



Monday, August 4

I arrive at Road's End with my trailhead reservation a little after 3:00. I hand the print-out sheet to the ranger. He stares at it and pauses.

"Uhh, um, you're for Copper."

"Yeah."

"The Copper Creek Trail is closed because of a fire."

Now it's my turn to "uhh, um." I ask how long it will be closed. He replies it probably won't reopen until Friday. So what to do? Months of planning and anticipation suddenly evaporate.

The ranger offers to write a permit for a different trailhead. My first thought is to do my planned route in reverse. I suggest I can ask the Bench Lake ranger when I pass through if Copper Creek has reopened.

"Bench Lake isn't open this year."

Oops. Rather than launch into a harangue about how shortsighted it is not to have a backcountry ranger between LeConte Canyon and Rae Lakes, I ask for an in-and-out permit. Since I am only one person, he writes one. There is no one in line behind me. We chat as he fills out the permit and gives me the trailhead parking slip. I learn the fire is at Lower Tent Meadow so the reason for the Copper Creek Trail closure is obvious. From our talking he figures I know the rules and avoids the lecture, merely asking me to initial the listed rules on the permit. Throughout this process, he is extremely nice and apologetic for the inconvenience.

The long-planned itinerary was to follow Steve Roper's High Route to Marion Lake and then spend three nights in upper Lakes Basin, two at the magical lake below Dumbbell Lakes Pass with a possible day trip to Dumbbell Lakes, and one night somewhere else in upper Lakes Basin. I would return via Cartridge Pass, the JMT to Marjorie basin, over Pinchot Pass to the junction with the Woods Creek Trail, and via Paradise Valley to Road's End. Now I need to reconsider what I will go do the next ten days.

I drive to Moraine Campground where there are more vacant sites than filled so I can be choosy. I pick a great site with lots of privacy, walk back up to the entrance, fill out the form, and walk back to the site. By the time I get the tent up, it is time to walk to Cedar Grove to phone home and buy beer and sunscreen at the store.

I am the lone person walking along the road. Only one car passes me. I enjoy the walk, taking the time to try and rethink months of trip planning. When I phone home, I find out the SEKI wilderness office had phoned about

twenty minutes after I left to inform me of the fire and trail closure. I tell my wife Barbara I will be going up Paradise Valley tomorrow and that the itinerary for the trip is now day-to-day.

I buy sunscreen and a couple of bottles of IPA and walk back to Moraine though the Canyon View Group Campground where there are many vacant sites. While eating the dinner I bought with me, I stare at the map, plotting possible campsites and alternatives for each day and write them down. The most likely alternative scenario is three nights off-trail in Upper Basin instead of Lakes Basin.

I am quite disappointed to miss visiting Grouse Lake, Goat Crest Saddle, the Glacier Lakes, and Glacier Valley. When I spent two days in Lakes Basin in 2006, I hiked the trail as far as Horseshoe Lakes before intersecting Roper's High Route. This time, I was intending to spend the second night on Cartridge Creek between Gray Pass and White Pass. I was enthralled hiking through that area in 2006 and had been anticipating watching (and photographing) sunset and sunrise on Goat Crest Saddle the first night and Cartridge Creek the second. Now I know at age 63, I may not get a chance to do it again. There are many other trips on my agenda, including a return to Kaweah Basin, several days in Denali, and Upper Basin for three nights at the lakes below Split Mountain.

Now my pre-trip anxieties are changed. Now it's climbing up Mist Falls, the hike up Woods Creek to Pinchot Pass (not down), and a big question of whether I can make it to Lakes Basin. The anxiety is compounded by the condition of my right leg. Three weeks ago, I injured what I suspect is my hamstring and spent a week healing well enough to hike and run. It is still not completely healed. I don't know if I can hike for miles with a full pack. My fear is palpable.

I walk to Canyon View for the sunset. I have the magical view to myself. The day's last light glows on the high walls of Kings Canyon. Afterwards, I sit in twilight at the picnic table writing. I remind myself how much more I love Kings Canyon than Yosemite Valley in the summer. The relative lack of development with only one road, the small store, diner, twenty-room accommodations of Cedar Grove Lodge, and the unfilled campgrounds with many spacious sites far from immediate neighbors is very different from noisy, overcrowded Yosemite Valley with its three lodging facilities containing hundreds of rooms, many restaurants, and tightly-packed reservation-filled campgrounds. In the summer, Yosemite Valley is Disneyland with spectacular scenery. Kings Canyon has spectacular scenery without the crowds and tourist-trap atmosphere.

I fall asleep by focusing on the sounds of the Kings River.

Tuesday, August 5

I wake up a couple of times in the middle of the night. The Kings helps me get back to sleep. At dawn, I get up, pack, eat breakfast, drive to Cedar Grove, and phone home. I give Barbara optimistic and pessimistic possible itineraries, but tell her essentially it will be a day-to-day decision. I am thankful to be carrying a new satellite phone so I can update her a couple of times a day so she won't worry.

I arrive a little after 7:00 at the Road's End trailhead parking and am surprised to find three empty parking spaces side-by-side. I am hiking down the familiar level trail before 7:30 to its junction with the Bubbs Creek Trail. I recall of some of my past walks here: returning at sunset in 1999, the canyon walls shimmering in golden lights; day-hiking with Barbara on a perfect October day with no one else on the trail.

Even on this easy, level hike my leg is not doing well. I wonder whether I will be able to make a go of it. I tell myself, one step, one day at a time. I arrive at the trail split with the bridge over the Kings and know the climbing will begin soon. At the first rocky climb, I feel relatively fine and gain confidence for the subsequent climbs. At the bottom of Mist Falls, I stop for a snack. No one is here. As I'm finishing, two young dayhikers appear and take photos. On the climb, I expect them to pass me since some of the best views of the falls are in this stretch. They never appear. The climb up Mist Falls feels more difficult than when I last did it in June 2010. The trail switchbacks up the rocks exposed to the sun on this hot day. The beauty of the falls is a good distraction. Despite the drought, there is a lot of whitewater rushing down.

One problem with hiking a familiar trail is I know it well, but not well enough. The final switchbacks last longer than my memory tells me they should. I am quite tired when I reach Lower Paradise Valley at noon. I continue to Middle Paradise and have lunch at a place on the river off the trail. No one is camped here. I may not make it beyond Upper Paradise today. I am hiking sluggishly. I feel better after eating, but my energy level only receives a slight boost.

Much of the trail from Middle to Upper Paradise is out of sight and ear range of the Kings. The short, simple climbs that should be easy, tire me out. My leg hurts and I walk with a limp. Before I reach Upper Paradise, I know I am going no farther today. When I arrive, no one else is here. The campsites

at Upper Paradise are no longer numbered as in the past. Now only Lower Paradise sites retain numerical designation. I choose the farthest one near the bridge over the Kings.

