

We didn't have sleeping pads. That trip, we learned the hard way the importance of a pad for insulation. Both nights, Fletcher Lake froze, the ice refracting in distinctive fascinating patterns. Despite our ten degree down sleeping bags, we were cold. At dawn, we sat gazing east towards the Sierra Crest waiting for the sun to rise and its warm light strike the open meadow by the campsite. We understood why our distant ancestors worshiped the sun. (We also purchased pads before our next trip.)

On that trip, we fell in love with the High Sierra. Ever since, we have been back multiple times every year. We returned to the Vogelsang area three more times. We twice camped midway down Fletcher Lake with the nearby cable for counter-balancing the food sacks; that's how food storage was done back then. The cables meant if you counter-balanced correctly, your food was safe from bears and you didn't have to search for the proper branch. Unfortunately, not everyone counter-balanced correctly. When we went to Glen Aulin in June 1981, we walked in the dark to look at the moonlight on the falls and ran smack into another camper's food sack hanging suspended from a cable at face level. The bear that came through that night enjoyed himself as shown by the debris littering the area the next morning.

Eventually, bear canisters transformed backcountry travel; no longer would one have to camp near a cable or search for the right branch and successfully throw the rope or, when near or above timberline, find a large inaccessible (to bears) erratic. After one trip with a canister, I was converted despite the extra weight; one could camp anywhere and everywhere.

This morning at Vogelsang Lake, my bear canister in the pack, I amble back to the trail for what is probably my final climb of Vogelsang Pass. There are two major snow patches, one lower down behind the extending ridge of Vogelsang Peak, and one leading to the top. On the lower snow field, there are many sets of footprints to follow. Obviously, people chose routes depending on the conditions at the time and personal whims. I head for the snow-free slabs beyond the snow field varying my way through the previous tracks to choose the most direct route. Once on the slabs, I find the trail on the other side.



The trail heads up diagonally to the low point of the pass, crossing a snowmelt creek before it ends at the large snowfield that extends up to the level area that defines the pass itself. Once again, there are several sets of footprints in the snow across the diagonal way to the top and over the snowfield. I remember a small tarn residing at the low point that currently remains covered in snow. Maybe in a month, the tarn will reappear.

On the sunny south side, the snow abruptly ends as the trail goes slightly up and traces its way across the long shoulder extending to Parson Peak. I make out portions of the original trail we hiked in 1978. There's a marvelous view of Gallison Lake and Bernice Lake. I eat a bar while I sit and scout a direct route to Gallison to avoid the descent to Lewis Creek and climb up to Bernice. Campsites at Gallison appear tenuous and the ridge does block the view south. A large snowfield occupies the Gallison side of the ridge; it appears from this distance sunny sparkles indicate the melting snowfield is creating a lakeside bog. While I had a romantic vision as far back as my first time over Vogelsang Pass of camping at Gallison, maybe it's more a vision than reality. I decide to first go to Bernice to see what I find. Continuing down switchbacks, I intersect what I surmise is the original trail due to the aging blazes of Nathaniel McClure's cavalry.

At the bottom of the switchbacks, this year Lewis Creek requires a wade. Once again, my memory shortened the descent to the Bernice junction. First I come to the Bernice Lake outlet creek off to the left in a lovely meadow. Another short set of switchbacks concludes at the sign announcing the trail to Bernice Lake. The trail to Bernice is now more a use trail than when I was last here in 2008. Only one set of footprints appears in the mud.

I lose the trail at a large snow patch. The way around the snow takes me up to Bernice Lake on the right (southwest) side. That's good; I can scout possible campsites at this end before proceeding further to explore the northwest end. No one is here. It's 1:30; it took me five hours to go a little more than three miles. My hiking speed has definitely further deteriorated.

I don't see any fabulous campsites at this end that warrant a possible three night stay. However, there is a stupendous view from the ridge of the distant

Clark Range. Going down to the water, I come upon the lakeside use trail. After crossing where the Bernice trail arrives at the lake, I continue following the lakeside path. Beyond where the path cuts up to the left to get around trees, I come upon a major campsite with three tent areas. This seems a bit large and ostentatious.

I scout further down the lake and come upon a great site with a single tent area. There's a breeze, good lake access, and a great view of Parsons and Simmons peaks along with their extensive ridges. I take off my pack and leave it. Below, there's a lovely small meadow. I come to the outlet creek, which forms a quaint lake that is barely a blip on the topo map. This year, it's a full lake. Any campsites remain in the meadow's bog or are too close to Bernice Lake. If there's a campsite on Bernice's north shore, to reach the Clark Range view ridge for sunrise I'd have to wade the creek. It's the same wade if I want to camp today at Gallison. Is this an obstacle telling me may to camp where I left my pack and dayhike up to Gallison?

