

Hiking on the Chilkoot Trail

Kathy and Mike's Excellent Adventure on the Chilkoot Trail

July 9 1998

At 7:30 AM in Juneau we boarded the Alaska Marine Highway ship, MV Malaspina, or in local parlance, the Blue Canoe. We sailed up the Lynn Canal and went ashore in Skagway at 2:00 PM.

We found our way to the Golden North Hotel, built in 1898. It is an excellent old structure, three stories high. Our room was on the third floor, up two flights of very steep stairs. It seemed like a step into the past. The hotel is kept up very well and furnished with many beautiful antiques. On our floor the bath was shared, down the hall. If the door was ajar one could assume it was clear, if closed, not. The plumbing was definitely tacked on perhaps in the nineteen oughts or teens. The shower was very touchy. When the proper temperature was set one should listen carefully for any change in the sound of the water flow and be ready to jump. In an instant the temperature could become blistering hot or icy. One tended to pay attention.

At 6:00PM we met our new companions in the lobby and went to dinner in the dining room with our leader and guide, Bruce Weber. We introduced ourselves to each other and looked each other over, each of us wondering who would complete the hike and who would not. Our trail companions were John and Libby from Michigan, Peter and Liz from Fairbanks, Betty from San Diego, Jim from Alameda and H from Missouri. H is his middle initial and that is what he is called. Later, on the trail, Bruce mentioned that in our group we had five PhD's. It was quite an erudite hiking group.

Bruce told us that due to a forest fire in the area we would not be able to use the camp ground at Dyea. The fire fighters were using it as their base camp and staging area. We would thus stay an extra night in the hotel. For the next day there was a hike planned from Skagway to Sturgill's Landing and back. This would constitute a conditioning hike and give Bruce an idea of our ability.

July 10

After an excellent breakfast in the hotel dining room we assembled in the lobby to commence our activities. We met our other guide, Tim, who has a sporting goods shop in town and operates Packer Expeditions. He is also an EMT with the Skagway fire department. We walked to the trailhead and because it was sprinkling we put on our rain gear. The hike was about three miles each way and up and over and then back over a 600-foot hill for a total gain of about 1200 feet. When we got to Sturgill's Landing I found that my shirt was soaking wet from sweat. My rain jacket is totally impervious; it doesn't breathe at all. It is useless during any activity. I took it off for the return and was drier without it, a lesson learned.

After we returned to town we had dinner and went to the National Park Service Auditorium to hear Buckwheat Donahue do some Robert Service readings. A very clever and humorous fellow.

Hiking on the Chilkoot Trail

July 11

After breakfast in town we took the Park Service tour of the town where they related the history of the stampede days. We found that we had missed the re-enactment of the shooting of Soapy Smith by one day. On July 8th 1898, Frank Reid and Soapy Smith, a notorious gambler, con man and gang leader, had a gunfight. Soapy died immediately, Frank died twelve days later. They had a parade and lots of festivities to celebrate the centennial. I'm afraid we will miss the next centennial re-enactment too.

After lunch we put all our gear on a pick-up truck and hiked to Bruce's five-acre place overlooking Nakhu Bay near Dyea. We stored our excess luggage there and got our packs ready for the hike. We made camp in the woods on Bruce's property. Kathy and I found a small cabin so we didn't have to set up our tent.

July 12

After an early breakfast we made last minute adjustments to our packs. Kathy and I both had twenty-pound packs until I included the tent that we rented. The tent weighed ten pounds, so I had thirty pounds. I carried the tent and Kathy carried the tent poles. Kathy's pack was then about 25 pounds. I was dubious about carrying such a heavy tent but later in camp in the rain it was worth every ounce. We were the only ones with consistently dry sleeping bags.

H showed Tim two large blisters he had developed on his foot, which had opened up to be serious wounds each about an inch in diameter. Bruce and Tim agreed that he could not continue so they arranged a room for him in the hotel until the 16th when he would take the train up to Bennett and meet us at the end of the hike. Tim's wife Carol, who is also an EMT, took charge of him and saw to it that he had medical attention and arranged activities for him around town. I considered developing a blister too, but Kathy wouldn't allow it.

Tim's pack weighed 85 pounds and Bruce's weighed 60 pounds.

We started hiking up the Chilkoot Trail along the Taiya River. The name Dyea is a corruption of the Chilkoot word Taiya. Our elevation at the trailhead was 30 feet. Almost immediately we encountered a steep climb of 210 feet up what seemed humorously called Saintly Hill and then almost as much elevation loss. As we hiked we watched the weather. Although the sky was threatening there was no rain. The trail continued to ascend and descend, as trails are wont to do.