I get out my watch. It's 2:30. It feels later. I am surprised and unsettled by how tired I am. Today is a concrete measurement of the changes in my hiking speed and stamina as I've aged. In 1998, I had lunch at Upper Paradise and made it to the JMT junction at Woods Creek by about 4:00. Granted, I was in better shape sixteen years ago, but I was carrying a heavier pack. I've been noticing a gradual decrease in my walking speed and stamina over the last few years, especially since turn 60.

I do not know how far I will get tomorrow. The scenarios running through my head right now are numerous, from having to cancel the trip to making it all the way to one of the lakes below Mt. Perkins in the lovely basin below Pinchot Pass. I speculate about the rest of the trip. I planned to enter Lakes Basin with far less climbing (after the first day's gradual, tedious grind of the Copper Creek Trail). Gray, White, and Red passes are nowhere near as difficult as the climb from here to Pinchot Pass and especially the Kings River to Cartridge Pass. I managed that particular climb in 2001, but I was 50 years old back then. If I try to reach Lakes Basin, I won't get there until the fourth day at the earliest, instead of the third as planned. That allows for three days in Lakes Basin. But if the weather is questionable for going over the pass, I would not reach Lakes Basin until the fifth day. Spending three days off-trail in Upper Basin is beginning to look like the better alternative. Again, I tell myself one step, one day at a time.

The Kings water level is very low. I walk out on the dry riverbank to reach the flowing river and wash off the trail dust and dirt in knee deep water. While the bridge was under construction in August 2006, I crossed the existing logjam crossing in early August 2006 a family was swimming in deep water beside the logjam.

After dinner, I wander around looking for photos. A buck with a large set of antlers ambles to the riverbank, enjoying the foliage for his dinner. He seems oblivious to my presence. A couple camped at another site also watch the deer. They are the only other people here. At 7:00, I am so tired I feel like going to bed. When the forest makes it impossible to write a little after 8:00, I do so.

Wednesday, August 6

I sleep well. I am awakened at 4:30 and see lights shining near one of the other campsites. I assume it's the couple who are up due to hearing a bear or something, and fall back asleep. I am awakened again when I realize headlamps are a few feet from the tent. I hear two voices discussing whether to cross the bridge.

"Hello, can I help you?" I call out.

"Should we cross the bridge?"

"Where are you going?" Even my half-asleep mind realizes that unless they are going to Road's End, of course they should cross the bridge.

"Glen Pass."

I find it odd they mention a destination that far away, instead of the JMT junction with Woods Creek or Rae Lakes, but simply reply, "Yes, cross the bridge"

"Where's the trail?"

"Turn right at the bottom of the bridge and follow the path along the river for about fifty to hundred feet or so. Then the trail turns left into the forest."

They say thank you and I hear footsteps on the bridge and voices fade away. It's beginning to get light outside. I look at my watch and it's a little after 5:00. I am now wide awake and decide to get up. When I phone Barbara at 7:30, I am packed and ready to go.

I cross the bridge, pausing to look at the view up and down the Kings. The metal steps on the other side are fewer and farther apart. With my short legs, I need to pay attention as I step down. Once I get hiking, I get into a rhythm, unlike yesterday. I decide to appreciate being here right now. The morning light shines off the cliffs, a little hazy to the north and west. Is it smoke from the Lower Tent Meadow fire? My leg feels better today. I look for possible campsites on Woods Creek for the final night; I don't want to camp at Upper Paradise if possible. About two miles from Paradise Valley at a short section along the creek, a large campsite sits to the left of the trail. I bookmark it in my mind.

I confess the Woods Creek Trail is one of my least favorite trails in the Sierra. Overall, the trail gradually climbs to the junction with the JMT. The trail is designed for stock travel so it goes up over rock outcroppings a foot trail would not require, at least to the extent it does. One gets an impression of going down almost as much as climbing. Also, the stock churn up the trail so one has to pay attention to where one plants each

footstep, especially descending. The saving grace is the rushing waters of Woods Creek, at least when the trail travels close enough to appreciate them.

The up and down of the trail begins to become tedious. One short steep climb culminates at a drift fence. I know Castle Dome Meadows are just ahead. A popular packer destination, Castle Dome Meadows are in an aspen grove along Woods Creek. Side trails lead to campsites. When the aspens end, the trail bends away from the creek and climbs to another drift fence. I tell myself, the JMT junction with the Golden Gate of the High Sierra over Woods Creek is not too far ahead. After a descent and a level section along the creek, a sign indicates the stock crossing. I'm hungry and a long ascent looms ahead. I follow the stock crossing path to the creek and find a place a little farther down for lunch.

The JMT's climb above the junction proceeds in stages. After steep switchbacks, there are relatively level areas until the next stage. I meet many parties heading south on the JMT. One friendly couple remarks I am the first person they've met heading north today. The parties vary from large groups of teens with parents to groups of six and four along with a few couples. The couples are the friendliest and most talkative. I am pleased when in my slow, upward pace, younger people step aside for the waddling elder. I thank them.

My pace slows with each climb until I reach the basin extending below Pinchot Pass. There is still climbing to negotiate, but not steep and only short sections. One trailside campsite is occupied by two couples. I look for known landmarks. Has the trail been rerouted? In about half a mile, three tarns appear well to the right of the trail. The first one doesn't look good for camping. One farther off does with a flat level tent area. The view is fantastic in all directions, most spectacular to the south with Mt. Clarence King in perfect silhouette. Mt. Cedric Wright looms to the east, its massive shape dominating the immediate area. I like this place. I get out my watch. It is already 5:30.

I put the home-dried spaghetti with water in the pot to soak. After I phone home, the spaghetti is ready to cook. With parmesan cheese, it tastes great. I need to try more home-dried meals. The spaghetti is the long-time family recipe we frequently make at home. Angel hair pasta replaces spaghetti noodles. It's easy to put a portion of the sauce aside in the refrigerator for drying later while enjoying the rest for a home dinner.

The light on Mt. Clarence King and its neighbors is stunning. Instead of putting up the tent, I wander around taking photos. During the transition to sunset, I erect the tent, then go back for more photos and to witness the beauty of a High Sierra sunset.

This is now the trip I want though not the trip I planned. I am in the timberline country sitting in solitude. It was a long day, but worth the effort. I'm happy. It is getting too dark to write, though the light of the nearly full moon helps a little.

Thursday, August 7

It's a gorgeous morning, not a cloud in the sky and no wind. The sunrise is almost as magnificent as the sunset. Yes, there's days and days of similar sunrises this time of year, but that doesn't detract from the wonder of this particular morning. The first light on the red rock of Crater Mountain is especially striking. There is a red sky to the southwest above Mt. Clarence King and its western neighbors. I have a good time moving around the area taking photos of morning emerging on this plateau below Pinchot Pass. The silence surrounding me is palpable. Van Morrison singing "listen to the silence" plays in my mind.

