

Michelle, My First Backpack Buddy

Swearingen Mountain was a steep, rocky mountain peak about a mile from our house near Evergreen, Colorado. It could be seen from the front door of our house and appeared to be beckoning for someone to come and conquer it. Our home was at an elevation of about 8,500 feet, and the peak was another 1,500 feet higher at about 10,000 feet above sea level.

My daughter, Michelle, and I decided one day we needed to stake a claim on our first "ten thousand-footer." Neither of us had ever climbed a "serious" mountain before, but we were determined to learn how to become backpackers and mountain climbers. Michelle was ten, had strawberry blonde hair, and wore braided pony tails, like Heidi, the little girl who lived in the Alps.

One Friday evening late in summer when the evenings lasted long and moonlight even longer, we decided to launch our assault. We gathered backpacks, cooking utensils, and grub and headed for our objective. We didn't bother to load the car, we would just hike the half mile up the gravel road to the foot of Mt. Swearingen, located in our neighbor's back yard, hence, the name of the mountain.

As we circled around their house, our friends, the Swearingens, waved us good luck on the mountain, and their big, old German Shepherd, Ralph, joined us for the attempted climb. The foot of the mountain was covered with Ponderosa Pine and fir trees and was littered with pine cones, pine needles, and dead branches. Ralph was so excited to have visitors to his mountain that he kept grabbing large branches in his teeth and begging us to toss them for him to fetch.

As we climbed higher up the mountain through the trees, the ground got steeper and steeper. When throwing Ralph, a branch at the bottom of the mountain, he returned with his trophy quickly, but the higher we got, the farther I could throw it, and the longer it would take him to rush down the mountain and struggle back up to us again. Finally, after panting heavily upon his return uphill to us for about the sixth time, I refused his demand for another toss and told him to go home. He disappointedly slunk down through the woods and back home. I think if I had honored his request one more time it would have killed him.

Michelle and I reached the top of the mountain about eight o'clock and had about an hour before dark. We needed to locate a good camp site, cook dinner, and set up camp, but first, we needed to recover from the climb and enjoy the view. "Our mountain" overlooked the small valley below us just uphill from our house, Bear Mountain a short distance to the Northeast, the town of Evergreen and the Bear River Valley about five miles north of us, Mt. Evans thirty miles West, and the Continental Divide, with peaks to over fourteen thousand feet, fifty miles farther to the West. We sat on the twin, upward jutting rocks of our perch, watching the lingering clouds over the "Roof of the World" slowly turn to crimson as the sun began to "kiss" the horizon.

Michelle reminded me that we had work to do before dark by asking, "Did you bring anything to eat? I'm getting hungry."

"Sure," I said. "We've got Top Ramen soup and scalloped potatoes with ham. How would you like that?"

"I'd eat anything after climbing up here," she said. "What's Top Ramen?"

I replied, "Top Ramen is the backpackers' trusty mainstay. It's a pack of noodles you boil in a pan until they're soft, and then flavor them with a packet of seasoning. We'll start with the soup and while we're eating that, we'll put on the scalloped potatoes to cook. It'll take a little longer to cook up here at ten thousand feet because water boils at a lower temperature at the reduced air pressure. That's also why we are having to breath more deeply. We only have about 70% as much air here as at sea level."

Michelle asked, "What do you want me to do?"

"Well," I said. "Why don't you find a good spot to lay out the sleeping bags and unroll them. We didn't bring a tent because it shouldn't rain tonight, and we'll want to look at the stars."

She looked around and said, "I don't see a flat spot anywhere. Where should I put them?"

"Yeah, you're right," I said. "It looks like the only spot is in the long crevasse between the twin rocky peaks at the top. Fortunately, that crevasse is here,

or we'd roll down the mountain anyplace else. But, it looks awful rocky and hard to sleep on. I'll have to cut some tree branches after dinner to put under our sleeping bags. Go ahead and unpack the bags and I'll have the soup ready soon."