At 4.8 miles we came to Finnegan's Point, formerly the site of a tent city of about 75 tents, now a campground. The mosquitoes among the trees were so bad that we took a break on a gravel bar protruding into the river. After the break and lunch, we continued up the trail. We passed an area referred to as the beaver dam where we were warned that we would have to take off our boots and change to sandals or camp shoes because the muck on the trail would be above our ankles. We were fortunate because we only encountered about two or three inches of muck.

Hiking on the Chilkoot Trail

Michael Lee, an excellent cook who was hired by Bruce to bring the food to each of our camps before we would arrive, had prepared our food. Bruce and Tim referred to him as our Sherpa. The stamina of all these guys is incredible.

We arrived at Canyon City Camp and set up our tent. Our guides told us that the weather looked pretty good, so we didn't need to put up our rain fly. We had our dinner and settled down for the night. At 3:30 AM we were alerted by our guides to put up our rain fly, it had started raining. We put up our rain fly every night after that.

The elevation at Canyon City Camp is 340 feet. Our cumulative elevation gain to Canyon City Camp was 840 feet.

July 13

After our breakfast we broke camp and started up the trail again. About a quarter mile from the campground we crossed a suspension bridge and walked about a half mile to the site of Canyon City. Canyon City was a village of over 1,500 people in May 1897. The city even once had electric lights. There isn't much there now, just an old stove, a very few ruins and an old boiler for a stationary steam engine which the Dyea Klondike and Transportation Company had used to power a tram.

From Canyon City we hiked in an on and off drizzle all the way. We didn't put on rain gear because the rain was so light, and the body temperature generated by our exercise caused the moisture to evaporate before it built up. The trail continued to go up and down all the way. Just before we reached Sheep Camp Betty twisted her ankle and fell. After she rested a while she continued into camp. A steady light rain had developed so we set up our tent and made camp in the rain beside the river. By the time our tent was up the trail was muddy and everything not covered was wet. Bruce and Tim stretched a couple of tarps for shelter where they could cook and we all could eat.

Sheep Camp is at 1,000 feet elevation. Our cumulative elevation gain from Canyon City was 950 feet. In its heyday Sheep camp had a Post Office, a hospital and numerous businesses. It served 6,000 to 8,000 transient residents on their way to the Klondike. By May 1898 most stampeders had left and the city dwindled away.

July 14

The Big Day. The Dreaded Day. The Day we Cross the Summit. Bastille Day

Bruce got us up early because this would be a long day. He said that we would not get to Happy Camp until 10:00 PM at the earliest. He was so very right.

It had rained all night and the river had risen about four inches. I noticed that if it had come up about two more inches it would have come over a small sand bar and flooded out our tent. I felt very lucky.

Hiking on the Chilkoot Trail

By 8:00 AM everyone was ready to proceed. We again started up the trail in a diminishing drizzle. I still felt more comfortable with no rain gear

Just above Sheep Camp we stopped at a warming hut waiting for Bruce and Tim who were getting their gear together. When they arrived, Betty said that she thought that she couldn't go on, as she felt too weak. We lost about an hour and a half while Bruce and Tim conferred and decided what to do. We were near a ranger residence and the ranger, Ranger Nancy, took Betty under her wing. Nancy said she was hiking out the next day, so Betty could stay with her until she left then Nancy would escort her out. We heard later that Betty fell again the next day and had to be helicoptered out. I understand that they charge \$800.00 an hour, so people don't do this lightly. We also heard later that Betty's ankle was x-rayed and no broken bones were found. Betty continued her trip from Skagway and we didn't see her again

Bruce told us that this was the turnaround place for anyone who doubted that they could finish the hike. He said that they could not split the group after that point. If anyone had to go back or if they lagged far behind we would all have to go back as it was not safe to split up after that.

The scenery was beyond words with many hanging glaciers on either side of the canyon and the many streams and waterfalls from the canyon walls along the way. We found blackberries, not quite ripe, blue berries, which were good, watermelon berries, which were about half an inch long and watermelon shaped. We also saw baneberries, a beautiful round shiny red berry about a third of an inch in diameter, poisonous. There were other berries and flowers all along the way.

We continued toward the Scales, the trail ascending along the side of a hill about twenty feet above the river. In most places it was a steep rocky slope down to the river. We stopped near where the river came down some steep rapids for a break and a snack. Jim had fallen somewhat behind and was still above the river when he fell off the trail. He was in great good luck; he fell into a batch of alders, which kept him from tumbling down the rocks into the river. Tim and Bruce extricated him with no injuries, but it was evident that he was quite fatigued. Tim and Bruce took turns carrying Jim's pack to the base of the Golden Stairs. They would go ahead and lay down their pack then come back to get Jim's, then relay the packs up the trail. I suggested that we split up the contents of Jim's pack and all carry a few pounds for him. Tim and Bruce, however, continued to take turns relaying his pack all the rest of the trip.