Here one is surrounded by lofty mountains near and far. A landscape of whitebark pines, shrubs, tarns, and rock extends to the surrounding mountains. For me, this is the High Sierra. There's a sense of solitude (though I know there are people within a half or even quarter mile, I cannot see or hear them). I am alone, viewing the singular magnificence of the High Sierra.

If only all our days could commence in such a place. To witness this sense of peace and beauty and the singular phenomena of life on our planet with a minimum of human influence provides a perspective on humanity's true place. Fundamentally, we are creatures of nature. When we come to a collective understanding of that undeniable truth of our place in existence we may curtail our destruction of our shared home.

Today I will go over Pinchot Pass, enjoying that exquisite walk to the bottom of the pass. Then will come the grind of the climb to that familiar place at the top of the pass. From there, it's down to the lake below Marjorie, then decide my next step. I'll see how I'm feeling and how much daylight is left for reaching the lake below Cartridge Pass.

I leave the campsite about 9:00. I meet no one as I enjoy the hike, though they have rerouted the trail below Pinchot Pass so it runs higher on the plateau on the approach to the climb of the pass. It no longer makes the same wide turn I found so enchanting or passes as close to the beautiful string of lakes and tarns that I explored in 1998. When the final climb is about to commence, it meets the old trail. Routing it higher means it's dryer, but I prefer the old route.

I stop for a Power Bar at the beginning of the climb. A wrangler with four empty horses is coming down. He thanks me for getting off the trail. I reply this is a good place for a snack before the arduous climb. About a quarter of the way up the pass, two male twenty-somethings march down. As they pass, they tell me it isn't far to the top. I reply, "No, there's still quite a ways to go; I've done this before." They say nothing. They are obviously trying to make a private joke at other's expense. A couple of switchbacks later, a young man catches up and I let him pass. I ask him if those two guys had said it wasn't far to the top. Yes, they had, though he questioned it. I give him a more realistic perspective and say maybe I'll see him at the top..

I continue my plod up the switchbacks. They are graded for stock so not too steep. When I reach the top, the young man is there along with a woman, probably in her thirties. She's a freelance graphic artist doing the JMT. Since she's in a similar business and from the Bay Area, we get talking shop. She's smart and friendly. Before I begin the descent, I tell her of a couple of campsites off the beaten track on the southern section of the JMT.

The hike down proceeds slower than expected. My right big toe throbs and my leg hurts. The young man and his two companions pass me. They are planning to camp at Marjorie and go over Taboose Pass the next day. I tell them of the campsite at the Marjorie outlet creek. A family of five are stopped off-trail a little above Marjorie, giving the children who are all under age twelve lunch and a rest before climbing the pass. The three children all look like they are enjoying themselves.

I limp down the trail above the Marjorie shoreline. The three young men are stopped, pondering their next move; someone is camped at the outlet. I mention the lake below has lots of good sites and continue. The campsite on the southeast shore is vacant. After rock hopping the outlet creek at the JMT crossing, I head towards the whitebarks scattered beyond the north shore in search of a campsite. It's nearly 3:00. The time and my sore toe and leg dictate not trying to reach the lake below Cartridge Pass. At the speed I'm moving that would take three, even four more hours.

I find one site not to my liking. I head towards the western end of the lake hoping to find something further from the JMT. Finding nothing satisfactory, I head back and quickly see a great campsite near the second outlet creek. It is well away and out of sight of the trail. The view to the north is spectacular. I'll stay here. Meanwhile, the three young men have grabbed the site on the southeast shore across the lake.

After the tent is up, I sit leaning against a rock wall along the shoreline. The water level is frightfully low. Parts of the lake normally under water are visible. The Marjorie outlet creek is barely more than a trickle; there is water flowing, but it is not a bubbling creek. In September 2001 when I thought it low, it was still running and meandering down with a wide range. The drought is visible here. Down below the high country, people can take action for the future (even though there's major reluctance among the powers that be to do much of anything). Up here, the water is entirely at the whim of nature and climate. In wilderness, there is no such thing as conservation and storage for the future. While the trees and bushes might have evolved characteristics for dealing with low water years, the lack of water could take its toll on other plant life from wildflowers to streambank vegetation. The lovely flowers at the top of Pinchot pass were well past blooming. The wildflowers still in bloom have all been near water, whether in Castle Dome Meadows or along small creeks, tarns, or lakes.

An ominous cloud hovers to the west as if to rain. It remains at almost the same westerly progress for forty-five minutes, dropping only a few sprinkles before dissipating late afternoon. After dinner, I enjoy gazing on and photographing the magnificent view to the north. The green forest along the South Fork of the Kings River transitions to the barren landscape of Upper Basin up to the peaks surrounding Mather Pass. To the northwest, Mt. Ruskin and Vennacher Needle (one of the most inappropriate names for any peak in Sierra) and the high ridges separating Lakes Basin from the world rise thousands of feet. Above the saddle of Mather Pass stands the lofty summit of North Palisade, a mountain that looks like one envisions a mountain. Except for Kaweah Basin, this view is probably my favorite view in the Sierra. I am excited to enjoy it again.

I watch the sunset light on Upper Basin and the Palisades. Almost all the color eventually vanishes from the clouds. Soon night will slowly come. Now only the faint twilight lingers. In most places, the lights would be on and twilight obliterated. I linger longer as I can still see to write. It's colder tonight. The breeze is chilling. It's good sleeping weather.

Friday, August 8

It's another beautiful morning, essentially like yesterday except for condensation on the tent. Mt. Ruskin gets the first light, then Vennacher Needle. Sunrise streams through the gap of Taboose Pass. Wandering the

area with camera and tripod, I get a composition I like by getting the outlet creek in the foreground and the light on the Lakes Basin eastern peaks to North Palisade.

Though the JMT is less than an eighth of a mile away, I see and hear no one. A breeze has been blowing since a little after the sun struck the surrounding peaks. It helps dry the condensation on the rainfly. I am quite content to sit here all morning, but the day is passing so I must be off. Perhaps I'll stay in this campsite in four days.

Today I go to Upper Basin. I've decided to forego Lakes Basin. I realize I may not get over Cartridge Pass today due to my leg and the weather. My weather instinct tells me a storm is coming today. I decide to trust my instinct. I've desired to revisit Upper Basin since spending two nights there in 1998 camped a little off the JMT. One of the trips on my agenda is spending three days wandering around the basin beyond the reach of trails. Now is my opportunity to fulfill that wish.

In certain respects spending three nights off-trail in Upper Basin is better, newer, than three nights in Lakes Basin. I have traveled through Lakes Basin. I camped at Marion Lake for two nights and spent hours wandering upper Lakes Basin above Marion on the layover day and exited the next day, taking my time hiking through the basin to Cartridge Pass. This time, I was hoping for more time to explore the basin, but now that is not possible.

