

Hiking the Grand Teton mountains, EST and the Gulch an idyllic summer

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the Grand Teton mountains

One summer, around 1971, mom drove us back to the Grand Teton mountains. We planned a 3 day trip, hiking up a canyon into Alaska Basin, then up onto Static Peak, just south of the more photogenic Teton crags. From there it's steeply downhill, into Jackson Hole and civilization.

This began well, all four of us keeping a good pace, and we set up a creek-side camp for the night. Unheard by us, a bear snuck into our camp site. As advised, we'd hung our food high in a tree, but that clever bear snagged the rope and brought it down.

Nobody was hurt, but almost all our food disappeared. We decided to continue anyway, and live on whatever dried stuff that was left. No problem, as things turned out.

Mom was, if anything, too casual. At one point, high above Alaska Basin, I wanted to detour and see a pond near the trail. So I cut across the snowy rocks, and saw a beautiful waterfall from above, just beyond the pond's outlet. Then I circled around, and came upon a shadow-preserved snowbank, along the edge of the pond.

I decided to continue, and went sideways along the sloping snow. I knew it might give way, and had plenty of experience with icy water. But it was sturdy enough, and I got past then above the pond. I called out, and found mom and my sisters on the trail, nearby but hidden among snowy boulders.

Soon we got to Static Peak, actually more of a long ridge, and Jackson Hole spread before us, with the Wind River Mountains in the distance. I emptied out my backpack, including 2 or 3 hardcover books I'd been reading, to find a pair of binoculars.

We could see our car, about a mile below and a couple of miles eastward, while for real, the people seemed like ants. The trail down, at one point, was narrow and icy, with a drop-off to one side. (The same winding cliff which hosted the waterfall I'd seen earlier.) Thankfully we made it past there, and returned to our car a few hours later.

We visited several other scenic places, at other times, though my memory isn't always clear as to which year and which place. (As in: before or following my parent's divorce.)

EST and the Gulch

Mom had the garage turned into a bedroom for me. She didn't bother with a city permit, just left the big door on, and got a handyman friend put in an acoustic-tile ceiling. I soon decorated its two translucent-plastic light panels, on their top side, with bright colorful patterns.

That handyman was in his twenties, and had a troubled past. At one point in autumn, mom had to go somewhere for a few days, and asked him to keep an eye on us three kids. Instead he has a drug addiction relapse, and vanished, having stolen a few items from our house.

Undaunted, we kids decided to make pumpkin pie. So we selected one big pumpkin from our back yard garden and cooked it. We also got out the flour sack and made pie crust. Soon we had three delicious traditional pumpkin pies. Unlike my sisters, I ate mine in one sitting.

Doug B still lived in the area, so he'd come over sometimes. We owned a three-wheel bicycle, with a basket between its rear wheels, so friends such as Doug could ride along. Usually, facing backwards. We kids would get shopping assignments, and head a few blocks to the big grocery store on Contra Costa Blvd. We had a heavy cable lock for the bicycle, and made careful use of it.

The Carolyn Drive house was big enough to take in boarders, more reliable people, so one Pinel student teacher named Harold stayed for a short time. Next, Antioch College student teacher Peter E stayed with us for the rest of the school year. He wasn't much older than me, though it seemed like it.

My interest in spirituality continued. I wasn't old enough, perhaps not confident enough, to do much in-person visiting, so I read a lot. I enjoyed one excellent classic, John Huston's *The Religions of Man*. (Years later, I sat near him at a large event, and really should have said hello.)

I read two or three Herman Hesse novels, and a biography of Ramakrishna. Of course I read popular Christian titles, such as Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*. While openly Christian science fiction is rare, many novels feature strong religious faith, even profound discussions. This included some CS Lewis books.

Sometime around 1971, mom came across Werner Erhard's Erhard Seminars Training (a.k.a. 'EST') organization, headquartered in San Francisco. My sisters and I attended the 'third teen training' at the old Jack Tar Hotel on Van Ness, then stayed involved for several years. I learned to work with new attendees, and sometimes we volunteered at the main office. It was good discipline, and solid business training, though it was not, I now realize, particularly spiritual.

One of the main ladies in charge was European, and an open lesbian, the first such individual I'd known. The group itself became controversial, though there weren't any titanic scandals.