We crossed a small snowfield at the bottom of the Stairs then started rock climbing. The slope consists of boulders from about a foot in diameter to some of several feet. It is a typical talus slope of jumbled rocks at their steepest angle of rest. Most of the rocks are quite firmly set but there are enough more or less unstable ones that the climb requires careful attention. The Park Service has placed red poles on the slope to indicate their preferred route. We followed it fairly closely but occasionally veered off on our own route. For those who are not comfortable climbing over rocks this was really a trial. As one ascends there are two false summits. From below it looks like you have nearly made it, then when you arrive you find another climb ahead. Near the top the cable from the old tram is still draped on the rocks. It is useful to hold onto and to pull yourself up.

Hiking on the Chilkoot Trail

The Chilkoot Pass elevation is 3,525 feet. During the stampede the North West Mounted Police (the Mounties) controlled entry to Canada. I'm told that they had a couple of machine guns mounted at the top. They required the stamperders to have a year's supply, about a ton, of goods and food to avoid a famine in Dawson and the gold fields. Now the Canadian Parks Service supervises the pass with no evidence of weapons. They require a permit to enter and allow no more than fifty hikers each day.

Just beyond the crest is a warming hut and a residence of the Canadian Park Warden, their equivalent of our rangers. The Warden checked our trail permits and made sure that everyone was in good condition. We rested in the warming hut and prepared our lunch. The rest was most welcome. Jim was far behind being escorted by Tim. We waited quite a long time for them to catch up then more time for Jim to recover his strength. As a result, we left the summit quite late.

We had four miles to go to get to Happy Camp. Mostly downhill and I assumed it would be a piece of cake. Wrong! Immediately after leaving the summit we had an extensive snowfield to cross on a side hill sloping off to our left. To those of us unaccustomed to snow travel this was a worrisome thing. At first the snow sloped off rather steeply, I thought, into Crater Lake about a quarter of a mile away. I was a bit concerned about sliding into that icy water. After about a half a mile we no longer had worry about the lake, we now were above a boulder field where if we slipped we could break several useful appendages on our bodies. After the snowfield we had a more or less level boulder field to cross. Then several alternating snowfields and boulder fields.

On our left was a series of lakes connected by a stream, which is one of the headwaters of the Yukon River. If I had spit in the river it would have come out in the Bering Sea. On our right was a wall of very high mountains with numerous streams coming down from glaciers fed by the ice field at the top. After sundown we passed a canyon on our left with a river raging over spectacular rapids feeding into the river we were following beside the trail. It was too dark to get a picture, so I just had to remember real hard.

We hiked until midnight but still didn't make it to Happy Camp. Bruce was worried about hiking in the dark while we were so tired. He thought we were risking injury while crossing the many boulder fields so he selected a tundra-covered smooth ridge near the trail and we bivouacked there. Although it was midnight it wasn't black dark like down here, it was like a late dusk. While we were setting up camp Tim came along. He had made camp about a mile behind and Jim was waiting there. Tim's purpose in catching up with us was to check on us and to share a shot of Old Bushmill's to celebrate crossing the summit. On his way to our location he had encountered a couple from Ontario Canada who were exhausted and huddled in a ravine just off the trail. He told them that they were not in a safe place where they were, and on his way back he would help them set up their tent in a better place. Tim and Bruce then went back to Tim's camp and on the way set up the Ontario couple. Bruce then hiked back to our camp and bedded down.

Hiking on the Chilkoot Trail

July 15

The next morning when I got up I could see the warming hut and outhouse of Happy Camp less than a mile ahead. I could also see the Ontario couple's tent about the same distance behind us. It had been reasonably dry the day before and through the night. Just as we started to break camp it started to rain so we had to put away a wet tent again.

We hiked into Happy Camp and waited in the warming hut for Tim and Jim to catch up. The mosquitoes were incredibly bad. We wore our mosquito nets most of the time. I frequently forgot to remove the net when I took a drink of water. By the time they got there, and lunch was prepared, and everything packed to hike it was nearly noon. For lunch we had the dinner that Michael had brought in for us the previous day.

Happy Camp elevation is 2,900 feet. The cumulative elevation gain from Sheep Camp is 3,100 feet.

It was there that I accidentally dropped my camera into the river while I was washing my utensils. I grabbed it out of the water, but it was thoroughly wet. Later I was able to salvage the film including our picture at the summit. Kathy allowed me to use her camera the rest of the trip.

