



THE LAST OF A GOOD THING MY WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE

For a number of Western U.S. watersheds, a majority of the stream flow comes from vast snowfields within designated wilderness areas, administered by the U.S. Forest Service. There are very few climate monitoring stations allowed within these wilderness areas. Until 1989, there were four of our (NRCS) remote SNOW TElemetry (SNOTEL) sites located within the High Uinta Wilderness in northern Utah. Since the wilderness was established in 1984 and these sites were established as early as 1962, they were allowed to remain for a time. These exceptions were contingent on establishing sites outside of the wilderness that would reliably assess the runoff potential of the yearly snow pack to the streams and lakes below. Water is a very precious commodity in Utah...so much so, that High Uinta water is sent out of the basin via trans-basin aqueducts to help quench the thirst of people living on the western side of the Wasatch Mountain range.

These four SNOTEL sites... Lightning Lake, Lakefork Basin, Five Points Lake, and Atwood Lake, were maintained each summer by packing in all necessary tools and equipment on pack horses. The summer maintenance trip was about 100 miles in length and lasted five days. It was considered, by some, to be a "plum" (coveted) experience. In 1988, I was fortunate enough to accompany Ed Harrelson (Utah NRCS Electronic Technician) on this "unique" adventure trip.

At the same time, the Forest Service was pressuring the NRCS to relocate the SNOTEL sites outside of the wilderness boundary. We struck a bargain with them...if we could find any sites outside of the wilderness that were acceptable for use within our water supply forecasting program; we would move the existing sites. If not, they could remain in the wilderness area. It was my job to do that analysis. As it turned out, there were no sites outside of the wilderness that provided the information needed to predict the amount of runoff that could be expected from each year's spring snowmelt. At the same time, the relationship between Atwood Lake snow data and stream flow wasn't very good, so we summarily agreed to remove that site. The "snow to runoff" relationship of the other three sites proved to be quite good. However, the analysis for Lightning Lake and Lakefork Basin gave almost identical results, using the limited amount of data that we had collected up to that time. So, the decision was made to discontinue monitoring Lightning Lake. This was a decision I would later learn to regret. We kept the sites at Lakefork Basin and Five Points Lake. Both of these sites are deep within the wilderness area and their discovery would be very unlikely, even if someone knew of their approximate locations. This seemed to be a satisfactory compromise to the Forest Service, and these two sites still remain. As I mentioned above, I have come to lament the loss

of Lightning Lake. Given enough time, this site would probably have been very valuable in forecasting runoff into Stillwater Reservoir, located just downstream. But... that's water over the spillway.

Early in the morning of August 8, 1988, ED Harrelson and I left Salt Lake City and drove to the wrangler's horse corrals located at Hades Creek. We met Ralph, the head wrangler, and his two assistant wranglers, Sandra and Kris. They had already purchased our provisions for the trip and were ready to load the panniers onto the pack horses. We were given brief instructions about pack string safety and then we were allowed to select our horses. Ed chose a large, white Arabian gelding. I opted for a nice stocky Palomino mare by the name of Shiloh.

That first day, we had a short ride to the Granddaddy Lake wilderness ranger station. We were told that this was the "best maintained" station within the wilderness. This was where Sandra and Kris lived during their summer as wilderness rangers.

One week before our arrival, a young man had drowned in one of the Granddaddy Basin lakes. It had fallen to Ralph to be the one to take him out of the wilderness via pack animal. If it had been a rescue mission, instead of a recovery mission, they would have been allowed to use a helicopter in stead of a pack horse. Go figure!



Granddaddy Lake wilderness ranger camp

Early the next day, we left for Lightning Lake. It soon became very apparent that my choice of horses was better than Ed's. His horse was continually hopping and side stepping. The only way that the animal would become somewhat manageable, was if Ed would let him take the lead...which is where he ended up for most of the trip. This turned out to be the best though, since Ed had made the same trip several times before and knew where the SNOTEL sites were located.

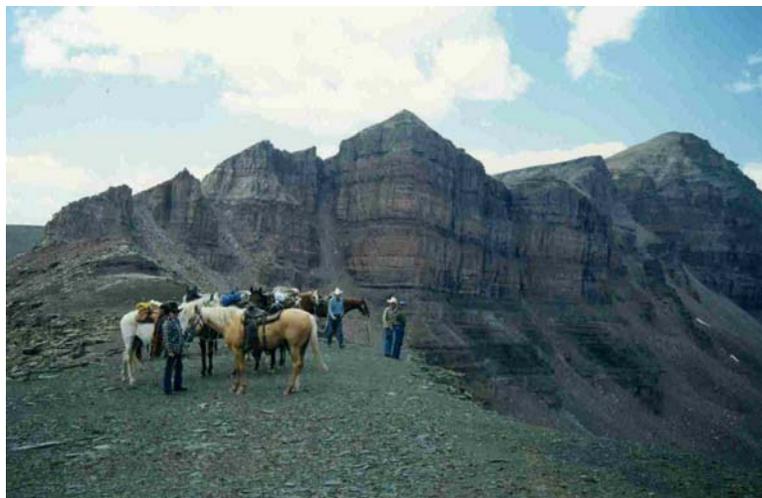
We had to cross Rocky Sea Pass on our way to Lightning Lake. During our decent down the south side, we happened upon a Boy Scout troop, headed in the opposite direction. Earlier, one of their adult leaders had been injured when his horse fell on him while coming down the same trail that we were on. This certainly didn't surprise me, because most of the trails over the Uinta passes are strewn with large boulders and are very steep.

After we reached the Lightning Lake SNOTEL site, Ed and I performed the necessary maintenance, while Sandra and Kris prepared our evening meal. It was obvious that they were accustomed to cooking on the trail. The food was delicious and it was gone in no time at all. Ed and I pitched in and helped with the camp chores throughout the rest of the week. This was something our wranglers were not used to. Ralph remarked that most of his clients didn't see the need. It seemed only fair to us.

