

Pine Lakes

“Hang a left at the big rock.”

Shoot from the hip and hope you don't blow off a toe in the draw. That pretty much sums up my approach to most things in life. Excursions into the wilderness seldom veer from this philosophy. Toss in a five pound bag of potatoes and a pound of bacon and head for the mountains with my dog. This year would see a change in that methodology.

At least once a year I try to make an annual pilgrimage into the Eagle Cap wilderness – specifically Pine Lakes. When a few members of the Squaw Butte Back Country Horseman expressed an interest in packing into the Eagle Caps, it was with conflicting emotions that I agreed to guide them in. Pine Lakes is filled with personal memories – mostly great, some sad and a few as spectacular as the lakes pristine azure waters. I don't mind sharing in the good and even a few of the spectacular moments, but the poignant memories are my own and likely not to be understood by others. I assured myself that it would be alright. Any such emotional episode could remain privately concealed behind dark sunglasses.

Preparations began to ramp up the closer it got to Labor Day weekend. Four of us had signed up: Janine and I, Rob and his close friend Bob. Unfortunately, Bob would have to cancel due to a family emergency. Janine and I hoped that Rob would still want to come along. Rob is an experienced packer, while Janine and I are just learning our own way of doing things. Rob reported that he would be going without his friend. We wanted a small group of four to six people. The smaller the safer when it comes to some wilderness trails. We put the word out in attempt to fill Bob's spot. The busy weekend brought no takers. Rob would be stuck with two greenhorns and a skittish mule.

I have absolutely no idea how to pack for more than one person. Emails flew back and forth between Rob and Janine on what food items to bring, what meals each would be responsible for and who would bring what. “Hey guys...over here, I'm going to you know! What do you want me to bring? Do you prefer Beanie Weenies with the Weenies, or Beanie Weenies without the Weenies...which is really just Pork and Beans?” It was suggested I bring local knowledge of the area and dessert. Whatever. Evidently, they either don't trust my cooking or they don't appreciate the culinary delight of a can of Beanie Weenies. You don't *have* to eat them cold, you know.

“Local knowledge of the area.” What did that mean? Sure – I've been to Pine Lakes many times; on foot, with goats and on horseback. That does not mean I still can't manage to get us all lost or thrown off a cliff. What if the trail has washed out since I went up last? What if I can't remember when to turn off the trail from Crater to Pine Lakes? What if we meet Llamas! There is no easy way in to Pine Lakes. There are multiple routes – but none are a walk in the park. The last time I was in I packed Jack. On the way out he was knocked off the trail by a protruding boulder and came all too close to falling off the edge of a steep cliff. The bulky packs and pulling with all my worth on his lead rope was all that prevented him from rolling over the edge. I certainly don't want to be responsible for something like that. Nevertheless, I was not overly worried about Rob or Janine; both capable, adventurous souls that matched, if not exceeded, my own.

In theory, I didn't have to pack much more than my personal gear. Rob and Janine seemed to have it all under control. Regardless, I opted to pack as I would if I were going alone. I recently purchased a set of rugged plastic panniers in hunter orange. I detest the color orange. I would have preferred camo- but thought better of it. My mule is black and has no equal in the game of hide- and- go-seek; hunter orange might even the odds in my favor.

We agreed to meet at Judy's Weiser In for lunch on Thursday, August 30th. Janine and Rob trailer-pooled and followed me to Halfway Oregon after lunch. We left our campers behind for easier travel knowing I could scrounge up a place to stay for the night when we got there. Once in Halfway, I took them on a mini tour of Halfway and introduced them to my Dad, his wife Roberta and my Granny. Dad put us up in one of his vacation rentals called, "The Carson House;" which to me sounds a bit like a name for a house of ill repute. We left the horses in Dad's pasture and later that afternoon had dinner at Wild Bills in town with my mom.

Blame in on nerves or call it excitement, but I could not sleep a wink. I felt like a 10 year old the night before Christmas – anticipating the arrival of Santa to fill stockings with treasures untold. Tired of tossing and turning, I snuck outside without waking the others. My dog, Shade, and I sat on the porch steps and listened to the bugling of elk until early dawn.



I had this grand plan to be on the trail by 6:00 AM Friday. That might have actually worked if I'd gotten to bed before 4:00 AM. As it was, we moseyed on in to town for breakfast, loaded the horses and headed to the trail head. By 11:15 we were packed up and ready to ride. A couple weekends earlier I had scoped out a trail that would take us to Little Eagle meadows. I'd never been on this particular trail before then. I wanted to find a route that would allow us to make a loop without having to move our

trailers or come back the way we went it.