I return to the pack and eat a late lunch, mulling over whether to wade the creek, explore campsites on Bernice's north shore, head up to Gallison, or stay here. My instincts are telling me to stay here, but I know my instincts are not a hundred percent reliable. As I'm sending a check-in SPOT, a message arrives from Barbara asking how I am. After over fifty years together, I can read between the lines; she'd want me to stay here. I send her an "at the campsite" message.

From the ridge above Bernice there's a fabulous view of the Clark Range. I didn't spy any likely campsites at Gallison; its open south shore currently appears to be a scattered rock-filled bog below a melting snowfield. This campsite is in the breeze to discourage mosquitoes with shady places to sit and gaze on the ridges running above Gallison, Parsons Peak, and Simmons Peak. No one is here at Bernice. I'll dayhike up to Gallison tomorrow.

The tent area is in a nook between boulders and pines. On one side is a way past a tree down to the lake and the other overlooks the lovely little meadow by the outlet creek. Next to the campsite and down along the lake are picturesque snags. Bernice seems to have an abundance of intriguing snags,

the most I've seen in one place since Kaweah Basin. These bare trees are a Sierra phenomenon I dearly love. I'm a sucker when it comes to trying to photograph them.

Attracted by the snags, I first considered camping at Bernice on a side trip from Florence Falls on my way to Vogelsang Lake in 1998. At that time, the climb didn't faze me. Now, my one mile side trip days are over. If I am going to undertake a side trip, it needs to be a destination in and of itself. Bernice feels like a marvelous destination. My perspective on where I want to go in the Sierra has clearly changed over the years.

After dinner, I enjoy walking along the shoreline towards Bernice's south end. A couple must have camped somewhere above the lakeshore. I hear their voices and see the man overlooking the lake while standing on one of the rocks. I surmise they may have lost the trail at the same place I did and took one of the campsites I rejected. They have their solitude as I have mine.

Returning to the part of the lake by my campsite and outlet creek, I wander some more taking photos and appreciating the final light on the snags, lake, and peaks. The day's last light glows on the cliffs above Gallison. I recall that same alpenglow view when camped with Barbara near the Bernice junction on Lewis Creek in 1982. The next morning, we cheerfully climbed Vogelsang Pass before breakfast and ate while overlooking Lewis Creek valley and the peaks rising at the far end. One's sense of what one wants to undertake definitely alters as one ages.

Now I don't analyze wilderness as I did in the past. Now I understand it in a way that no longer requires analysis. I truly feel it and truly know it. I live it. There's no need for deciphering. I exist in a state of grace in wilderness solitude. There are also new lessons learned every time I am here. Those new perceptions are imbued within the greater insight.

The alpenglow emanates from Parsons and Simmons peaks. Fish splash on the lake's still water, creating expanding golden circles. Twilight transitions to near darkness. I can no longer see to read what I write. Feeling satisfied, I get in the sleeping bag and quickly fall asleep.

## **Day Four, August 4, Bernice Lake**

At dawn, I head to the south end of Bernice and photograph the moonset. The sun has already risen when I reach the ridge for the view south of the Clark Range and what I guess in the far distance is the shoulder of Half Dome. Florence Falls descends as a silver ribbon between this ridge and the distant peaks.

I'm not sure which peaks are which. I could consult the map, but realize here and now, their precise names are of no significance; all that matters is their magnificence across the horizon. At this moment, what the U.S. Geological Survey decided is not relevant. Names are a human designation inadequate for such grandeur. There is an intangible thrill about distant peaks in sunrise light. Something in the day's first light adds another dimension. Tomorrow I'll come directly here to witness the sunrise. Today, I'll revel in the emerging morning.

Eventually, I wander back to my campsite, make breakfast, and sit while sipping coffee and jotting notes. After a leisurely morning, I head up to Gallison Lake.

I wade across the outlet creek and come to a faint use trail heading to the right of the outlet, which soon disappears near a small lake within the creek. Before the lake a crossing requires two wet steps. I begin ascending the small ridge separating Bernice from the basin above. Proceeding diagonally to the right, I come upon a very faint use trail that takes me to the top.

A lovely unnamed lake sparkles to the right. Drawn to it, I make my way towards the lake and the small ridge separating Gallison from the rest of the basin. Looking down across a wide green meadow, Gallison stands alone, Lewis Creek cascading down to the lake from above. Closer inspection reveals the green meadow is populated with tiny yellow buttercup-like flowers. Not another lake is in sight. That's part of the romantic vision of Gallison: a singular lake standing alone with the wide open meadow to its west, east, and south.

Making my way over the meadow toward the rocks at the east end, I come to billowing Lewis Creek. The current is quite swift. Finding a shallow crossing, I



feel the current's push on my ankles. Heading down to the rocks above the water, I sit on one to take in the view of the entire lake. When descending Vogelsang Pass I thought these rocks might contain a campsite, but there is none. However, the mosquitoes are quite prevalent and annoying. I am glad I didn't camp here.