I leave the campsite at 9:30 after the rainfly dries. I make my way back to the outlet creek crossing of the JMT and head down the trail, noting a campsite at the south end of the next lake as a possibility for four days from now. I rock hop the creek at the Bench Lake Trail junction and meet a group of twelve, teens with parental accompaniment. Twelve people seems a huge group in this fragile environment, even if it is the JMT highway. The trail down to the river crossing takes longer than I remember. A series of long switchbacks make their way down, crossing one side creek near the beginning and a second much farther down. I enjoy the views down the Muro Blanco when available. As I near the river, I see a large stock party crossing and head up the trail.

There is a rock hop crossing where the trail comes to the river. I don't trust my balance well enough to try it. I see a well-used path to the left. It goes to a much easier rock hop out to a tiny island in the middle of the river. A log extends over to the other side. The log is wide and stable.

I continue on the JMT as it gradually climbs into Upper Basin. The stock party's passage is obvious from the loose rocks and manure. About a mile

up, the trail veers back closer to the river. I find a spot well off-trail and stop for lunch. Taking off my boots, I soak my feet in nature's whirlpool bath of the rushing river. My sore left big toe especially appreciates it. When I finish lunch and put on my boots, the toe feels fine—no pain.

I meet a couple of small groups heading south and a couple who are friendly and stop to talk. They've been taking a lot of side trips, Amphitheater Lake among them. They are debating whether to camp at Marjorie or Bench Lake. I say Bench Lake is worth seeing at least once in one's life for the view of Arrow Peak rising above the lake. I mention the more secluded campsites if you follow the use trails to the left before reaching the lake.

At the upper crossing of the Kings, I manage a tricky rock hop and soon veer northeast cross-country. About a quarter mile later I stop to check the map. A man in an NPS shirt is hiking down the JMT about a hundred yards to my left. I call out, asking him if he is a ranger. No, part of a trail crew. I ask about the lakes below Split Mountain. He hasn't been there, but he is friendly and asks to look at my map. He agrees with the route I've chosen and wishes me a good trip.

I follow a diagonal route up to the northeast and eventually come upon a creek. It is obviously an outlet creek from either the lakes I am headed for or, more likely, the larger lake above below Split Mountain. I follow its course, keeping to the nearby slabs. I am enjoying this easy cross-country travel above timberline away from the busy JMT. After about twenty more minutes, I stop to reconnoiter and take in my surroundings. The wind has picked up. To the southwest, a storm is coming. The sheets of rain are about a mile away over Lakes Basin and the Muro Blanco, heading this way.

I check the map; I must be quite close to the lakes. Are they a couple of hundred yards to the east? I continue following the outlet creek. A lovely small tarn appears where the creek pools. I look for a flat place for a tent. I see none and continue up the creek for another hundred yards or so and come upon a larger tarn. There is a flat, level area. The storm is upon me.

I get out the satellite phone from the camera case and dump out the tent and tent poles from the pack. While holding the phone up with my right hand to send a tracking message home, I dump out the tent poles and tent from their sacks. Fortunately, the tracking message quickly connects. Hail begins to fall as I erect the tent. The hail intensifies as I get the rainfly secure and pound in the rest of the tent stakes. I lean the pack against a large boulder by the tent entrance and pull out the sleeping bag and clothes. Since the cup is stuffed with a pair of socks, it gets tossed in the tent, too.

The hail comes down hard, mixed with rain, as I dive into the tent. Safe inside, I think. As the pounding hail builds up on the roof, a couple of leaks appear. I place the cup to catch the water from the largest one. I put the clothes, sleeping bag, and camera under the raincoat on top of the sleeping pad. In the back half of the tent (the two largest leaks are a little inside the door) I kneel on the pad and keep the raincoat over the sleeping bag, clothes, and camera. Another leak is in the center above my head. I put on my hat so the drip hits the hat, then falls onto the raincoat. After sixteen years of exemplary service, my Sierra Designs Orion CD is obviously worn out. The sealed seams are not where the leaks appear. The fabric of the rainfly seems to have deteriorated. I know what I am using my REI dividend for in 2015.

The storm hit a little after 3:00. By 5:00, the hail ends, but rain continues. From the seconds counted off after the lightning flashes, I determine the storm is moving farther away. The cup catching the leak is now full. I toss the water outside the tent and put the cup back in place. It gets another quarter cup of water before the rain finally begins tapering off at 5:30. When it stops, I put on the raincoat and crawl outside. The hail is three inches deep around the tent. The surrounding peaks have a thin hail cover, looking as if it snowed.

At 6:00, I phone home. I ask Barbara where the hell am I? She looks at the tracking message and says the lakes should literally be a hundred yards away. After dinner, I climb the small rise above the tarn for the view and photos. From the top I look directly down on the lakes a few yards below. Tomorrow morning I will find a campsite there. I enjoy taking photos of the sunset and the twilight before retiring for the night. In the aftermath of the storm, the clouds are stunning. I fall asleep to the gurgling of the creek.

Saturday, August 9

At dawn, there is already a smattering of clouds. After photos, I eat breakfast, pack up, and go searching for a campsite at the lakes. At one of the lakes, a tarp overhangs a cave-like opening, flapping in the wind, tied down to rocks above and below the opening. I wonder what it's for? I decide not to investigate right now. I find an idyllic site overlooking two of the lakes, put up the wet tent, and spread the rainfly and wet clothes out to dry. Split Mountain rises behind me. Mather Pass, Mt. Bolton Brown, and Mt. Prater are to the north and east. To the west, Vennacher Needle and the ridge above Lakes Basin is directly in front of me. From here, Frozen Lake Pass, looks rather nasty.

I am now ensconced at my campsite for the next two nights. I've decided I get one day I don't have to pack up. Also, I can't imagine finding anything better tomorrow than where I am now. Today and tomorrow are my days to let the High Sierra inside me. There is not a tree in sight. A few bushes, lots of rocks in all sizes and shapes, sand, patches of green/brown grass, and some wildflowers still blooming. Wilderness silence is all-encompassing, only a few buzzes of dragonflies and bird song. Rosy finches flit about, otherwise total silence. This is the silence that frightens some people. All one hears is the gentle murmur of the wilderness and the thoughts inside one's head. This is where we perceive the essence of our individual being and its place in life itself. Each of us is only one small organism in the immensity that surrounds us. Wilderness is to be appreciated by the humans who pass through and spend time in it. Hopefully, they will make sure it remains for future generations.

While things dry, I enjoy the morning passing and take a short exploratory walk around the area, circling a couple of the lakes and getting photo ideas. Along the small creeks connecting the lakes, wildflowers provide a sprinkling of red, yellow, blue, and violet. I plan on taking a more extensive walk in the afternoon. After lunch, the clouds begin gathering. Some are dark gray, almost black. Thunder sounds in the distance. I am not optimistic. At this time yesterday, there was no sound of thunder. It appears Lakes Basin may already be getting hit with rain. I decide to forego any extensive exploratory walk and instead take a quick swim at the smaller lake west of the campsite.