The trails into and out of the Lakes are steep and rocky at their best. I suggested earlier to the group that they would want to make sure their horses were shod, if needed, and legged up. Janine put front shoes on Two Ton, I had shoes all around on Jack and Rob's mustangs and Annie went barefoot. Each would navigate the rocky terrain remarkably well.

The trail begins in the center of Cornucopia and climbs a roughly graded four wheeler road directly above the ghost town for a couple of miles before veering off to the left at a creek crossing. The climb was steep and took its toll on the stock. About mid-way through a particular steep section, we stopped for lunch and rested under the shade of pines.

Rob noticed that Oregon does not seem to understand the concept of switch backs. The trail cut straight up the center of most of its mountainous terrain. Skirting a large ravine with impressive rock formations, the trail continues up a canyon before winding around and bringing the explorer directly to the front door of Snyder's Cabin, snuggled atop a knoll on the back side of Little Eagle Meadows.



We watered the horses and mules at Little Eagle before continuing on to the Lakes. A small group of riders and pack animals rode ahead of us through the meadow before turning left toward Summit Point and home. We turned right and began the second leg of our journey into Pine Lakes.

The trail into Pine Lakes from Summit Point is less steep than some of its other routes. When I say less steep – I don't mean to imply that it is not steep. It is. It is steep, rocky and can be treacherous in spots. There is little to no signage along the route. There used to be a sign placed at the junction of Crater and Pine Lakes. It was nowhere to be found. Annie, always sure she knows the proper route, had it in her mind we should be going to Crater Lake instead. The others waited as I went back in search of my wayward mule. I tied Jack and set out on foot. The trail is narrow with very little opportunity to turn around. I felt if I rode Jack, all it would accomplish is to push Annie on down the trail. Not 100 yards from the split and I catch glimpse of bright hunter orange protruding from behind a tree. Orange is vast becoming less repulsive to me all the time. "Come on Annie – we will go to

Crater on another day." Annie dropped her head slightly and followed me back up the hill toward Jack.



Once again, I found myself at the back of the string. I don't mind – in fact, I prefer to be in the back. I don't feel like I have to push Jack to keep from holding anyone back and I like to stop and take pictures whenever I want without disturbing others. We made excellent time as our small group wound its way around the mountain and through a number of saddles. I

recognized the last saddle as the one that would bring Rob to an overlook of the Lakes. I could not help but smile in anticipation of what he was about to see.

I could not make out exactly what he said once he crested the saddle, the tone, however, was unmistakable. There are more picturesque views of Pine Lakes than what unfolds before your eyes when you drop through the saddle, but none as awe-inspiring. Pine Lakes is made up of three lakes. There is an upper lake separate from the two lower lakes...one pouring into the next before cascading down the canyon and flowing through Halfway in the flowing form of Pine Creek.



Now comes the fun part. The decent from the saddle into the lake is comprised of switch backs that resemble the zig-zag setting on a Singer sewing machine. Each zig seems to zag your butt right off into oblivion before switching back 180 degrees – only to do it over and over again. I kept reminding myself that staring at the ground in front of Jack's hooves really does nothing to prevent him from falling off the cliff. Instead, I attempt to calm

my nerves by looking up at the beautiful blue sky with its fluffy white clouds and humming the lyrics to Little Big Town's "Pontoon:"

*On the pontoon
Makin' waves and catchin' rays up on the roof
Jumpin' out the back, don't act like you don't want to
Party in slow motion
Out here in the open
Mmmmmmm...motorboatin'
(Hoo hoo hoo)*

A large meadow rimmed in granite formations and mountain pines sets between the upper lake and Pine Lakes below. It was going on 5:00 PM and the animals were rightfully tired. Rob had brought a trail guide that showed the meadow as one of the authors favorite camping spots, designated as none other than: "The Awesome Camp Spot." If it was good enough for the author, it was good enough for us. We



decided to make camp in the meadow and ride into the Lake the next day. We could move camp to the Lakes later if we chose.

By 5:30 PM we had the stock unpacked and camp set. An area was chosen for the kitchen. A large, flat sided granite boulder formed the backdrop for a perfect fire-ring. Jutting out one side of the boulder is a two sided tunnel of flat granite with a short lean-two type roof. A person could light the fire, crawl under that lean-two and probably survive the coldest of wilderness nights. It truly was an

awesome camp site.

