

Meadow Madness

By 10:00 a.m. the next day we were sitting on the front porch of the Kennedy Meadows General Store, and I was wishing we were back in the wilderness. Out there at least we controlled our fate.

In the Meadow, we had problems.

Kennedy Meadows is a wilderness outpost on the southern edge of one of the world's great mountain ranges. The only vehicle access is by a single road that climbs 30 miles from Route 395 and the Owens Valley, thousands of feet below and to the East. Back then the huge meadow, or valley, was dotted with a handful of homes, ranging from nouveau log cabins to dilapidated shacks. In the center of the meadow were a general store, a popular campground, and a large ranger station. Hikers then and now use the area as a launching point for southern Sierra adventures. The area is also a popular getaway for dirt bike and off-road vehicle (ORV) enthusiasts and weekend campers. It's very busy in the summer, and we arrived on the Saturday of Memorial Day weekend in 1983. Though the winter had been terrible and we were told the crowds were light, for us there was barely room to breathe. There were so many people, cars, trucks, and ORVs that we couldn't find a quiet spot to relax and recuperate from the grueling 45-mile slog and crawl from Weldon. This was a big issue for Pete, who had woken up on the South Fork Kern River suffering from the same overwhelming ailment as Ryan had been felled by a few days earlier. He was miserable, and he need peace, quiet, and quick access to a bathroom. There was little we could do to help. Finn and I

hoped only that whatever it was, it wasn't coming our way. His father, who was coming to take him home, wasn't there yet.

Shortly after arriving we stopped in the general store, which serves as the post office for the area's residents and long distance hikers passing through. There we picked up our mail, which included several letters and our giant food box, but didn't include the joint package we were expecting from Finn and Ryan's parents that would include sweets, the extra provisions we had come to rely on, mostly carbs, and money. This was a major problem, as without the box we had very little money for the not-so-free freeways we would soon be hitchhiking along. It put us in something of an immediate quandary as well, because cash-free camping was going to be pretty difficult to negotiate in Kennedy Meadows, and after Saturday there was no more mail delivery until Tuesday. In addition, we wanted to get back to Ryan, who by then had surely made his way to Independence, CA, where he would rest and recuperate from his awful bout what we suspected was giardia. One piece of mail we did get was a post card from him, giving us the name of the Independence motel he was going to find and be staying at.

The crowds put us in a bad mood, particularly Finn, who was never a fan of crowds, or ORVs, or car campers, or people in general. We spent the morning focusing on our problems. In addition to the missing box, we had the problem of how to transport the contents of the giant food box down the mountain to Ryan and his pack. There was simply too much to carry in our packs. While Pete snoozed on the front

porch of the general store, while weekend campers stepped over him or veered around him, Finn and I talked about how much we were relying on a ride from his father.

Pete's father arrived just before noon, but his need to get back on the road immediately to meet his schedule, along with Pete's condition, along with our need to wait for the late afternoon mail delivery, pretty much cancelled any hope we had of getting a ride from him. Though we had spent the last thirty days with Pete, baking in the desert and freezing in Sierra streams and snowpack, asking his father, a complete stranger, to make a fifty mile detour was a pretty big ask in the best of circumstances. In the end, Pete forgot all about it anyway, and we didn't even bother asking. We bid each other fast and fond farewells, and he was gone, just like that. Pete would be missed. We had all grown very used to each other.

Finn and I spent the afternoon lounging around the general store and ranger station. It was a warm day, and despite the crowds the day was quite pleasant. The meadow itself is huge, kind of like a valley, with small picturesque creeks running here and there through meadows and small alpine groves. The civilization is all at the southern end of the meadow, with a few dirt roads leading north along the margins to trail heads and ORV jump-off points. To us Kennedy Meadows was a huge milestone and transition point, but the Pacific Crest Trail presence itself in the meadow was pretty incidental. Barely 50 people a year were attempting the trail back then, and general knowledge of the PCT, and the general popularity of long distance hiking itself, was much smaller then. This was especially true at Kennedy Meadows, where the services were more geared to supporting motorized recreation than long walks in the park.

There was a trail register behind the counter, and a few references at the ranger station on where the trailhead was, but that was about it. Despite our rough and ready appearance we enjoyed a pretty anonymous presence that day, though even today Kennedy Meadows is such a busy outpost that the PCT occupies a very tiny profile in the hubbub of the area as a whole.

I was pretty happy to be anonymous, and enjoyed trying to generate a little small talk as one of the hoard of weekend warriors migrating through the store and station. This was actually pretty impossible, considering our grooming and attire had us looking like particularly poor-off homeless people, but Finn found it completely unacceptable. We had walked there from Mexico. We had been outside since April 1. All the others had driven up in their air conditioned cars for the weekend. We were better, and damn proud of it, and he wanted everyone to know that. So while I pretty much snoozed on the general store porch, Finn talked with rangers and campers and sought information on the trail and the Sierra and told stories about our adventures. While I was tired and wanted to pretend I was one of the weekend warriors, he was a warrior. It was a fine afternoon.