Once again, the rain begins at about 3:00. For the first ninety minutes, I am fine in the tent. The couple of leaks are small and intermittent. The thunder and lightning remain far away. Then an onslaught commences. Hail pounds the tent and piles up outside. Something is not right in the tent. I lift the pad and discover the floor is leaking, badly. It has never leaked before. Once again, I pile everything on the pad. When the hail builds up on the tent roof, I push up at a seam. With a "plop" the pile of hail lands on the far end of the vestibule, the weight collapsing it. Thunder and lightning flash and boom at six second intervals between the flash and the boom.

When the onslaught subsides, I peer out; a stream of water is flowing under the center of the tent into the vestibule area. I put on the raincoat, grab an unused tent stake, put on shoes, and go out in the drizzle. After readjusting the vestibule stakes and digging a trench in the gravel with my heel and the tent stake for the water inside the vestibule, I check behind the tent. A mini-lake has formed. I get a few of the surrounding rocks and erect a wall at the

rear of the tent, placing the rocks up against the floor. From the way the rocks are scattered, I suspect I'm not the first person to use them. The rain picks up again so back I go into the relative refuge of the tent.

Up on the pad, I achieve a position that is more comfortable than kneeling. The sleeping bag is already wet due to the floor leak. At 6:00 it is still raining hard. I'm due to phone home. Oh, what the hell. I'm sure not doing anything else. I get out the phone, point it south and turn it on. To my amazement, it gets a clear, strong signal. Barbara answers.

"It's raining right now. I'll call again at 8:00."

She acknowledges and I turn the phone off. At 6:30, the rain sounds like it's finally letting up. There's a lightning flash and six seconds later thunder, the same as an hour ago. Is this storm not moving? As if in reply, another deluge commences. Once more, the hail piles up on the tent and outside. Again I push the slushy piles off the top of the tent and one plops on the vestibule. The hail stops. I peek out of the tent. It looks like more rain is coming. A thunderbolt flashes. This time it's eight seconds. Is it moving away? The rain continues. At around 7:00 the rain slows down. I realize I have not heard thunder for several minutes. Is this the end? The rain slows to a steady patter. The patters get slower and slower. Finally at 7:20 the rain stops.

Outside the tent, it looks like a disaster area with puddles and large piles of hail. The stove is wet; I forgot to bring it in the tent. After one attempt to start it, I decide to have bread and tuna for dinner. I'd rather eat in the daylight than take the time to dry the stove, cook dinner, and eat in the dark. I make a tuna sandwich and eat the rest of the tuna out of the pouch. Along with jerky, dried fruit, and trail mix, it will due until morning.

The sky remains cloudy. There is no visible sunset, only a lessening of the light. When it gets dark, I check everything outside and double check the tent stakes. I go into my wet tent and crawl into my damp sleeping bag wearing polartec pants, wool socks, and a polartec shirt. At some point, I drift into sleep.

Sunday, August 10

Though I wake up several times shivering from the damp cold, I manage to get back to sleep. At first light, I emerge to clear sky to the southwest. After a few photos around the area, the sun clears the ridge to the left of Split Mountain. I lay out the sleeping bag, wet clothes, and take off the rainfly so the sun can dry the interior of the tent. I eat the mash potatoes planned for last night for breakfast. Some of the hail slush lingers until 10:00.

When the things are dry, I go off exploring. I follow the direction of the outlet creek I'd followed the day before yesterday toward the lake below Split Mountain. It is a whimsical, wandering climb amid boulders, small cliffs, and bushes. The creek alternates running water with pools and tarns, the water flashing silver in the morning sun. The view back towards the lakes around my campsite and Upper Basin is breathtaking. A myriad of small lakes and tarns shine across this plateau.

As I climb, the view to the north diminishes behind a ridge. The small cliffs lead me down closer to the creek where the walking is easier. I cross the creek, thinking it is a more direct way to the lake. Standing on a high rock, I spy the lake about a hundred yards away. I also realize the easier route is back across the creek. Recrossing the creek, the lake is soon before me. No one is camped here. The lake is large with an interesting shoreline of small points jutting out and one large peninsula extending far into the water. I walk to the end of the peninsula to get a better view of Split Mountain rising above.

After exploring more of the shoreline, I enjoy the meander back down, following a different route through the cliffs and boulders. I stop frequently to investigate intriguing nooks and crannies and take in the view north. Returning to the campsite and checking the time, I learn I've been wandering in solitude for well over two hours. This has been the kind of walk I so love in the Sierra. Wandering alone through wilderness is a primeval reconnection to humanity's evolutionary past. Did our ancient ancestors wander in search of game to hunt and food to gather with a sense of wonder and awe at the surrounding landscape?

After a rather late lunch, I wash and write, enjoying the view of Upper Basin and the ridge and peaks above Lakes Basin. Clouds begin appearing over the top of Vennacher Needle. They do not look ominous yet. Thunderheads appear. This is more ominous. I decide to forgo another exploration walk. At 3:30, there is still no rain. Maybe I'll get lucky today? One dark cloud is above; a few rain drops fall. All around it is blue sky and white, benevolent clouds. The play of light on the distant peaks is dazzling. As the clouds shift, sunbeams dance across the faces of the mountains, light and shadow shifting as if a time-lapse sequence.

The clouds slowly dissipate. As the sun shines on my campsite, I'm practically giddy with joy to have a beautiful end to a wonderful day. I spend the final two hours of daylight wandering the lakes, creeks, and plateau around me with camera and tripod. The tiny blooming wildflowers along the outlet creek of the lake below are especially striking.

At sunset, there's a faint pink glow on the southern mountains, a few clouds passing above. The stillness is a voice speaking serenity at the end of a near perfect day in the High Sierra wilderness. It says, listen to the silence; listen to what the High Sierra is saying.

It is hard to end this day. If only this moment, this outer peacefulness, this inner contentment could remain inside forever. The world can be a confusing, violent place. Here, at this moment, that world does not exist. I am transformed by the transcendence. These are the "glad tidings" John Muir extolled us to seek in the mountains. This is the day I will remember, the day I melded with the High Sierra

The light is fading. The full moon rises over the shoulder of Split Mountain. The moonlight transforms Upper Basin into a fantasy landscape. When weariness leads me into the tent, I leave the vestibule open to view the moonlight. The light of the full moon shines on me as I drift into sleep.

Monday, August 11

At 4:20 I am awakened by raindrops on the tent. What? When I awoke at 3:00, there were scattered clouds, but not storm clouds, and the moonlight magical on the barren expanse of Upper Basin. I zip shut the vestibule, pull the sleeping bag over my head, and go back to sleep. At 5:15, a hard rain wakes me. The tent floor leaks again, but not badly. The extra t-shirt that encases the polartec jacket as a pillow is soaked. The jacket is still dry. Opening the mosquito netting sufficiently, I toss the t-shirt outside, lay my head on the jacket, and drift back to sleep. Though the deluge is brief, it continues raining lightly.