Rob set up the bathroom facilities using my folding camp shovel and a plastic toilet seat ring. Ugh, I hate those plastic toilet seat rings. They leave indents on your butt and have a tendency to buck you off at the most awkward of times. Can't we just use the shovel and make our own little cat holes? Please? There was no pleading with Rob. Bathroom facilities would be found by "hanging a left at the big rock." Period. Apparently my camp shovel left little to be desired. Rob swears the thing was possessed and intent on pinching off his fingers. Throughout the weekend, he and Janine hinted that my shovel might not be making the trip out of the wilderness.



Rob whipped up Jambalaya rice and chicken for dinner. I made either cinnamon rolls or chocolate chip cookies for desert, I don't remember for sure. You would think a person whose only responsibility was dessert could come up with something more creative. Hell, I was still reveling in the miracle that I had gotten us all there without putting our wilderness first aid training to use.

The moon was spectacular as it hung just over the backside of the

Lake; large, yellow and full of harvest promise reflecting in the inky blue water. The next night I planned on hiking down to my favorite photo op of the lake and take a picture of that moon as it rose behind the lake.

The Benadryl Janine doled out soon took effect. I crawled into the small bivy tent and slipped between the narrow nylon linings of my mummy bag and drifted off to sleep with a feeling of contentment that I was home. Outside my tent could be felt the rustling of a German shepherd dog and the presence of another - large and white as he faithfully watches over me.

What is it about camping out that seems to synchronize everyone to rise at the same time? As soon as first light hits the tents, sleepy bodies crawl out to face the day in unison. Horses need to be watered and hobbled to graze. Coffee needs to be put on and a fire lit to cut the chill of the morning. There were no rules or set kitchen duties per say. We didn't need them. Each of us took on whatever task needed to be done and camp life flowed like a well oiled machine.

After breakfast Saturday morning we saddled up and rode down to the lakes. Rob and I had each bought a three day non-resident fishing license to the tune of just under \$50.00. We were going to have to catch a lot of fish or tomorrow's breakfast was going to be very expensive.



Janine lounged atop a large boulder to read while Rob and I fished. Rob reminds me a little of my youngest boy. If the fish aren't biting in the first 30 seconds – he's over it and off doing something else. I managed to land two fish before giving up as well. \$25.00 per fish was better than getting skunked - no matter which way you looked at it.

Rob had spied a rock bluff on the far side of the lake that he thought might make a fine jumping off point into the water. The problem was getting to the opposite side without going the long way around. Janine and I watched him make his way across the high water line of jagged granite toward a protruding rock bluff that blocked the way. A person could either swim around it or climb over it as I had in the past. Not Rob – nope, he was going to scale the face of that cliff if it killed him. I thought it just might. I can't watch. I can't help it, I have to peek. He's still clinging to the rock. I can't watch this! I have to watch this! I hope he doesn't hit his head if he falls. OMG – I can't watch. I couldn't help myself – I had to watch as Rob crossed one long leg and arm over the other and scaled the face of the rock like a freakishly tall Spiderman.

I am no Spiderman and I can barely swim. I'm going the other way. I wrapped my swimsuit and shampoo in a sarong folded like a hobo-sack and headed for the opposite side of the lake, counter-clockwise to Rob's chosen route. By the time it takes me to get to the other side, Rob should be finished with his dip. Rob climbed to the top of his rock cliff and dove head first into the frigid, icy waters. "SPALOOOSH!" – I waited for the blood curdling yell to follow. Nothing. Has he come up yet? Where's the blood curdling yell? Either the icy cold water knocked the wind out of him or he's a lot tougher than I am.

I'm not diving headlong into anything liquid if I can help it. One foot in front of the other, that's my plan. I can see this water has not warmed up any over the last 30 years. Unlike Rob's impressive Olympic performance, I carefully waded up to my knees before sliding into a magnificent rendition of canine propulsion. "AUGH!"

Before the trip, I downloaded a few geo-cache coordinates within 5 miles of the lake. With GPS in hand, I set out to see if I could find the closest cache. I walked to the front side of the lake, crawled up to the highest peak and stared out over the wide expanse of the valley. The "Pine Lakes" cache GC1F1T1 placed by DrAwKwArD was nowhere near the lake itself. As the crow fly's – the cache sits 1.5 miles down the canyon toward the wilderness boundary. We will be going home that direction. I'll pick up the cache on our way out.