In order to follow the shoreline to the far end of the lake, I recross the creek. Here, where Lewis Creek empties into the lake, the current is more gentle. Due to the creek dividing just before entering the lake, there are two short crossings. Once on the other side, I walk down the lake. The melting snowfield blanketing the ridge to the south creates rivulets of water that turn this portion of the shoreline into a bog with tufts of grass standing above the tiny pools of water. In certain respects, it is reminiscent of the snowmelt bog I encountered three weeks ago at Long Lake.

Beyond the bog, Gallison contains two bays at the north end. I reach the farthest shore of the southern bay before following the dry rock-strewn flatlands to the edge of the canyon. The snowy peaks of the Clark Range rise in the far distance. I take a photo to commemorate the occasion while implanting this view in memory. It's a quite different, more confined perspective than the all-encompassing view from the ridge above Bernice.

I turn and head to the far end of the northern bay of Gallison where Lewis Creek begins its plunging descent. From this vantage point, all of Gallison Lake stretches to the east with the high cliffs that are so spectacular at sunset rising above Gallison's north shore. There's an excellent view of much of the length Lewis Creek as it cascades down from the high lakes below Parsons Peak and Simmons Peak, enters Gallison, and exits here. I surmise the snow in the basin above will make exploration up there more a difficult, annoying adventure than a thrilling discovery.

After taking in the view, I make my way to Gallison's south shore, hopping from one tuft to the next over the bog before walking up the meadow. I pause to sit on a rock to take in Gallison Lake for a final time. Trudging slowly up the meadow I come to the string of whitebarks separating Gallison from the beautiful unnamed lake to the south. Like sentinels, the pines stand guard over the meadow and Gallison Lake.

I pass to the right above the unnamed lake, following the landscape as it heads down to where the exit creek waterfalls down to Bernice Lake. The lay of the land sends me diagonally down to the right where a snowmelt creek through the cliffs promises a way to the next level. As I descend, I see a step in the dirt; someone else recently took this same route; so much for feeling like an intrepid, lone explorer.

At the next level, I descend through the trees until crossing the creek below the waterfall where it passes over slabs with the creek's lakelet to the right. My feet only get slightly wet. On the other side, I head to Bernice Lake's shoreline to take in the view of the entire lake from the northeast end. It's a very different perspective than the view from the southwest end where the dramatic peaks and ridges around Parsons Peak rise up from the shoreline. Here at the northeast end, one gazes on the shoreline and low ridge above Bernice where one can appreciate the magnificent view of the Clark Range. I resume walking, heading slightly up from shoreline, passing a couple of possible campsites, until reaching the crossing of the Bernice outlet creek.

When I arrive back at my campsite following my four hour excursion, I am glad I camped here. The mosquitoes are far worse up at Gallison. The scattered rocks, small erratics, and snowmelt bog make establishing a camping area on the south side or northwest end difficult. There is no view to the southwest unless one walks well past the lake's far end. If I had camped there, my tent would have blighted the view of every person hiking over Vogelsang Pass. The view of the Clark Range and Lewis Creek valley is grander from the ridge above Bernice.

In terms of the romantic vision I've built up ever since going over Vogelsang Pass in 1978, Gallison proved a bit of a disappointment. The other five times over the pass only accented that vision. Of course, it can't live up to that. It's not Picket Creek Lake, Kaweah Basin, Upper Basin, or Marion Lake. Yes, Gallison is a singular gorgeous lake, like so many others in the High Sierra. However, I prefer camping at Bernice, especially since I am the only person here. By going to Gallison, I satisfied that forty-five year wonder of what it was like to be there. Today *there* became *here*. Now I know.

The day seems to slow down so time passes with an acute awareness of the magnificent surroundings. The trees, the bushes, the flowers, the lake, the peaks, the ridges all convey something that beckons one to listen and assimilate at wild nature's pace. The day continues moving forward. While there are still the necessary chores of making dinner, licking/cleaning the pot, brushing teeth, they each move at what is perceived as a more leisurely pace. Everything gets done at roughly the same time as the day before. Today it just feels different. I'm now in sync with the wilderness.

I have seen no one today except birds, insects, and squirrels. As the alpenglow once again shines on Parsons and Simmons peaks while the feeding fish create golden circles, I am transfixed at the end of a full day in wilderness solitude. Tomorrow will be a "nothing day"—nowhere to go and nothing needing to get done.

## **Day Five, August 5 Bernice Lake**

I am up and out of the tent with the dawn's first light. I climb directly to the ridge overlook of the distant Clark Range and Lewis Creek valley directly below with Vogelsang Peak and its long ridge rising above. Reaching the Bernice ridge top before sunrise, I witness the light change from pink/red of dawn to the first bright sunlight striking a distant peak to it spreading slowly over the Clark Range, Simmons Peak, and Vogelsang until all ridges shine sunshine. It is a once in a lifetime sunrise.

