

Longs Peak

While I was a graduate student at Colorado State University I had several opportunities to climb a few tall mountains. My friend Alan McNab and I decided one Saturday we were going to climb Longs Peak, which is one of the 14,000-foot mountains in Colorado. There are three 14,000-footers, as they are called, along the front range of the Rockies and another ten or so along the Continental Divide and in the southwestern part of the state. Longs Peak is just west of Longmont, Colorado about 50 miles north of Denver.

We decided to take our families to picnic at the foot of the mountain near Estes Park while we climbed the mountain. Our families stayed near the trailhead, playing among the trees and chasing ground squirrels while Al and I went to find the top of the mountain. We told our wives we would be on the top by noon and to look for us. We would wave to them right at noon from the peak. Of course, the top of the mountain was so far away they couldn't possibly see us at that distance and we really didn't have any idea how long it would take us to get there. We had never been on the mountain, we didn't talk with anyone about the trail, and we didn't even know what the distance to the top was. We carried only a canteen of water each and a couple of candy bars.

We got a good start by arriving at the foot of the mountain early in the morning. The trailhead began at about 8,000 feet and the top of the mountain was 14,259 feet, so, we had about a 6,000-foot vertical climb. We figured the length of the trail would be about 10 miles, but we didn't anticipate how rocky the trail would be or the steepness of the last couple thousand feet. We started at 6 a.m. and made pretty good progress throughout the day. It wasn't hot and as we climbed the temperature got even cooler with altitude. We climbed to an area called the Boulder Field and then through a notch on the north side of the peak called, the Keyhole, about two thirds of the way up. From there we went around the west side of the mountain and continued to climb along a cliff that looks down onto a lake, several thousand feet below. We continued to climb to the south, then turned sharply eastward, and up a channel filled with snow on the back side of the mountain. This was the steepest part of the climb and any misstep could result in a

terrifying slide down the snowy trench, over the cliff, and into the lake thousands of feet below.

By the time we reached the bottom of the trench we were at an elevation of about 13,000 feet, so we had about a thousand feet to go. But, the remainder of the climb was very challenging. At this level there was much less oxygen and the slope was much steeper. Forty percent of the atmosphere was below us and it was hard to breathe. I learned from first-hand experience why climbers on Mt. Everest carry oxygen for the last leg of their ascent. As we worked our way to the top of that last portion I could only climb for about 2 minutes at a time, maybe 50 feet, then stop and pant for several minutes. It took us at least an hour to climb the last thousand feet to the top of the mountain. When we got there, we were beat, and it took a long time to recover. I remember lying flat on the ground among the boulders with my arms outstretched thinking, "I'm going to die."

The top of Longs Peak is flat, about the size of a football field, with boulders scattered all around. Once we caught our breath and were feeling a little better, we walked over to the eastern edge of the mountain and looked down over the magnificent view of the foothills and the fruited plain below. We arrived at the edge of the overlook exactly at noon, our appointed time to wave to our families below. Of course, we couldn't see our wives and children 10 miles away and 6,000 feet below, but we decided to wave anyway. Maybe they would see us even if we couldn't see them. And, as it turned out, when we got down from the mountain they happened to have made friends with another family that was camping nearby who had a telescope. My wife, Jeannette, asked the husband if they could look through his telescope. She told him we were going to be at the top of the mountain right at noon and would wave to them, exactly at noon. He focused his telescope at the highest point of the mountain, and sure enough, there we were, waving to them from the peak.

Going back down was obviously a lot easier, but different muscles are used when going up from going down. It's the back of your legs that hurt going up and the front of your legs and feet that hurt on the way down. By the time we returned to the Keyhole, we'd been hiking for almost ten hours and were tired. Even though it was downhill it took almost as long to walk down as it had climbing up.

I made it up Longs Peak one other time with my two brothers, Steven and David, but we took horses to the Boulder Field and they climbed the rest of the way from there. The wrangler stayed with me and the horses below while they went through the Keyhole to the top. I didn't feel well that day due a touch of the flu, so I didn't get to the top the second time. I guess I could say I climbed Longs Peak maybe one and a half times.

Another memory I have of Longs Peak is about another graduate student in the Atmospheric Science Department at Colorado State who routinely climbed Longs Peak in preparation for the Red Zinger bicycle race in Boulder, Colorado. This annual race was sponsored by the Red Zinger Tea Company. Our friend prepared for the race on Saturdays for several months prior to the race. He would leave Fort Collins on his bicycle, ride to the foot of Longs Peak 35 miles away and 3,000 feet higher, get off his bike, and run to the top. He would then run back down the mountain, get on his bike, and ride the 35 miles back to Fort Collins, all in one day.

I was blown away by the physical conditioning it took for such an extreme activity. However, I guess some people enjoy participating in extreme sports. Al and I observed another such athlete the day we climbed Longs Peak. We were passed by an Indian running up the mountain about three miles from the trailhead. We still hadn't gotten to the Keyhole, another four miles ahead, when he came running back the other direction having already reached the summit. I have never been in such good shape, even when I graduated from Officer Training School. My best time was a six and half minute mile. My excuse has always been that I have short legs! I was never in good enough shape to do what those guys did. But, I'm proud to say, I topped at least one 14,000-footer in my prime.