Unfortunately, it was time to head back to camp. Again, I can't remember what Janine and Rob made for dinner, but it was no doubt delicious. I believe it was some sort of seafood fettuccini thing. Dutch Oven peach cobbler for dessert finished off dinner. The wind had picked up enough that I changed my mind about taking pictures of the moon over the lake. I suppose a hard-core photographer would have toughed it out. Instead, I went to bed shortly after the sun buried itself in the jagged granite peaks.

The original plan for Sunday was to ride into Crater Lake. None of us thrilled at the idea of climbing back out that treacherous saddle. Nobody said anything about sticking to any agenda and the idea was bagged. Everyone seemed to disperse in opposite directions and into their individual adventures. I had brought a geo-cache of my own to place at Pine Lakes. After placing the cache – I set out on a pre-planned mission; to make snow angels and bring back enough material to build a snowman.



A side trail skirts the backside of the upper lake. I had never noticed this trail before. I love the feeling of exploring not yet traversed sections of trail. It's as if you are the first to step foot on that particular section of earth. Shade and I meandered along the path listening to the constant chatter of chipmunks and ground squirrels. The tree tops came to life with unique birdsong. Looking through Janine's binoculars, I caught the flight of a magnificent bald eagle as it landed in the uppermost branch of an old, twisted snag. The binoculars brought into view things that appeared to come from a land of pixies and mountain fairies. I don't know what they were – whether insect or seed pods – little white glistening entities flittered about in delicate, whimsical dance. Magical.

Patches of glacier-like snow clings to bowls of jagged granite surrounding the upper lake. Making a snow angel was not nearly as effective as what you see in the movies. No fluffy white powder here. I spread my arms and plopped down quite abruptly. Denim pockets meet packed, concrete like snow with a thud. I flail my arms and legs like an uncoordinated, flightless bird and jump up to admire my work. "Hmmm. Looks more like sporadic chicken scratching." Well, there is still the snowman; now to get

enough snow back down the mountain to camp without it melting. I scooped a handful of crystallized snow and formed it into a hard ball. I wrapped the snowball in an empty plastic gummy bear's bag, wrapped that in my bandana and placed the whole thing in my camera bag. My butt was already numb from the snow angel attempt, so I hung the bag of snow over my backside and made a dash for camp.



Janine and Rob were coming back from their respective explorations when I reached camp. I scrambled to form my big snowball into two smaller snowballs and threw them at both. Mission accomplished. I know – childish – but who says a bunch of mid-life horseman can't have a little fun. It's not like we were in danger of reenacting scenes from Lord of the Flies. The remaining snow was then formed into a miniature version of frosty the snowman. Small twigs formed the arms and smiling mouth. Tiny pieces of coal made up his eyes. Janine placed a dab of moss on top his head for hair and "Wilson" was born.



"I don't want to go home!" It's always hard for me to return home after being in the Eagle Caps and this time was no different. I can honestly say that this was, for me, the best time spent in the Eagle Caps... ever. I am certain Rob and Janine felt close to the same. We reluctantly began to pack up camp late Monday morning. Janine and I went to work helping each other pack up our mules. Rob wanted us to pretend like he wasn't there. He said he wanted us to learn to do it on our own so we didn't feel obligated to invite him along on our next trip. I don't think so Rob...we invite you along for someone to torment – your packing skills are irrelevant.

If the ride into the lake was scary – the ride out bordered on petrifying. The trail resembled nothing from past years. Jagged, loose granite covered every inch of the severe switchbacks. Rob led the way, followed by Moose his pack horse, Annie, me and Jack, Janine and her mule Bubba. Rob shouted back a warning. A large boulder blocked the trail at the point in the switchback that juts out over an edge; basically, the pivot point of the switch back. The trail bypassed the large rock, narrowly skirting the outside edge *almost* wide enough for hoof placement. Rob, Payette and Moose gingerly made their way past the obstruction. Annie stuck her nose on the boulder and examined the whole thing like only a mule can. There had to be a better way in Annie's mind. There was absolutely no room on that trail for a mule to turn around without shoving the rest of us off the cliff. I dismounted and took hold of Annie to prevent her from turning around. Janine and I led our animals through the precarious section. "Ok, that is about as bad as it gets. From here on, it's smooth sailing." I didn't mean to lie – I just had no way of knowing I was wrong.

A few switchbacks down from the obstruction and Rob dismounted. Janine had an accurate, but ominous thought: "This must be scary bad if Rob's getting off."