These days, Erhard/Rosenberg lives in Costa Rica, and his brother runs the group's successor, Landmark Education. Attendees have informed me it teaches precisely that same things as 'EST,' which I have come to regard as profound selfishness, and a subtle mockery of the divine. Yet they do have great insights into human character and relationships, also on how to live an accomplished secular life.

Erhard brought together many different scientific and eastern-faith insights. In my view, his teachings were very similar to those of Dianetics (part of Scientology), but without the space alien part.

The group also did serious charity work. The whole 'EST' spirit was quite messianic, a newer New Age outfit, especially for those practical secular yuppies who were coming up to succeed hippie spiritual seekers.

One thing I appreciated was that Erhard had close connections to local academia, and he'd sponsor speakers from the local scientific and medical organizations. I remember some doctors from UCSF, who spoke about their groundbreaking work on "left brain, right brain" mental functions.

Again like Scientology, 'EST' had a lot of celebrity support. One year, probably in December 1972, they rented a large arena for a Christmas party. (Wish I could recall more details.) John Denver was a big supporter, and he sang a few of his songs. One lady sang a bawdy song, I'm not sure but it may have been Valerie Harper. (She sounded a lot like Bette Midler.) Comedian Bill Dana performed his 'Jose Jimenez' routine, hilarious at the time, though nowadays it would've drawn angry racial activists to the man's front yard.

This kept my idealism high, and my thinking global in scope. Bigger, even, though my wish to travel to distant stars was not going to happen any time soon.

The famous science fiction author Arthur C Clarke once spoke at Contra Costa College, quite a drive from our home, but we were both fans so mom took me to see him. The event took place in an ordinary classroom, there couldn't have been more than forty people present. All quite casual, and to my everlasting regret, I was so overawed I did not say a word the whole time.

Around 1972, Clarke spoke at the then-new Exploratorium in San Francisco. Our Pinel boarder, Harold, took me. There was a large crowd, and the event quite formal, but this time I did submit a written question.

One longtime Pinel friend was a businessman named Doug O. He dealt in real estate, and later on, got

elected mayor of his town Danville. He'd bought 40 wooded acres in the northwestern corner of Mendocino County, a good 250 mile drive from the Bay Area.

He had a large wooden cabin built on the property, where a dirt road crossed its lower corner, near Thompson Creek. To the west about half a mile, the creek's source occupied half a large meadow. Past that, the land plunged into Whale Gulch, which opened into the Pacific Ocean a couple of miles to the south.

Sometimes Doug would host Pinel student and others at the cabin. When the summer of '72 approached, Doug offered mom an opportunity to stay there for the season, as he would not be using it. We eagerly accepted. Our boarder Peter E came along, and invited two (maybe three) fellow Antioch college students. One guy named Sam, also a young lady named Rita, who I best remember for her playing the cello so beautifully.

I do not know what arrangements mom made for the monthly bills, watering the lawn, picking up the mail, and so forth, back at our regular house. As a naïve and ordinarily self-centered youth, I don't think such grown-up world necessities even crossed my mind.

That region is now called the Lost Coast, and half a century ago it was far more so. Only gravel roads, and no electrical or telephone lines. No mail delivery, into our valley; and the road dead ended a mile past our cabin. Even with battery power, there was no TV reception, and only a handful of radio stations.

The cabin itself has one huge room, with a sloping shingle roof, and a second level toward the rear. A wooden ladder granted access to the upstairs, with was divided into two rooms. Below those were two more rooms, generally used as sleeping quarters.

The forward part of the main area (toward the north) had a kitchen on one side, and a huge stone fireplace on the other. On the west, a smaller wing held a bathroom and a sauna room, with its own little wood stove.

One feature that set the place apart, and represented an old rural tradition, was a big outdoor propane tank. Those gas service companies, with big rugged tanker trucks, will fill a propane tank for even the most remote cabin.

That propane enabled three helpful appliances: an old refrigerator, a water heater, and a four burner stove. I learned how to fix all of these, as necessary. Later, I extended the gas line and put in a bright gas lamp, above the sink. Otherwise, we used kerosine lamps.

Water came from a spring, clear across the property, in (an otherwise dry in summer) creek bed on a steep hillside. The pipe was flexible, ¾ inch, black plastic, of a type popular in rural water systems. The pipe lay along the ground, and was about a third of a mile long. Without much of a demand, there wasn't even a water tank! I cannot recall running short of water, any time that summer. (Later, I'd engage in a major water supply project.)