After dinner, while I located some fir trees lower down on the peak and cut an armful of pine boughs for our beds, Michelle cleaned the cooking utensils with our limited supply of water, so we could fry pancakes for breakfast. Normally, under dry camping conditions, I would just take the dirty dishes home for washing, but I needed the cooking pan again for breakfast.

Once we got the dinner dishes stored away and the sleeping bags set up, we were ready for some serious star gazing. That night the moon didn't rise until well after midnight and the few clouds remaining became transparent. The sky was filled with stars and planets. We found the Big Dipper, the Little Dipper, the North Star, Orion's Belt, Saturn, and Mars. And the Milky Way was so bright, we could see our shadows on the ground. It was evident why the Old Testament patriarchs so often spoke about features displayed in the sky such as Genesis 19: 1-2, "The heavens declare the glory of God; And the firmament shows His handiwork."

We fell asleep early that night. The climb up the mountain, the warm evening, and the lack of wind all conspired with the silence above to induce slumber quickly. Even the occasional meteor flashing across the sky and reflecting off the mountains couldn't deter the sandman.

Morning comes early on a mountain top. A light wind began to rustle our sleeping bags and the first light was only blocked by the rocks surrounding our campsite. But, the sound that woke us most effectively was the crowing of the Swearingen's roosters from fifteen hundred feet below us. That's not the normal sound you hear camping in the wilderness! But, it was more than enough to get us moving for the day.

After a leisurely breakfast of pancakes, sausage, and tea we broke camp and headed downhill for home. Normally, when you camp in the woods you explore the river or lake you camp near, after you get up in the morning, and don't get back on the road until mid-morning, unless you're trying to make tracks to somewhere. But, when you camp on a mountain peak, there's no place to go, but down. We

descended the mountain and were back home by eight o'clock, before anybody at home had even gotten out of bed!

Michelle and I continued to backpack together over the next ten years, sometimes just the two of us, but more frequently together with church groups. I remember at least one other time we camped together, on Grouse Ridge, north of Donner Pass in the Sierras. We camped with the Combie Bible Church youth group numerous times on Grouse Ridge and at Royal Gorge of the American River Canyon, also near Donner Pass.

But, probably the most memorable group backpacking trip with Michelle was on the return hike back from a two-day campout with the junior high students. She and about four other girls in her group ran out of water about a mile from the trailhead and we decided to take a brief detour to get more water in Milk Lake, at the bottom of the last hill to our cars.

As we rounded the edge of the lake to reach an opening to fill our canteens, we passed a couple of tents and other camping gear lying about. It was evident that someone was camped there and had left them temporarily. As we reached a small beach where we could get to the water, I noticed a couple of people swimming across the lake. I thought, "That's neat. What a beautiful place to camp and swim."

But, I also noticed that one of the swimmers crossing the middle of the lake about fifty yards out, seemed to be wearing an unusually brief swimsuit. I didn't think about it any further until another couple walked past our group of junior highers stooping at the water's edge filling their canteens. The intruders were completely in the buff, carrying no towels, and completely oblivious to our stares.

Most of the girls were busy filling their canteens and didn't realize they had just been mooned. However, my daughter and one of her close friends, Julie Johnson, happened to turn around at the wrong moment and got the "Full Monty." I still recall Julie's wide-open astonishment and utter silence at the brazen nudity she had just witnessed. Michelle seemed more circumspect about the whole incident but didn't seem to have much to say on the tramp back up the hill to the cars.

It's not uncommon to run across "Skinny dippers" while backpacking in the mountains of California. So, if you choose to lead youth groups into the back country, be prepared to protect them from both "bears" and "bares."

I've had many other backpacking buddies since first hiking with Michelle. I've taken each one of my children, one at a time and in groups, backpacking during their childhood. And, I've had adult backpacking buddies in Colorado, California, and Arizona. I'll tell you about some of these exciting adventures in other short stories and at another time. But, I especially remember the times I learned to backpack with "Michelle, My First Backpack Buddy."