Janine and I both dismounted. Another obstacle blocked the trail. Two large boulders had fallen dead center in the middle of the trail. A gap between the rocks was barely wide enough for a horse to get one leg through. Somehow, Moose managed to cautiously navigate the obstacle with the athleticism of a gymnast. Annie and bubba followed. Each did so without upsetting their heavy loads. It goes without saying that we were pretty proud of our animals. This is what it's all about really.

You practice and work with your animals. You learn knots, slings and weight distribution. You take your animals on small outings and work through any flaws in your technique. Then comes the day when you head out on the trail for the real thing. This was the real thing, especially for Janine and me. The Eagle Caps are as unforgiving as they are beautiful. Rob put it bluntly: "There is no room for error on a trail carved straight from the granite cliffs. One misstep can lead to the loss of life of both stock and human."

We chose to lead our animals over the more rugged portions of trail. As Rob said, it was not fair to our animals to make them navigate the sharp and unsteady shale beneath their feet with our added weight. By the time we mounted, we were entering the line of timber adjacent to the Wilderness Boundary. I checked my GPS again. The cache I had downloaded was directly in-line with the wilderness boundary tree. It was not a safe, or a convenient, spot to hold up the string while I search for the cache. I powered down my GPS and vowed to come back up and find the cache another day.



We stopped to rest and grab a quick bite to eat before crossing Pine Creek at the red bridge and undertaking the last leg of our journey. The trail follows an old four wheeler road the last couple of miles before coming out at the back side of the Cornucopia Pack Station. Rob's horse, Payette, seemed to have forgotten the sights and sounds of civilization and fidgeted the closer we got to the pack station. Rob chuckled at the mustangs' sudden wariness. The horse had managed to safely carry Rob down what he said, and I quote:

"The scariest hour and a half I've spent on horseback in a long time," – only to spook at the sight of a few pastured pack animals.

We arrived at the trailers shortly after 4:00 PM. The crew made quick work of unpacking gear and loading the animals for the haul home. Everyone agreed that this would be amongst the most treasured and memorable times spent in the wilderness. We had all come up with a more descriptive rating system for trails that spanned from "Oh Shit" to "OMG we are doing to die." Janine had discovered strength and confidence in her ability to navigate rough terrain as well as honing her packing skills. Rob seemed to let go of the everyday stress life sometimes offers, and allowed in himself the luxury to relax by offloading some of the responsibilities on to others. As for me, I learned that just because the people and animals in your life change, that not all of your best memories are behind you. Adventure and good

times do not have to end with the passing of a faithful dog or a beloved friend. Memories and new experiences can be made every single day, and some of the very best are yet to come.

Epilogue

Winding down after any pack trip to me is more difficult than preparing for the trip. I suppose there are as many techniques to doing so as there are variations on what is the best type of hitch to sling. Once the animals are unloaded and taken care of, I lay everything out on the porch, clean the truck and trailer and begin to go through my gear. There are clothes and dishes to wash, supplies to replenish and possibly a few alterations to equipment. I had made a list during the trip of the items I want to add to my supplies for future adventures. There was the nifty little removable pot handle, a fire pan and a small kettle for boiling tea water. I had coveted Janine's sweet Nikon binoculars and added those to my list as well. A zippered camp jacket that didn't collect so much horse hair that is turned me into a Wookiee would be nice and made its way on the list.

I would also omit a few items I didn't need. As I begin to sort through my equipment, I had the nagging feeling that I had forgotten something. What was missing? I had my sleeping bag, tent, kitchen-kit and highline bag. All of my hobbles seemed to be present and accounted for...what was it? The bathroom supplies were over-kill so I planned on cutting those in half. That was it...the bathroom! My foldable camp shovel we used to dig the holes "left of the big rock" was missing! My mind drifted back to bits and pieces of sound bites between Rob and Janine concerning that very shovel. Rob hated the shovel – it collapsed on him and almost pinched off his fingers. Janine suggested they leave it as an item in my geo-cache. It all made sense to me now. Somewhere, hidden within the wilderness boundary of the Eagle Caps, lays a green, foldable camp shovel.

Later that week after our monthly Back Country Horsemen meeting had adjourned; Rob called me over to his vehicle. "I have something for you," he said with an impish grin. "Janine and I would like to present you with this gift of appreciation for showing us the Eagle Caps." From the back seat of his mini-van, Rob handed over a shiny new, Truper - Tru Tough non-folding camp shovel with turned step for greater foot comfort. I was moved beyond words before bursting into laughter. It was the sweetest gift a girl could ask for and would help prepare the facilities "just left of the big rock" for many years to come.