That is once in a lifetime for me. I know that I will never again appreciate this scene at this time at this location. Tomorrow I will save my climbing stamina for Vogelsang Pass. Today is for this sublime sunrise and a day spent "doing nothing." Today is the day to inhabit Bernice Lake. Today is a day to be completely present in the here-and-now.

During this entire trip my mind has been dwelling on past trips. This area contains so much personal history. I have seen the changes from the rebuilt Lyell Canyon, Rafferty Creek, and Vogelsang Pass trails to no camping at Fletcher Lake to the encroachment of pines on open meadows. Those changes

co-exist with the seemingly unchanged peaks, an enduring testament to the eternal.

The real change has been with myself. In 1978, I was still going to set the world on fire. Now I know the most that will result is an ember glowing in fading dark. Instead of setting the world on fire, I fell in love with the High Sierra, transforming my life. No matter what else occurred, I have visited the High Sierra every summer since then as well as Yosemite Valley nearly every winter since 1983.

When younger, there was a youthful exuberance bordering on carelessness. Traveling in the Yosemite backcountry was a spontaneous excursion. Now, the outlaw facet of obtaining a permit and choosing a route has mostly disappeared. The necessity of more wilderness rules and regulations changed certain aspects of the experience. For popular trailheads, permits must be reserved months in advance before one knows the winter snowfall and subsequent summer conditions. Most of the remaining “walk-up” permits are grabbed up either one or two weeks before any trip, not a true “walk-up” experience. Spontaneity is mainly confined to what happens after one embarks from the trailhead as long as one continues to be open to whatever is discovered.

While traveling the High Sierra backcountry is no longer what it once was, eternal truths remain. The transcendent grace, the magical wonder of wilderness solitude persists. It's been many journeys covering many miles from the Hoover Wilderness in the north to Golden Trout Wilderness in the south. The regrets are only those places I never visited, such as Blackcap Basin. I tell myself to not treat this trip as the finale of a forty-five year love affair. Hopefully, in the future, there are will be other trips with new places to discover. However, I can't shake the feeling that this trip seems like a benediction.

It's a lovely lazy High Sierra afternoon. Gusts blow through the whitebark pines. Birds flit from tree to tree, sometimes vocalizing. Sierra hummingbird moths flock to the blooming red penstemon scattered over the area. The red flowers provide a delightful contrast to the gray granite and green trees and meadow.



To remind me of civilization, a jet flies overhead, the plane's distant engine roar punctuating the gentle sounds of wilderness. If one wants true wilderness without the intrusions of modern civilization, those places no longer exist. I've encountered deflated helium balloons miles from any trail. Even Antarctica contains the imprint of human civilization. Human-caused climate change effects even the most remote locations. Real and true wilderness where human imprint leaves no trace disappeared in the twentieth century. Now in the twenty-first century, we need learn to minimize what trace we leave.

I take a short excursion to the end of the meadow observing the reflections in the tiny tarn ringed with pines and snags. The outlet creek spills out from the end of the little lake in whitewater cascades. The lake is already shrinking, its overflow pools becoming boggy. Pines of essentially that same height are scattered over the meadow, climate change in action. Those pines were not here when I was last at Bernice Lake in 2008. Yet despite the changes and the planes overhead, the less popular places in the Sierra maintain their wilderness qualities. The silence of the wild exists in a spectacularly beautiful place.

I am enjoying immensely doing nothing. I wander a little, wash in the Bernice outlet creek. Mostly I am absorbed by the sounds and sights of the High Sierra. As the wind picks up in the afternoon, the breeze through the trees becomes a constant rustling background. Only the sound of another passing airliner disrupts the peace and grace of wilderness. This is when we learn how existence could be. At least enough of us believe we should set aside sanctuaries from the horrors of civilization. Here, life is at its most basic. Places like this surrounded by peaks sitting on a shelf with a basin above are defining locations in the High Sierra.

I hear voices about 4:00. Two men are searching for a campsite. They find one in the pines on the cliff overlooking Lewis Creek valley. When they walk past later while exploring the area, they almost miss my campsite and remark on how unobtrusively it's tucked away. Like me, they explore to the outlet creek, pass by the small lake, and observe the waterfall at the outlet creek's exit. I don't see them again so I remain essentially in solitude.

This is the final evening at Bernice. I can't remember better except Kaweah Basin and Picket Creek basin, maybe Palisade Basin and last year at Mesa Lake. I have definitely figured out how to make the most out of my wilderness trips despite age-imposed limitations. I realize my idiosyncracies are now so ingrained, there is no way I could backpack with anyone else except Barbara.

Once again, I visit the southwest end of Bernice, following the light as I return to the outlet creek, shoreline snags, and the final alpenglow on the surroundings peaks and ridges. It would be wonderful to appreciate the stars before retiring to the tent. Twilight seems to linger, feels too long, but actually lasts as long as nature intends. One can feel it moves and changes too slowly if one is waiting for darkness in the wild. Twilight is nearly non-existent if residing in electric light civilization. There is no twilight in cities and towns; the lights come on long before the sun goes down.