As always, we were very hungry, but this time the packs we carried into town were completely empty. We didn't want to dip into our food box because we didn't know how much we would need to get to Oregon, and we weren't completely sure that the mysteries of the 1983 US Postal Service would get our requests for cash to be sent to Hyatt Lake, Oregon so that we could resupply anything we ate along the way. Still banking on getting to Canada and returning to Kennedy Meadows, we had made a last

minute decision to have the next box sent further up the trail to Crater Lake. This would assure we would have enough supplies to complete the entire PCT, and assure that we wouldn't have to leave supplies behind if we happened to make it to Oregon in a day or two. We also were loath to spend a penny, at least until the mail arrived, and so we resorted to our outlaw ingenuity and lifted a package of pasta and a jar of tomato sauce from the hard working proprietors of the busy general store. We honestly never felt proud or justified by this dishonesty, but we did feel like we had to do it. The plain fact was that we were always hungry. It is a plain fact I now know is a basic truth of all long distance hikers, but we know that when we started and we hadn't packed enough food and didn't have enough money. Shoplifting was adventure survival, and we tended to be very surgical and need-oriented in our larceny. As we often explained to other long distance hikers, like Pete, who we partnered with and who witnessed or partook of our ill-gotten gains, these reasons didn't justify what we were doing, they only explained it.

What we didn't yet know was that we were developing a reputation along the PCT network that year. While most hikers and hiking teams give themselves trail names, a time honored tradition begun many, many years earlier on the Appalachian Trail, we were actually *given* a nickname by others who had met us and who would comment on our entries in trail registers along the way. Because of our shoplifting, and our cigarette smoking, and our beer drinking, and our amateurish approach to the "profession" of long distance hiking, we were being called "The Outlaws." When we later found out, we liked it.

Pete was gone and Ryan was lounging by a motel pool, enjoying his "Independence," and so Finn and I finally splurged for a six pack of beer from the small amount of cash that we had received in the mail. When Saturday's mail did finally arrive, there was nothing for us, and we walked a half mile back to the trail we came in on, then a half mile cross country to a flat, tree-shaded spot, and set up camp and cooked and ate an entire one-pound package of pasta. We finished the beer, smoked another hand-rolled cigarette, and then camouflaged our gear and the food box contents we couldn't cram into our packs. We then strolled back to the store, where by now they knew us. Finn bought more beer while I picked up a large bag of popcorn and nonchalantly walked out the front door without paying. We walked over to the ranger station as the sun set and got good seats at the outdoor theater for the much anticipated showing of John Wayne and Oliver Hardy in "The Fighting Kentuckian."

There was a huge and raucous crowd for the movie, and we had a great time sitting in the back so as not to scare any of the little kids, but also because there were a few bikers back there, and we felt more at home with them, and they gave us some marijuana. We rolled a joint with our cigarette rolling papers and smoked half of it, saving the rest for the next day. After the movie, we slipped off into the woods like outlaws to our secret campsite, where the din of the car campground was distant, and the stars were not obscured by the electric lights.

That morning's hike into Kennedy Meadows with Pete had been a furious and frustrating gallop, complicated by what another hiker had termed in the trail register,

the South Fork Kern "find-a-trail" section, but the day had felt like a holiday, a transition day, and sleep that night was well-earned.

The next day was getaway day. We simply couldn't wait until Tuesday, consuming more supplies and spending a portion of what little money we did have, waiting for mail that might never arrive. We left a forwarding notice at the general store for any mail to go to Lake Hughes, Oregon, and then we hung out near the gas pumps looking for people who were clearly heading down. It was Sunday during a holiday weekend, though, and so there were very few. We made a sign that read, "Need a ride to Route 395" and placed it on our packs, and then camped out nearby. We smoked the rest of the marijuana joint and read books and wrote letters.

We eventually got angry and abusive at the small array of motor homes and pick-up trucks that pulled in, dumped their trash, stopped to buy whatever crap they needed, and left again, glancing disdainfully at our sign. We moved our operation to the front porch of the store, posting the sign in front of us. We also added a note to the bulletin board at the ranger station. It was soon late afternoon and we had pretty much resigned ourselves to waiting until Monday and the weekend getaway. We were a little tense and anxious about being stranded, but we were also pretty relaxed about it too. The ranger station was screening "Duck Soup" that evening, and we thought Groucho would be an even better time than John Wayne. We were actually discussing whether or not to dip into the food box or the money belt when a middle aged guy named Charlie stopped by and asked us about our adventure. We told him the whole story,

particularly the sad story of Ryan, and before long he was offering us a ride to Route 395. He wasn't actually leaving for the night, but he and his wife and his dog crowded into the cab of their pick-up, and Finn and I and our gear and our food box stuffed into the truck bed, and in thirty minutes we were standing on the side of route 395 in the absolutely flat and mostly desolate Owens Valley. We bid a fond farewell to Charlie and his wife and his dog. They had taken a few minutes out of their world and noticed us, listened to us, and then helped in a way that was little for them, and fun for them, and tremendous for us. I am always struck by the compassion and generosity of people when they have a moment's pause from the hamster wheel of their lives, and this was a good example. It's a wonderful thing that happens in the mountains, and though it seems like it happens less and less these days, I bet that isn't true.

