

What Were They Thinking - Adventure in a Colorado Wilderness with Three 12 Year Olds

By Gordon Hollingshead

I still can't believe it. It's been 40 or so years since that fateful summer. My buddies Steve and Larry and I were around 12 years of age when we were dropped off early in the day on a rainy, muddy little trail of a road off Highway 135 north of Gunnison, Colorado up toward Kebler Pass.

The mission: follow trails up Pass Creek through the West Elk Wilderness Area, cross Swampy and Castle Passes at 11,086 feet, finally coming out on the other side following Little Robinson Creek down arriving at Coal Creek just up from the Paonia Reservoir and Anthracite Creek.

I marvel and wonder to this day, what were those boy's parents thinking? What would prompt them to turn 3 twelve year olds loose for a journey through the West Elk Wilderness? We were on the trail way back in the backcountry of Colorado for 3 days and nights, carrying and fixing meals, setting up camps, fishing, chopping wood and worrying about bears and being lost. I and people I know with children that age now are not sure we would even consider dropping them off on a wilderness trail, seeing them 3 days later in survivable condition at the other end.

Over the years I've questioned family and friends and the answer usually comes back - it's a different world today than it was 40 or 50 years ago. Kids are different. At that age, we were outside all the time, leaving the house in the morning and only coming in when we were hungry or it was bedtime. On our bikes, we explored the entire valley, the river bottom on the North Fork of the Gunnison, nearby creeks, hills and draws around Paonia, Colorado, day after day. Our parents seldom had a clear idea where we were. It was a different world absent fear of kidnappings, only the beginnings of awareness of the dangers of toys, only occasional accounts of kids dying in accidents and so on. A more naive world perhaps, with less media hype of every single incident.

Of course, Steve was a seasoned backpacker (at age 12?), experienced in navigating trails, campsites and so on. The parents apparently figured we would be fine. Or they worried themselves sick and just never told us.

The three day journey started off on the right foot. Both feet in fact were soaked as were the pants up to above the knees since the trail led through tall grass drenched by steady rain turning the trail to muck. A wet slog up Pass Creek headed for Swampy Pass, and the first night's camp we huddled in tents in the fog and rain in a grassy meadow along the creek.

The second day dawned sunny, warming the scene, drying sleeping bags and tent. Pants and shoes dried out eventually as we wore them over Swampy Pass and Castle Pass. The second night's camp afforded a comforting campfire, and order was restored. Some order was restored anyway. During the night an

alarming snuffling noise outside the tents awakened us. Panic ensued. Racing around in the dark, and restoking the campfire, nothing was found indicating a bear anywhere. Hoof marks suggested deer might have been grazing through, but imagination sure whips up mighty frights in the dark.

The next morning dawned bright and sunny, despite the night's fright. The Beckwith Peaks shined to the north, meadows were filled with flowers, and the fishing...., was unbelievable. Hammering it out for miles back into remote creeks, Colorado fishing provides something of legends. That 3rd day at the headwaters of Little Robinson Creek, we fished our way downstream. Almost every cast was a strike. Our limits were quickly filled on the upper reaches of that pristine stream.

Finding a good campsite along Little Robinson Creek we set up the last nights camp and torched the campfire for dinner. To our delight we discovered a valuable trait of a seasoned back-pack companion, even at 12 years of age. He cooked fresh trout in foil over a campfire to perfection. A memorable taste treat that would stick with us forever.

That night sleep came early and deep, except for constant shifting to find a "softer spot" after two nights on the ground. Exhaustion from the haul, and the lack of sleep the nights before overrode concerns about bears or other wild critters. Another sunny morning back in the West Elk Wilderness greeted a refreshed group of guys, with the realization that those nighttime anxieties were unfounded paranoias tormenting the mind.

The last leg of the journey involved several miles following Little Robinson Creek working our way out of the wilderness. The rendezvous point with our parents was where Robinson Creek and Willow Creek turned into Coal Creek at an old abandoned ranch house. We started the morning trek with enthusiasm - a beautiful day, wonderful view of the Beckwith Mountains to the north of us, sparkling Little Robinson Creek at our side, and a good nights sleep.

The delight of that trek through West Elk Wilderness will always have the painful tinge of the final miles of the journey. Not a major disaster, but the long, hot, dusty trudge down that last leg of the trail. The weariness, legs in pain, feet bruised and aching, and the seemingly unending trudge stick with me. The training I continue on into my 50's is framed in terms of preventing the pain of that last leg of the journey - assuring better gear, quality boots, and the drive to train for such distances.

Now days we would also envision great base-camp accommodations in nearby Gunnison or Crested Butte and found in the Colorado Wilderness Tours site at www.montanaadventure.com/out/state/us-co.html. And again I've got to wonder what our parents were thinking when setting us loose on that 30 mile trek through the wilderness, I with beat up tennis shoes, and a backpack that was a bag with shoulder straps. It was a much different world. Gotta love it!

As web designer for the Montana Recreation Connection and Colorado Wilderness Tours at (www.montanaadventure.com/out/state/us-co.html), Gordon Hollingshead has provided an online travel

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