I awake again a little before 6:00. The rain is still light. I gather things up and curl up in the sleeping bag, dozing off. At 6:30, the rain stops. The sky is clear to the west and north, but clouds remain in the other directions. The sun is not risen above the Split Mountain ridge. Outside there are new piles of hail. I take the fly off the tent and spread it out and lay the sleeping bag on a large boulder and the t-shirt on a slab.

I wander around for photos as the sun rises. At the neighboring lake with the tarp, a short burst of rain causes me to seek refuge under the tarp. There's a stash of equipment, probably for research on the lakes in Upper Basin. Returning to the campsite, I make breakfast. There are now clouds gathering to the west. I pack up, not waiting for the tent, sleeping bag, and t-shirt to dry. By 8:00, I'm making my way down to intersect the JMT.

I enjoy the trailless ramble down. The clouds gather and a few raindrops fall. I put on my raincoat and continue walking, crossing a small creek. A hiker makes his way up the JMT. Within a few minutes, I intersect the trail.

Drizzle continues as I march down the JMT. No one else is on the trail. At the upper crossing of the Kings River, I pause at the rock hop I did on Friday. The river is running higher and the rocks are wet. Should I slip, I'd end up in water at least thigh deep. I head up the creek in search of another crossing. About a hundred yards up, there's a shallower rock hop. I have to step in the water at a couple of places, but since the water is only a couple of inches deep, it doesn't matter. Pleased with this solution, I continue my solitary walk.

About a mile further, a doe and two fawns cross the trail in front of me. I consider this a good omen. The rain stops. I encounter a solitary elder hiker coming up the trail. When I stand aside, he says, "Come on. I can use the rest." I laugh. We geezers achieve instant commiseration, joking about our snail's pace hiking. I come to the second crossing of the Kings sooner than expected. The rain commences again, still a drizzle. One young man is on the other side, putting his hiking boots on. I find the log, cross to the small island, and rock hop to the other side. The young man had decided to wade the crossing and is finishing a snack before heading for Pinchot Pass. I tell him I'll see him again soon when he passes me on the climb.

Slightly beyond the first creek crossing the young man passes me. I meet no one else on the climb to the Bench Lake junction. The rain picks up; visibility extends only a few yards. I rule out a side trip to Bench Lake. When I reach the first lake I thought about camping at, I continue walking. The site and the lake don't look as inviting as before. At the crossing of the outlet creek of the second lake, I make my way to my Thursday night campsite. It's not occupied. The rain diminishes. I stand under a whitebark by the tent area to shelter from the rain. After a few minutes, the rain ends.

I put up the tent and lay out the rainfly, sleeping bag, and wet clothes to dry. There's more clouds than sun. The clouds and fog swirl over and around Mt. Ruskin, Vennacher Needle, the peaks around Mather Pass, and through Upper Basin where I began my day. The play of light shifts with the swirls of fog and clouds. The view changes every few seconds. It is impossible to anticipate the changes. I watch, fascinated, hoping I might achieve a photo to encapsulate the marvel playing out before me. The clouds and fog kaleidoscope gradually transitions to fewer clouds as sunset approaches. A couple takes one of the sites in the whitebarks between my site and the JMT. We smile and wave as I move around taking photos. Near sunset, the light emanates with a golden glow on the pines and peaks.

After the sun sets and twilight begins its transition to darkness, I sit, write, and appreciate the magnificent view from my campsite. The clothes I am wearing are all that remain dry. I sleep in my polartec shirt, pants, and wool socks to stay warm since the sleeping bag is still not dry. I drift to sleep listening to the wind in the whitebarks.

Tuesday, August 12

I awake to a cloudy dawn. I wander towards the western end of the lake for reflection photos on this still morning. The surrounding peaks and ridges are mirrored in the still waters of the lake and outlet creek. The clouds gradually slacken so there are areas of bright sunlight. Returning to the campsite, I lay out the wet things to dry. It's hard to tell what is going to happen weatherwise today. I will pack and climb the pass and hope for the best. Leaning against a rock drinking coffee, I take in the magnificent view one last time.

I am off at 9:15. Not everything is totally dry, but clouds are increasing. My weather instinct is unclear, unlike Friday morning. If a storm hits, I want to be over the pass. Before ascending the pass, I stop at the site at the Marjorie outlet where I camped in 1998 and 2001. In the thirteen years since, it looks the same except for a rock wall at one end and the remnants of an illegal fire. Since the fire ring is knocked down, but the burned logs not scattered, I surmise the ring was dismantled by a recent camper, not a ranger.

A couple, probably aged in their early 50s, are also on their way up the pass. We play trail leap frog until on a long, less steep switchback, I leave them behind. As long as the grade is consistent and gradual, I still move along at better than a snail's pace. A young man hiking at a quick pace passes me. "Oh, to be young again," I remark with a laugh as he goes by. "But you're still young at heart," he replies with a smile, then disappears around the switchback.

From then on, no one is in sight in front of me. Behind me, the couple continue, spread out as each walks at his or her own pace. A couple of more small figures are also moving up the trail. When I reach the top of the pass, no one is here. I take a couple of photos and am enjoying the view and solitude when a young man appears. He must have been several minutes behind me. He is nice and expresses surprise when his questions discover this is my sixth time over Pinchot Pass. His hiking partner appears a couple of minutes later. They ask me to take their picture together, posing at the top of the pass. They hand me their phone-like camera.

"Where's the shutter," Luddite me asks.

“Push the circle on the left of the screen.”

I compose them against the backdrop and push the circle. To my surprise, they are pleased with the photo.

Another young man arrives, probably French by the accent. From their mutual recognition, it is clear he has been paralleling the other two men for awhile on the JMT. The man of the couple arrives soon after along with another young man who is the hiking partner of the man with the French accent, then the woman of the couple. It's getting crowded at the top of Pinchot Pass. It's time to head down.

I encounter a group of four rounding the final switchback, then a couple a minute behind them, and another group of four a minute behind them. I imagine quite a convention at the top of Pinchot Pass. I meet another half dozen ascending hikers further down the switchbacks. At the bottom, I find a place off the trail and have lunch.

I see clear remnants of the old trail. I decide to stay on the new route a little longer until I cut down to a lake far below. There is a campsite, but it's not what I'm looking for. On the other side of the lake, the old trail is quite clear. I follow it for a quarter mile, then cut up to my right where there is obviously a lake. It turns out to be two small lakes, each beautiful. I circle both lakes but there are no campsites. Threatening clouds are gathering and wasting more time seems like a bad idea if a storm is due. I decide to head back to the new trail instead of continuing my search for a site in this area. I had a marvelous afternoon and evening at one these off-trail lakes in 1998 and I retain the memory. I can make new memories somewhere else.