Here and now, twilight slowly fades and the first star appears in the deepest darkest blue sky. Another fabulous day concludes. I'll see about tomorrow and Monday, then head home. So in one respect, I actually begin the journey home tomorrow. I'm just adding one more place on possibly my last trip ever to the Vogelsang area. It's good night for now. Thank you Bernice for three great days.

## **Day Six, August 7, Bernice Lake to Townsley Lake**

It's Sunday and I worship once again in the church of my choice, the cathedral of wilderness, the denomination of the wild. Muir was right to term it "terrestrial immorality." For one final morning, I revel in the day's first light on the peaks and ridges surrounding Bernice Lake.

Did Muir, in all his wanderings, ever come to Bernice Lake? The Lewis Creek canyon seems a logical assumption to have been trodden on by Muir. He would have come to the Vogelsang area and over Vogelsang Pass. One Sierra Club High Trip Muir was on went over Vogelsang Pass and down

Rafferty Creek to Tuolumne Meadows. But it seems unlikely he would have made the side journey to Bernice Lake since it is not the best access for climbing any major peaks and there were no glaciers here, unlike going up Lyell Canyon to Mount Lyell and the Lyell glacier or following the Merced up to Merced Peak and its glacier where he experienced his “Eureka!” moment that proved his glacier speculations were indeed fact.

Bernice has exceeded expectations. I’d visited here in 1998 and 2008, but those were just visits. The first time in 1998, I went for a swim. The second time in 2008, I walked along the shoreline as far as the outlet creek. Here at Bernice Lake in 2023 in the High Sierra wilderness, I am contented. This meadow, creek, peaks, pines, glacier erratics all form a scene not of perfect symmetry, but a scene of near natural perfection. This is what and why I keep coming back: to revel in wilderness, to exist in “terrestrial immortality.”

I depart Bernice Lake at 9:15, again losing the trail at the same snowbank. I follow what I think is the trail beyond the snow for about a hundred yards and realize it isn’t the real trail. Rather than backtracking, I decide to follow it anyway since it is easy walking through forest and will put me further up the Vogelsang Pass Trail. I pop out of the woods by the lovely meadow on the Bernice outlet creek. A shallow crossing is directly in front of me. The Vogelsang Pass Trail is below. I remain at this level and soon intersect the trail on one of the switchbacks up to the level portion and wade across Lewis Creek.

It is a pleasant walk through the forest until the switchbacks commence up to the pass. At a narrow portion of the trail, I spy descending backpackers ahead and find a place to the side to allow them to pass. They are strung out in three separate groups. The first two groups I let pass with a “good morning.” I walk another twenty yards, step to the side, and let by the stragglers. They are obviously not looking ahead since they are startled to come upon me standing to one side of the trail.

After about ten more switchbacks. I come upon a large contingent of descending dayhikers, a teen group with three adult supervisors. When one of the supervisors tries to avoid the water on the trail, I remark he will get wet soon anyway at the Lewis Creek crossing. Another adult asks where I’m from.

“Bernice.”

“That’s where we’re going. You headed back?”

“No, Townsley. Have a good hike.”

The teens catch up so he moves on. I soon come to the place I stopped on the way down to consider a cross-country route to Gallison instead of following the trail to Bernice. The switchbacks end; I counted twenty-five. The trail goes along the side of the cliff with spectacular views extending from Gallison to Bernice to the Clark Range rising in the far distance above Lewis Creek valley. I take in the view one final time before coming to the level snowfield at Vogelsang Pass, walking across in one of the many sets of footprints. At a snowfree area off trail, I stop for a snack and send a SPOT to Barbara to let her know I’m over the pass. As I’m eating, a solo hiker passes with “good morning.”

The snow is far less than three days ago. After descending the top of the pass, I now only have a short snow section behind Vogelsang Peak’s extending ridge before getting back on the trail. The snow on the trail below Vogelsang Lake is gone. I wade Fletcher Creek and make my way up through the vacant High Sierra Camp to the large cairn by the collection of trail signs at the junction.

A young couple arrives from the Fletcher backpacker campground. I think of Barbara and I forty-five years ago. They are very friendly, beginning their hike back down to Tuolumne Meadows. When I mention that I was thinking of going to Townsley, they remark that would be better if I want to avoid people.

I take the trail signed for Evelyn Lake. Soon a sign points to the Fletcher Lake backpackers campground where that side trail ends in a stand of trees. It is quite far from the old location near the lake with the cable strung between two trees. Proceeding on the Evelyn Lake Trail, I come to our old campsite by what was at that time the other cable. There is now a “Revegetation Area” sign indicating no camping. The location is still lovely. What was then an open meadow has many younger trees, all about the same height, another indicator of climate change encroachment.

I go down to Fletcher Lake and walk on the lakeside trail. On the other side of the lake, a person with a backpack is crossing over a large snowfield.