It had been a long time since I had ridden a considerable distance on a horse. The next morning, when I swung up into the saddle in preparation to leave for Lakefork Basin, it felt as if "a thousand red hot needles" were poking into my backside! Fortunately, after the second full day in the saddle, the pain eased and then finally went away.

Soon the mentality of the pack string animal was rudely brought to my attention. About five miles from the Lightning Lake wilderness ranger station, I stopped to pick up something that one of the other riders had dropped. Now mind you...Shiloh and I were the last in line. I tarried a little too long and she lost sight of the rest of the pack string... she panicked! When I tried to re-mount, it was rodeo time! After several failed attempts to catch the stirrup, I desperately lunged and made it. A split second after my foot made contact with the stirrup; Shiloh was in full gallop, with me hanging on for dear life! We finally caught up to the others as I finished pulling myself up into the saddle and tried to look as dignified as I could.

To get to Lakefork Basin, we had to cross Dead Horse Pass and Red Knob Pass. The climb to the top of Dead Horse Pass was steep enough, but I wasn't prepared for the "nosebleed" trail (or lack thereof) that went down the other side. The descent is basically a forty five-degree slope, on loose shale, with no visible trail at all. The last thing in the world I wanted to do was ride a horse down that slope! Fortunately, Ralph announced, "We'll turn the horses loose and let them pick their own way down, while we do the same." I was relieved! Later on, Red Knob Pass seemed like a "piece-o'-cake" compared to Dead Horse.



Deadhorse Pass with Ed and Shiloh in the foreground
Ralph and the wranglers are looking at the only way down!

The Lakefork Basin SNOTEL site is located off of the trail and is obscured by trees. It would be only by dumb luck that the average wilderness traveler would stumble

upon it. We stayed that night in the shell of the old wilderness ranger station near the site. We actually slept under the stars, since there was no roof left over the shelter. Fortunately for us, it didn't rain once during the week. Ed said that it always rained on this trip... just lucky I guess! "Wrangler Ralph" hobbled the horses and turned them loose over night. Surprisingly and unfortunately for him, these horses could "hobble" pretty far. It took Ralph a couple of hours to find them the next morning.

That next day, we rode to Five Points Lake... a beautiful, isolated spot off the main trail. This site is also very difficult to find, unless you have been there before. On the way in, we spotted a moose standing in a small pond a short ways off the trail. It looked pretty contented so we just looked and passed on by.



Five Points Lake SNOTEL site

We stayed the night at the Five Points Lake wilderness ranger station and left for Atwood Lake the next morning. This part of the trail goes over Anderson Pass and around the north flank of "King's Peak", the highest mountain in Utah. The trail over Anderson Pass is narrow and steep! The slope was straight up on the uphill side and straight down on the downhill side... a long way down! I began the ascent by leaning into the uphill side of the trail. However, Shiloh noticed the imbalance of her load and compensated by leaning the other direction. I soon realized that I had to sit straight up in the saddle and trust that Shiloh would not step off of the narrow ledge and kill us both.

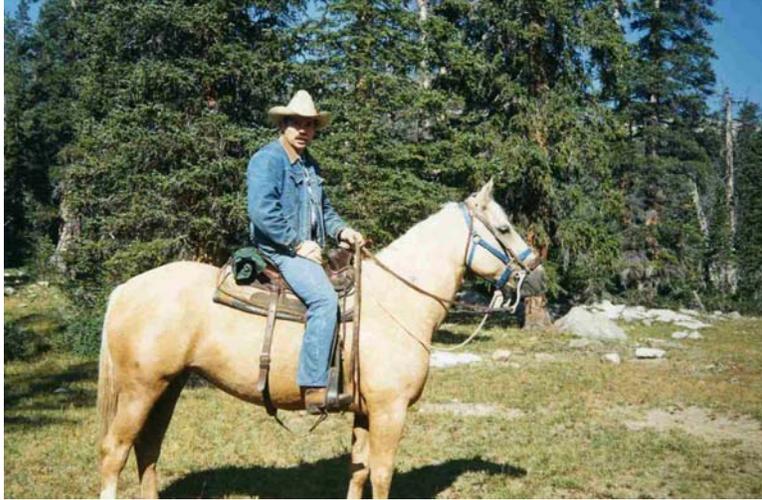
As we skirted around King's Peak, there was a small army of Boy Scouts scrambling over the rocks climbing to the summit. This was the first time since we left Rocky Sea Pass that we had seen any other humans on the trail.

The rest of the long trip into Atwood Lake was pretty uneventful, until we got within a quarter mile of the wilderness ranger station. This is where we would ford Atwood Creek. The swift running stream was icy cold and came half way up the sides of the horses. However, we crossed without incident.

On the last day, August 12th, we made the long descent to Wandin Campground on the Unita River. Shiloh refused to be ridden over the "Sheep Bridge" crossing (which is a suspension bridge), so I had no choice but to get off and lead her across. At the campground, Ed and I collected our gear (along with our great memories), said our farewells, and made the drive back to Salt Lake City.

I will never forget this experience. It was an opportunity of a lifetime for me! What beautiful country! Ed Harrelson and I became good friends on that trip. He has since retired from the Snow Survey Program and I wish him well!

Epilog – Because Lightning Lake and Atwood Lake were removed from the High Unitas Wilderness after the 1989 water year, my trip with Ed was the “last” week-long pack horse maintenance trip into the High Unitas Wilderness by snow surveyors. The current trip into Lakefork Basin and Five Points Lake can be made in only two days.



Cowboy Tom & Wonder Horse Shiloh

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