Returning to the main trail, the tarns I camped at the second night are vacant. Repeating the same campsite another night is not something I want to do. I recall there is a lake a little further down the trail. At the lake, I cut down to a grove of pines at the north end of the lake, a probable campsite. Yes, it's lovely one overlooking the lake with a marvelous view of Mt. Clarence King rising above the opposite shoreline. I'm far enough off the JMT to not see passing hikers. I'll stay here. The threatening clouds dissolve as I erect the tent.

I spend the rest of the afternoon writing and enjoying this location. I think this might have been the lake the trail crew was camped at in 1998. On the old route of the trail it was further from the JMT. One side of me says stop trying to find the campsites you knew off the old trail's route. As evening comes, three people take a campsite halfway down the lake. I don't see their tent, but do see them come down to the lakeshore.

There is some glitch on the minutes for the satellite phone. At first, I am upset by it and then realize there's nothing to be done, let it wait until morning. The sunset is not spectacular though there is interesting light around Mt. Clarence King. The mountains' distinctive summit is shrouded in clouds. When I crawl in the tent after darkness falls, I am tired and slightly frustrated. I tell myself tomorrow is another day.

Wednesday, August 13

Dawn reveals a perfect High Sierra morning. I walk above the western shore of the lake to the far end where the view overlooks the descent to Woods Creek and the peaks around Mt. Clarence King. After taking in the view, I return to the north shore near my campsite for photos of Mt. Clarence King reflected in the still water. When I phone home, the problem with the minutes on the phone is fixed. Stop worrying about the outside world; enjoy here and now.

This is my last morning in the high country. Also possibly my last morning ever on this basin below Pinchot Pass where I've had so many beautiful mornings. For many years, the section of the Sierra between Palisade Lakes, Mather Pass, Upper Basin, Marjorie basin, and this timberline area below Pinchot Pass, has been a particular favorite. It is that sublime combination of being surrounded by spectacular high peaks, scattered whitebark pines, boulders of all shapes and sizes, expansive meadows, scattered bushes providing green in contrast to the gray and brown, colorful carpets of wildflowers, and beautiful lakes and tarns.

Life doesn't get much better than at this moment. The nearly full moon is setting above the stark peaks against a clear blue sky. The lake is still, the peaks mirrored in its water. These mornings one feels at peace, one feels content. There is a feeling of all's right with the world. The outrageous mess we humans are making on this planet dissolves in the serenity of here and now. This is the way life should be: people existing peacefully in wild nature. There's nothing to exploit, nothing to take except photos and memories. We pass through life with the whitebarks, mountains, lakes, streams, each existing on its own terms with no malice intended.

The moon sets behind the shoulder of Crater Mountain. A breeze begins to flow, breaking the silence of the High Sierra. This is the sign that the peace of this morning ends and I must return to the mundane tasks of packing up and heading down the trail. This is a morning I will treasure so I am reluctant for it to end. I linger a little longer before leaving the High Country for the lowlands.

Soon I meet a party of four men in their early twenties who step aside for me and interchange hellos, have a great trip. A minute later, I encounter two forty-somethings whose stomping steps and refusal to make eye contact convey they are not about to step aside for anything except an ambulance with its lights flashing. I step aside as they tromp up the trail, eyes staring straight ahead without acknowledging my “beautiful morning.”

This span of one minute encapsulates what I’ve been observing for several years. The so-called Millennials are usually polite, friendly, and sometimes talkative. The so-called Me Generation lives up to the moniker. Though, far from universal, the rudest people I’ve met on trails the last few years are from that generation. The only other consistently rude people I’ve met are teenagers exhibiting age-appropriate indifference and arrogance.

For the first hour, the hike down is delightful. The forest gradually transitions from sparse whitebarks to lodgepole pines retaining the surrounding magnificent views. When I begin the steeper descent from the plateau, I meet a couple in their thirties. They are friendly and we talk for a few minutes, exchanging rain stories. About fifteen minutes later, I meet another couple who offer passing hello’s.

After the first hour, I lack energy. Lethargically, I make my way down the trail. The beautiful waterfall on upper Woods Creek and the section of plunging cascades help me keep moving. There are sections where the wildflowers are still in bloom, especially the purple daisy-like ones. I meet no one until slightly above the Wood’s Creek junction where a man leading four llamas is making his way up. “I should get one of those to carry my pack,” I joke. “You’ll need to get two since they are social animals,” he responds with a laugh.

At the junction I follow the stock crossing trail to the creek to enjoy a snack along with a soothing soaking of my feet. I meet a wrangler leading empty horses a little before the drift fence above Castle Dome Meadows. He is the last person I see until the next morning. When I pass the last drift fence, my energy picks up. I focus on the subtle changes along the trail—wildflowers when they appear, the trees and rocks, the sound of the creek. Time passes more easily. I’m thinking it’s another twenty to thirty minutes to the possible campsite when the trail goes up and then down towards the creek. The campsite spotted on the second day to the right of the trail is unoccupied. There’s a large fire ring and tent area. Best of all, there’s an immense level rock about three feet high that serves as the perfect surface for, first, unpacking, and, later, cooking.

This site is about seventy-five feet off the trail. Woods Creek is on the other side of the trail. It runs very fast here, too fast for even a quick dip of any sort. I must be disgustingly filthy at this point. Except for twice in Upper Basin, I haven't washed since last Monday.

I am ensconced in forest. Thousand foot cliffs rise above the Woods Creek canyon. However, it feels very open. Some of the trees have shaped themselves in interesting ways with their twists and turns. A dead tree stands by the trail. I expect this winter it will come down and make a days' work for a trail crew. With the berry bushes, this looks like prime bear habitat.

After dinner, I wander around with the tripod looking for photos. As I'm walking slowly back in the direction of the campsite, a doe and fawn are on the trail about twenty feet away. The doe stares at me for a least thirty seconds, glances back at her fawn, and stares again. Her eyes shine with fiery intensity. She and the fawn turn and go into the forest. I return to the campsite. A minute later, the does returns to the trail. At first, she walks slowly. As she comes closer to parallel, she trots up the trail, the fawn following in a run. A few minutes later, the buck who was at Upper Paradise Valley the first night strides nonchalantly up the trail, heading up in the direction of the doe and fawn.

On my last evening, I reflect on this trip. My biggest problem has been my anxiety. At times, my normal rhythm with the High Sierra was disrupted. At first, my expectations were upset by the Copper Creek Trail closure. I was also forced to re-evaluate my hiking stamina and speed and adjust my destinations to conform to current physical reality. However, when I calmly reflect, I made the best of it. If I'd tried to go to Lakes Basin on day four, I would have had to stop at the lake below Cartridge Pass since the storm hit Upper Basin at 3:00 and it was already raining with thunder and lightening in Lakes Basin. So going over Cartridge Pass would not have been possible until the next morning, leaving only two days in Lakes Basin. On Monday, the windows for getting over the pass were brief due to the storm. Though there was too much hiking on populated trails, I managed to camp in solitude. The weather prevented the more extensive exploration of Upper Basin I hoped for. My biggest complaint is the result of my age. In 2006, I hiked from further up the trail than today all the way to Road's End, arriving at my car at 5:30. I arrived here, twelve miles from Road's End, at 3:30. But I cannot reverse the aging process. It's a simple truth one has to live with and appreciate the magical places one can still discover.