She continues, crossing over the falls at the end of the lake. I meet the woman at the far end. She warns me about bears being active in the area.

The Fletcher Lake lakeside trail heads up by a campsite near the waterfall coming down from Townsley at the northeast end of Fletcher. The trail dies out in the rocks a little way up, but the direction is obvious. Use trails appear and disappear as one climbs up granite slabs. Obviously, different people have chosen slightly different routes to reach Townsley Lake.

I ascend to the top of the cliffs and see the lake before me. The couple I met at the cairn were correct; no one is here. The west end by the outlet creek is still a bog. The bushes and wet conditions indicate this is not a good place to camp and avoid mosquitoes. I follow the lakeside use trail down the lake, scouting for possible campsites. One campsite is still in a puddle from snowmelt, another seems more like a place someone picked because it was tent-size flat. I come to a large level area by the lakes one distinctive point. This will be fine.

Leaving my pack, I check out other spots. From this distance, I surmise there is also at least one campsite by the inlet falls at the east end of the lake. I decide on this area on the point. Access to the area above the lake seems easiest from here. This campsite is out in the open so will be more windy and thus fewer mosquitos. This is such an opposite of the campsite at Bernice, which was in a nook with trees. The Choo-choo ridge rises to the northwest, Fletcher Peak directly above to the south, and Parsons Peak with its long ridge to the southeast while Amelia Earhart Peak stands to the left of Parsons. It's interesting to see those peaks from the different perspective of the other side.

The area around Townsley Lake is also fascinating in its contrast to Bernice. Except at the west end by the outlet creek, there is no vegetation along the lakeshore except for a small clump of whitebarks near my campsite. The area above the lake includes a few scattered whitebarks that conclude with a line of pines along the top of a low ridge. My guess from the topo map is beyond those whitebarks is a large open area with a string of tarns.

Fletcher Peak rises directly from the south side of the lake with the southside shoreline still engulfed in deep snow. A couple of ice floes meander

over the water across from my campsite. I hear a crash and realize it is a falling segment of lakeside snow that was hanging over the lake. It's a mini version of a glacier breaking off and tumbling into the water. A new ice floe joins the others.

After dinner, my curiosity gets the better of me and I climb the two hundred feet to the ridge to discover what's beyond. As on the topo map, there are four tarns strung out in a line. This year, the tarns appear full to their brims. Surrounding them is a spectacular wide open rock-strewn meadow stretching from low ridges to the north and west to the higher ridge above Ireland Lake to the east. The Kuna Crest rises in the distance to the north of the ridge separating this area from Ireland Lake. I enjoy wandering around towards the near tarn and gazing on the magical slanting evening light. I'll explore this area more extensively tomorrow.

I head back down, appreciating the view of my campsite below and Fletcher Peak rising out of Townsley Lake. The alpenglow is lovely, if not spectacular. The fish are jumping, just like at Bernice. Tomorrow will be my final layover day. I am in solitude. Take it in, all in, so it will provide solace when I return to civilization.

With no wind, the mosquitoes are annoying enough to drive me into the tent. Since it is already getting dark, as last night, I wait until the first stars appear. Every day is a shorter so my wait time decreases a minute or two. The first dot of light appears, which is in all probability a planet, not a star. From my perspective, it's all the same. I marvel in its distant light as another dot of light appears before retreating to the tent. It's been a great day! Hopefully, tomorrow will be, too.

## **Day Seven, August 8, Townsley Lake**

At dawn, I await the sunrise. The first light strikes Fletcher Peak and the Choo-choo Ridge at 6:15. At sunrise, there is no wind so there are vivid reflections of the lakeside snow along with the peaks and ridges rising above the lake to the south, east, and west. A half hour or so after sunrise, the wind begins stirring, transforming the reflections into wavy patterns on the water.

This is my last leisurely layover morning. If the wind would decrease, it would be ideal with not a cloud in the sky. I find a rock to lean against with the wind at my back and enjoy coffee, writing, and gazing on peaks and ridges before heading out on my dayhike.

I ascend the low ridge behind my campsite by the same route taken last evening. At the top, the land opens to the vast untrailed landscape of marvelous green meadow, four tarns, scattered snow patches amid granite outcroppings, and a plethora of small erratics; each seems to be saying “I’ve had enough, leave me at this spot for eternity.”

I wander around each of the four tarns. A large buck deer grazes near the third tarn, oblivious to my presence. It’s only when he walks straight toward me that he notices, which doesn’t change his course so I move right. Beyond the tarns, climbing a small rise, all of northern Yosemite and Kuna Crest stretch across the horizon. To say it is breathtaking is an understatement.

It’s a walking across the top of the world feeling that one experiences in certain High Sierra locations. I don’t feel like a discoverer so much as the only person striding over a revelatory place. No man made objects mar the wide open untrailed landscape. There is nothing except High Sierra wilderness from horizon to horizon. I am a solitary human walking in wonderland. I’ve only experienced this marvelous sentience in Picket Creek basin, Kaweah Basin, Upper Basin, Bear Lakes basin, Royce Lakes, Brewer Basin, Bench Canyon, Spiller Creek Canyon, Humphreys Basin, Lakes Basin, and the Upper Kern.