Standing in the gravelly breakdown lane, Finn scribbled "Independence!" on the back of our cardboard sign and held it up. We stuck out our thumbs. We were officially on the road. About the fifth car that went by picked us up. The driver was Native American, with a long black pony tail and large turquoise and silver rings on half of his fingers. He was also in a pick-up, but alone, and we tossed our gear in the back and climbed into the cab for the hour or so ride to Ryan. The Sierra were a white stone wall to our left, and the guy, whose name we never got, pointed out Mt. Whitney, the tallest peak in the lower 48 states, as we sailed through the village of Lone Pine. Our unnamed driver was in his forties or fifties. He lived in Mojave but was on his way to Idaho, he said, to watch his grandfather die. He had just split with his third wife the day before,

and he was getting slowly smashed on Michelob Light while he drove the desolate freeway north.

He grew thoughtful when we told him what we were up to, and told us that it was good we were taking advantage of our time while we were young. He said he was born in Idaho and had travelled himself when he was younger, but had settled in Mojave more than ten years before and now thought he would never leave. He said he loved the desert, and he now hated trees. He had a good sense of humor and Finn, sitting in the middle, talked with him about crazy stuff that happened in the desert while I mostly stared out the open window. At one point I asked him what Mojave was like when he first moved there, in the early seventies. He said, "It was wild, man. It was just like the Old West."

It was a great ride. He was an interesting guy with a great story. We had funny and thoughtful conversation, with the wind in our faces and a wide open freeway rolling beneath us as the sun went down behind the Sierra Nevada Mountains. He dropped us off in front of Ryan's motel and drove away, gone as quickly as Pete, without much more than a "goodbye and good luck." It was life on the road.

We found Ryan's room and pounded on his door until he came out, a little bit of a scared look on his face until he saw it was us. We had an impromptu reunion party and Finn and I slept our first night indoors since San Diego. We never did receive the missing package (maybe someday it will show up on Ryan's doorstep) but Ryan's parents had wired him money to cover the expenses of his recovery, and so the

freedom of the open road was enhanced by the freedom of having a little money in our pockets. Our thirty hours in Kennedy Meadows was the first time since we left New England that we had felt trapped anywhere. It was the first time we weren't free to go and do what we wanted. We weren't able to just walk down to 395 because of the food box, and we couldn't get a ride, so we were stuck. I wrote in my journal: The feeling here is not really unlike being trapped in a job. It sucks. I must avoid it as much as possible."

While we drank Michelob Light in honor of our man from Mojave, we caught up on the events of our time apart. Ryan was kind of happy, for example, that Pete had fallen ill with the same illness as he had. It made him feel not so alone about it. On the subject of Pete, Finn and I had a bit of an argument. On the trail, Finn and Pete would butt heads frequently, and so with Pete gone, Finn began listing out all his flaws. The issue had been that Pete had a lot of discipline and liked to play things by the book whenever possible. We learned on our second last night together that he had been an Eagle Scout. He was also a bona fide star athlete in high school. Finn saw how ridiculous and inefficient this approach was sometimes, as did I really, but Finn couldn't tolerate it. Always a bit of a control freak, he had started saying to Pete things like, "if that's what you think, then you do it. I'll do it my way." He started getting really self-righteous and defensive and often on the Weldon to Kennedy Meadows stretch, without Ryan to keep us all laughing, he was a general pain in the ass. We started talking about Pete's contributions to our systems and styles, and while we both agreed that the discipline he brought us will be valuable, Finn was really critical of him for his

structured diet and insistence on always finding trail, rather than moving cross country in the correct general direction. Our discussion was really more about me trying to explain to Finn that I thought it was his need to control, and his lack of patience with ideas and practices that he didn't agree with, which was as big a cause of the tension between them, at least as much as any rigidity on Pete's part. I even suggested that Finn was intimidated by Pete's athletic prowess and his Eagle Scout stuff. The discussion went well, with me getting my point across and tempers never going over the edge, which was progress in itself.

We also talked about our decision to hitch around the Sierra, and then circle back after we reached Canada. Ryan said that a hiker was killed on Mt. Whitney the day before, taking a 2,000 foot fall from near the peak, and that two other hikers were killed on the Kern River a few days before that. Everyone everywhere confirmed that the Sierra were closed, and that what we were doing was our only chance. We toasted to chance, and to Canada, and spent an unpleasantly stuffy night indoors.