I made the best I could of the situation. I know that now. I did not know it at the time. Three days ago, even last night, I doubted it. I did get to a place in Upper Basin I've long wanted to. However, I did get to spend seven nights in one of my favorite sections of the Sierra. I will treasure this trip.

I prefer this site to Upper Paradise. While the setting for Upper Paradise is more picturesque, especially when the Kings is running at normal or higher levels, this place offers solitude. At Upper Paradise, people pass through regularly and they are always other people camped nearby. Here, there is Woods Creek and the canyon. There is a sense of wilderness peace here. It is that sense of beauty and peace that defines wilderness. Barbara and I have been able to find it on the ridges above San Geronimo Valley and on trails in Point Reyes National Seashore. Sometimes we've even found it at Sky Camp and Coast Camp when we are the only ones in the campground. In the Sierra it's anywhere one finds solitude. Whether it's in Kaweah Basin, where I spent days without seeing another human being, or here, yards from a well-traveled trail at twilight surrounded by the cliffs of the canyon and the roar of Woods Creek.

Being in wilderness transforms one's self. There is a reconnection to one's essence and existence. The artifice of contemporary human society dissolves. As John Keats wrote, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty—that is all/Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

One of the most difficult fundamental life lessons contemporary people fail to learn is how to live and appreciate the here and now. We become engulfed by the disparate demands of every day life—from emails, phone calls, bills to pay, and a myriad of outer demands on our time and attention. We forget to see, hear, feel, and appreciate those small, sublime moments of life itself, of existence as a conscious being. When we are in wilderness, in a place without human disturbances, we find both our true selves and the essence of being alive.

That is a state of being we may be losing. The post-industrial human being is fundamentally different from our ancestors. Neurologists are discovering the human brain changes with technology. It's only a matter of time before every person in the wilderness will be carrying a smart phone that is able to connect to a satellite. (Iridium has developed one already). One will navigate with the map and GPS coordinates on the phone's screen. The phone will charge with solar power. Instead of map and compass, people will hike by smart phone screen. That is a very different experience. What will be its effect on human's relationship to wilderness?

Historically, humans avoided wilderness as much as possible, except for those few who chose to venture into it or aboriginal tribes who inhabited it. Wilderness in and of itself as a place to preserve and appreciate is a relatively recent concept. What will happen when we bring our technology with us into the wilderness? When we can surf the internet while sitting around a

campfire or watching a sunset? Will we appreciate and revere wilderness as we have done for the last century? Or will people play video games on their phones as they sit around the campsite?

Here in the canyon darkness comes quickly. The light won't last much longer. I can see why the large fire ring. If you want to stay up past dark, most people probably want a fire since star gazing is not possible due to the trees and canyon. The roar of Woods Creek will see me through the night, providing comfort when I wake in the middle of the night.

Thursday, August 14

I awake a little before 6:00. Only the dawn light provides illumination. I begin packing and have breakfast, treating myself to two packets of instant oatmeal on this final morning. The light descends the cliffs and begins to light the forest a little after 7:00. Everything is ready to put into the pack. All that's left is the long walk home and the long drive home. I enjoy a final cup of coffee and watching the light creep down the walls of the canyon.

For the first mile or so, I hike in solitude. It is a lovely morning. The first hikers from Upper Paradise appear on the ridge before the final descent to the river, a friendly older couple. They are followed by a large group of teens and parents, a group of four, and another couple. It must have been a crowded night at Upper Paradise. I pause on the bridge over the Kings before continuing to the other side. A couple is camped at the site where I camped the first night. Another couple is still in one of the sites farthest from the trail. Yes, it must have been very crowded here last night.

There is now a large pine down across the trail on the stretch between Upper and Middle Paradise. My left big toe begins to ache again. No one is camped at either Middle or Lower Paradise. As I begin the descent to Kings Canyon, I meet several potential parties for those empty campsites. Since my toe is bothering me, I negotiate the steps on the switchbacks carefully. At the top of Mist Falls, I meet a friendly family of day hikers. I limp down the switchbacks. At the bottom of the falls, there are more day hikers. I look for a place by the river where I can get well off the trail and soak my toe and foot in nature's whirlpool. I may be only a little more than two miles from the Roads End, but I need to stop. I find a good place and soak my feet for fifteen minutes or so. When I put my boots back on, the toe, once again, feels much better.

The first half mile of those final two miles is delightful, then the dust and fatigue set in. There are a lot of day hikers along with a couple of runners. I am relieved to come to the little bridge and see the wilderness office cabin.

A couple is parked next to my car, getting ready to embark on their trip of the Rae Lakes loop. We talk briefly as I dump my garbage in the bin, load the car, and change from my hiking boots to shoes. I mention a couple of possible campsites and wish them a great trip.

The first parking area along the river has two cars with one person picnicking by the river. This is definitely not a place to wash off ten days worth of dirt. Slightly past Roaring River, the road goes over a bridge on the Kings. Before the bridge there is a dirt road to a picnic area above the river. Barbara and I ate here once. No one is here. I grab my bag of clean underwear and t-shirt and go down the bank to the river. The view from the road is blocked, a good place for a skinny dip. The water feels good. I use my scarf as a washcloth. I put on the clean clothes and head down the road to Cedar Grove.

I phone home and go in the diner restaurant. Delaware North Company (DNC) has radically changed the menu since I last ate here. Radically changed is the polite way of saying they've ruined the menu. French fries and fresh greens are no longer available. The condiment station is gone. Indeed almost nothing remains from the old restaurant. I ask for the tri-tip. They are out of it. I order a cheeseburger. The cook forgets to put on the cheese and the burger is overcooked. The potato salad is pre-made, jammed into a cup, and stored in a refrigerator. It tastes like it's about a month old. The Yosemite concession contract is up for renewal. Since DNC stewardship of the Yosemite concession has been about the same as the quality of this food, I hope someone else gets the contract. Upper management seems to have a predilection for changing what has worked for many, many years. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it," is not a philosophy they subscribe to. DNC's only positive is that the employees are always extremely friendly and helpful. Keep the employees and get new management.

After my late lunch, I buy a coke for the road and a Haagen Daz bar for right now. Chocolate and vanilla ice cream are never better than after ten days in the backcountry.

The drive home is its usual anti-climax. The landscape transitions from the beauty of the Sierra to the mundane highways and freeways of the Central Valley to the overcrowded scurrying traffic of Bay Area multi-lane freeways. The best part is arriving home to a cold beer, hot shower, and Barbara.