I realize I am fortunate to experience this walking across the top of the world feeling so many times. Today may be the final time I will know this miraculous sense of wonder. I don’t necessarily foresee the few places I may manage to get to containing this marvelous transcendent sensation of unlimited freedom in a vast untrailed landscape. That thought leads me to perhaps seek out such a location for a future trip.

I don’t pay much attention to wandering towards any particular place. Looming Fletcher Peak rises directly over Townsley Lake so there is no chance of becoming lost. I eventually meander over to the larger stretched out

series of small lakes and connecting creek below the long ridge separating this basin from Ireland Lake. Snow bridges sit above the water. As I walk, I keep turning north to take in the ever-changing view of the distant peaks. I end up back at the largest of the tarns.

I decide to head for the waterfall at the southeast end of Townsley. By coming from above, I can avoid the snow field above the shoreline. When I get to the waterfall, I find the suspected couple of excellent campsites by the inlet creek and the small lake above Townsley. I bookmark them in my mind, though I know I'll probably not manage to get here again. Sitting on a rock by the falls, I take in the view of the entirety of Townsley Lake all the way to the Choo-choo Ridge beyond the far north shore.

I make my way back to my campsite along the shoreline. Without a pack, leaping to avoid the water, snow, and bog is manageable. Back at the campsite, I check the time. I've been wandering for over four hours.

The wind now blows with near gale force from the northwest. I hook up the outer tent guylines normally left unused in order to leave the vestibule open for appreciating the view. Today requires the guylines to prevent the wind getting under the vestibule, picking the tent up, and sending it off to who knows where. The tent poles strain and bend with the force of the wind, but remain in place held down by large rocks.

I recall the wind storm Barbara and I encountered in Arches National Park when we had to stand holding the poles to keep the tent from flying across Utah while the force of the wind blew fine red dust literally through the walls of the tent. The tent fly could keep the rain out, but not that micro red dust. When the wind storm concluded, we emptied the tent, shook out the sleeping bags, and dumped the accumulated red dust.

Thinking of past trips gets me realizing that along with it being forty-five years in the High Sierra, it is also twenty-five years since the thirty-eight day trip that became the basis for *A Summer in the High Sierra*. While camped at the isolated upper end of the North Fork of the San Joaquin in 1995, my contemplations led to the revelation that human civilization is based on belief



systems essentially codified over two thousand years ago. In 1998, I hoped by journeying alone in the same wilderness that inspired John Muir I might discover new ways of seeing humans in relation to existence.

Like Muir and Henry David Thoreau, I sought the lessons wilderness teaches us each and every day. I hoped to perceive a new way of seeing beyond those entrenched belief systems that so profoundly influenced our planet that was, and still is, at a crossroads crisis point.

Despite all we've discovered and learned over the last few hundred years, nothing has changed regarding our fundamental beliefs of humanity's place in the evolutionary cycle of life. While we remain in terms of evolution a relatively recent single species residing on a single planet in a single solar system in a single galaxy among an immense, near infinite universe filled with galaxies, we remain rigidly locked in the belief that an all-knowing, all-powerful being is primarily concerned with our single species. Humans still behave as if our fate takes precedence over all other life in the universe.

All known facts disprove those dictates. Evolution scientifically may be considered a "theory," but it is obviously essentially a fact when one observes the evidence left by all the innumerable life forms on Earth over the last several millennia. The images from the James Webb telescope see further back in time with the number of known galaxies increasing. This has caused some cosmologists to question the "Big Bang" theory of creation. Maybe there is no "moment of creation." Therefore, there is no big bang, no "creator." Maybe there is only existence, perpetual existence, perpetual existence that is constantly evolving. How can we begin to comprehend our minuscule place in the cosmos? Over the last twenty-five years we've done nothing to alter human behavior except to become ever more enamored with technology.

Yet, I, too, remain a flawed human being in the evolutionary course of life, encompassing the contradictions inherent in human nature. All I can do is try to live true to what wilderness reveals to me. Imposing that realization on anyone else is contrary to the humility integral to wilderness' basic lesson. In 1998, what I discovered was merely a personal realization. Neither the rational deconstructions of science nor the leap of faith of religion contain

the breadth and depth of the wild's message. It is intangible, felt in the core of one's being, not something that can be confined within a doctrine. As Thoreau's adage proclaims "in wildness is the preservation of the world."

The sun drops lower until it disappears behind Fletcher Peak's ridge, it's light still illuminating the surrounding land. After dinner, I climb back up the low ridge for photos of that incandescent light on the tarns and expansive meadow. I walk as far as the grand breathtaking view of northern Yosemite. Unfortunately, it is hazy so I wonder if any of the photos will be worth preserving. The sunlight keeps going in and out as the clouds move over the sky. I stand waiting for the slanting sun to emerge at the right moment to render the green meadow and erratics with just the right iridescent glow.