Having abundant hot water allowed for a shower, which was outside, just west of the cabin atop a wooden platform. That was it, plain and simple. It became quite popular, and we placed a can, so that neighbors with a plainer cabin could donate toward more propane. Modest individuals need not apply.

The main coastal highway, the famously scenic state Highway One, curves inland north of Fort Bragg, and US highway 101 doesn't touch the coast until many miles north, at Ferndale. The main north-south road is gravel, called the Usal Road, and (then and now) it's mainly utilized by logging companies and brave tourists. Head inland from the desolate Usal Junction, a crossroad a couple miles southward from Thompson Creek, and you swing northeast along the Mattole River headwaters, coming to tiny Whitethorn.

That town, across the line in Humboldt County, hosted the nearest post office, and a small grocery store. At the south end of town stood a lumber mill, already disused and rusting away. (And this was before the spotted owl controversy.) There is also a monastery for Catholic nuns, which I would only visit once, a couple of years later under dramatic circumstances.

Turn west from the Usal Junction instead, and you wind down to a black sand beach. An old wooden house, then a private residence, is now the offices of a state park.

Head north on the Usal Road, and take a left at the paved road, you get to an old, low-key development called Shelter Cove. It has no serious harbor, but a nice beach. Inland on that road, about 20 miles, you get to the twin towns of Redway and Garberville.

The scenery is awesome, with steep forested mountains all the way from the Trinity Alps neat Mount

Shasta, to (on the west side of the Gulch), Queen Peak overlooking the ocean. That ridge, maybe a thousand feet high, gets up to 200 inches of winter rain!

Logging kick-started the area. I didn't know the history then, but the peaceful Indian tribes had been cruelly routed, the survivors sent to a few reservations such as Hoopa and Round Valley. (It was too far north for the Gold Rush.)

A man named McKee came to own thousands of acres, and logged it of redwoods, but mostly huge old Douglas fir trees, then subdivided the land for settlement.

So the whole landscape was bisected by logging roads, however with that heavy winter rainfall, washouts soon formed. Thanks to the fertile soil, except in the hardest-pounded areas, the meadows and forest immediately began their stages of re-growth. Flowers and ferns, also whitethorn and huckleberry shrubs, along with alder and oak trees, sprouted very quickly.

There had also, as I now understand, been very heavy hunting by the old timers. Wildlife was scarce, and we would not see any deer or even raccoons, much less bears. Still, it was peaceful and quiet, a welcome change from the suburbs.

There were still Indians around, though we did not know any. One native elder taught our Whale Gulch neighbor Ray Raphael a lot, and he in turn showed us newcomers. I learned about many plants, like what was tasty, or beautiful, or medicinal, or used for crafts, or poisonous. We could prepare tasty herb tea by gathering within a few hundred feet of our front door.

We became good friends with our neighbors by the meadow, Peter and Nancy, with their two small girls Anna and Jessica. They had a real settlement going, with a garden and chickens and more. Gradually they expanded their house, and it was featured in a 1973 book called *Handmade Houses, a Guide to the Woodbutcher's Art*, by Boericke and Shapiro. (Much later I heard some good-natured grumbling, as the book credited "the guys" for these awesome hand-built homes, when in fact Nancy and other ladies had done plenty of the work.)

The culture became very unusual, and is the subject of books such as *An Everyday History of Somewhere*, written by Ray Raphael. Perhaps unanticipated by McKee and his logger buddies, the New Age and hippie movements were peaking, and a lot of people sought to "get back to the land" just as his properties went on sale.

So there was an influx of long haired, left-leaning, marijuana growing, skimpy-clothes wearing, hippie types; looking for a simple non-consumerist life. This shocked and offended the area's old timers, and a low grade tension built up. This was not evident to we summer vacationists, but later we'd get right in the middle of it.

As the years passed, the hippies "won," coming to dominate local culture and politics. Power and phone, then internet, lines went into Whale Gulch and the Thompson Creek valley. Fortunes were made, by selling illegal marijuana and such, so many of the hippies who remained could afford big houses and bigger toys. Go figure!

We stayed at least two months, and for me (and, I think, everyone) it was an idyllic summer.