About noon we headed for Lake Lindeman. We stopped between Long Lake and Deep Lake to rest and have a snack. While we were resting Jim accompanied by Tim arrived. We left Deep Lake and started toward Lake Lindeman where we met Michael and his friend Kate coming up from Lake Lindeman Camp. We were hiking on the side of a steep slope that descended rapidly to a magnificent gorge between Deep Lake and Lake Lindeman with roaring rapids at the bottom. The sight and sound were overwhelming.

We arrived at Lake Lindeman about 6:00 PM. We made camp near the lakeshore. Our tent was wet but soon after we set it up it dried out. The scenery was what you would expect to find on a post card. The mosquitoes were very bad. We had to use our mosquito nets much of the time on the Canadian side.

Lake Lindeman elevation is 2,800 feet. The cumulative elevation gain from Happy Camp is 570 feet.

We had an excellent dinner of spaghetti, garlic bread and salad in the warming hut then bedded down.

July 16

We had a dry night but just as we were breaking camp it rained lightly so that again we packed a wet tent.

Before we left I had Tim do some preventive first aid on my feet. I had a couple of hot spots starting on top of my big toes, so he put on some Band-Aids.

Hiking on the Chilkoot Trail

On our way out of Lindeman Camp we stopped at the Park Warden's office and were issued certificates that certified that we had completed the Chilkoot Trail. Up there they don't feel that qualifies one as a sourdough. You have to spend a winter up there for that. Down here I can make the claim, and no one will ever know.

We hiked through a varied forest scene. We saw evidence of bear and moose but not the critters themselves.

Jim had taken off before us and had dropped his pack at the beginning of the climb. Bruce and Tim were still relaying his pack. After hiking quite a distance we began to worry because we hadn't caught up with him. I guess he was feeling better and managed to stay ahead of us longer than we expected. Bruce took off running up the trail to catch him. In the absence of the guides I was entrusted with the anti-bear pepper spray. Happily, we encountered no bears. Everything turned out OK; Jim was just making better time than we expected.

We stopped at Bare Loon Lake for lunch. It is really a beautiful little lake that could be a destination in itself. Of course, that is true of most of the places along the trail.

We arrived at Lake Bennett in the mid afternoon after climbing a long sandy rise. Tim and Bruce didn't like it at all, but Kathy was delighted after all the rock hopping she had done. We set up camp near the shore again. Our wet tent dried out quickly. A couple from Western Washington who were hiking just behind us said they saw a small bear near the trail just before arriving at Lake Bennett.

The elevation of Lake Bennett is 2,150 feet. The cumulative elevation gain from Lake Lindeman is 1,130 feet.

H and Bruce's young son and wife and Tim's wife had taken the train up from Skagway to meet us and had brought the makings for a great dinner of burritos. The Michigan couple had never eaten avocados before; they seemed to like them.

That was the first night that we spent with no rain at all. There was heavy condensation inside the tent, though so we had to do the dry-out drill the next morning.

July 17

The Yukon Outdoors Club of Whitehorse had set up the Chilkoot Sourdough Bakery in the Lake Bennett Campground. In honor of the Klondike Gold Rush Centennial they were providing free sourdough pancakes and coffee for all hikers who had completed the Chilkoot. The ladies were dressed in turn-of-the-century costumes. I thought that this was a marvelous cap for the hike

We explored the area around the Lake Bennett campground. There is a splendid old church that had ministered to the stampedeers. Unfortunately, it was just a shell, the inside was full of support structure to keep the old building standing.

Hiking on the Chilkoot Trail

Mid-morning we packed our gear again. This was the first time since the first day that we packed a dry tent. It was a bittersweet experience knowing this was the last time and we would not be camping anymore.

We had an excellent lunch by the train depot and on the train. There is a Canadian beer called Kokanee brewed by the Kokanee Brewing Company in British Columbia. I'm not sure if it is one of the best beers I have ever tasted or if any beer would be wonderful after that long hike. Perhaps even Falstaff, - nah! Never Falstaff.

At 1:30 PM we boarded the Yukon & White Pass Railway to return to Skagway. We got back to the hotel and took a wonderful shower in spite of the peculiar way their shower works. We unpacked our packs and prepared to return to the real world

July 18

We got up and met for the last time, had breakfast and said our good-byes.

At 2:30 PM we boarded the Malaspina and headed back to the real world. Would we do it again? Probably not. Would we like to? Oh yes, definitely.

There's a land where the mountains are nameless,
And the rivers all run God knows where,
There are lives that are erring and aimless,
And deaths that hang by just a hair,
There are hardships that nobody reckons,
There are valleys unpeopled and still,
There's a land - oh it beckons and beckons,
And I want to go back - and I will.

From the Spell of the Yukon, Robert Service