I descend down to my campsite as the day's final light radiates. I am reminded of the final night of my 1998 trip when camped at Vogelsang Lake, I ascended Vogelsang Pass to observe the sunset. A marmot sat on its haunches and also gazed on the same final light on distant Half Dome. When the sunlight dissipated and Half Dome and the rest of the High Sierra faded into shadow, the marmot scampered into his den and I descended the pass to my tent.

Pink clouds against a startling blue sky pass over Parsons Peak and its extended ridge as the day's final light glistens off the granite before the sun disappears below the western horizon. Today has been everything I could wish for, as near to perfect as possible. It is my last night, maybe my last night ever in the backcountry. At this point in my life, I never know what the next season will bring. One thing I've learned is life keeps throwing curveballs and one has to adjust to whatever the new reality brings forth.

This summer season has been fabulous despite the "unprecedented" snow. I award myself a metaphoric gold star for planning and improvising this snowy season in the High Sierra. I've experienced two magical trips with true solitude.

This is one of those days one hopes will never end. While there are moments when the passage of time seems to slow down, the sun's passage inevitably continues. Twilight slowly becomes darkness. The stars begin to emerge. With a final wish, I crawl into the tent.

## **Day Eight, August 8, Townsley Lake to Tuolumne Meadows**

At dawn, I awake for my final morning. Pink/red sky glows to the west beyond the shoulder of Fletcher Peak and Choo-choo Ridge. I marvel at the first light, beginning on the summit of Fletcher Peak. Within about five minutes the light covers the horizon rock formation of the Choo-choo Ridge. One has to react quickly for photos.

As on all final mornings, I am torn between wanting to linger and being anxious about packing up and going. I savor my lingering time with one last thermos of coffee, a nuts-over-chocolate Luna bar, and final thoughts. It is a moment to think back on all that has transpired over the last twenty-five years in America and the world, the last forty-five years in the High Sierra, and the last seventy-two years of my life.

When I am immersed in the wilderness I feel most alive and most at peace with myself. From the summers of my youth in the Boundary Waters of Minnesota to all the many visits to the Sierra I find “terrestrial immortality.” I will return as long as my health permits. I know what I can do and what I can not do. There are lots of places I still can do. My mind drifts off to so many places from the Sierra to the place I live where the Point Reyes National Seashore backcountry campgrounds are literally a couple of hours out my front door.

I sit in solitude at Townsley Lake. I have seen no one since Sunday. I have walked over a wide open landscape, feeling on top of the world, the epitome of unbounded freedom. I have seen the sunrise and sunset on Parsons Peak and it’s spectacular extending ridge, Amelia Earhart Peak, Simmons Peak, the Clark Range, the Choo-choo Ridge (something that I have renamed in my mind as Castle Rampart Ridge). Because of knowledge and experience, my recent trips that have been as marvelous as possible.

Yes, it has been a great trip. Thank you, Yosemite Wilderness. You provided me with more than is promised for one cannot promise serenity. That has to be experienced to comprehend, taken inside and absorbed in the depth of being. Now it’s time to go home.

I pack up and head down Townsley Lake to the outlet. The descending use trail appears and disappears on the way down to the vacant campsite by the waterfall. I follow the lakeside trail once more to our 1978 campsite. This time, I pause for a snack and to look around more closely, trying to figure out where we pitched the tent and which trees held the cable suspended between them. I recall how we were the only people here. Fletcher Lake froze both nights. Each morning, we welcomed the sun emerge from near Mt. Conness while sitting on a rock in the open meadow that is now dotted with whitebark pines. The High Sierra's particulars evolve, but the serenity feels eternal.

When I finish my snack, I walk down the trail to the cairn and signs. I see no one until I come to Tuolumne Pass where a group ahead is coming from Booth Lake. I enjoy the view north while I wait for them to head down the Rafferty Creek Trail. The rest of the hike down to the junction with the JMT is an exercise in meeting groups and couples heading up the trail. Once I am on the JMT, it's a constant stream of backpackers and day hikers. I meet one friendly couple who are my age and congratulate me for still backpacking.

I finally arrive at the Dog Lake parking lot. It's already 3:00. It took me more than six hours to cover the eight miles from Townsley Lake, a concrete indication of how much I've slowed down over the years. That use to be, at most, a four hour hike.

I send Barbara and "at the car" SPOT message since cell phones don't work here and I don't feel like discovering whether or not the pay phones by the campground still operate since the campground remains closed for "rehabilitation." I am curious to see the new version of the campground since Barbara and I have stayed there so many times over the last forty years. Maybe in 2025 we'll discover it once more.

The car starts. The trip home begins. I wonder when, and if, I will be back here again. I realize it's not if, it's when.