

## A Fall Chicken Takes a Hike

August 13, 2025. The first couple of miles weren't bad. I was doing OK until the trail began to ascend steeply about three miles in. A glance at my watch indicated a heart rate of 150 beats a minute. I was struggling to breathe. I kept going for as long as I possibly could but there came a time when I could go no farther. It was clear to my backpacking buddies that I was in distress. I felt my pulse. 1-2-3-4-5 pause 1-2-3-4 pause 1-2-3-4-5-6-7 pause..... "I'm in afib," I panted. "I just need ..... to rest a bit. When I do the..... stadium stairs, my ..... heart rate goes to 125 or so. .... I can go on and on at that pace. But 150 beats a minute ..... is too fast for me to sustain."

At sixty-eight years old, I'm no spring chicken. I've completely recovered from a mild stroke in July 2023. I've mostly recovered from breaking five ribs when I fell from a motorcycle in Peru in July 2024. Daily I am reminded that failing to follow the surgeon's orders to take four weeks off to recover from a radical robotic prostatectomy in February 2021 has resulted in stress incontinence. That doesn't mean I urinate involuntarily when I am anxious or worried. It does mean that when I walk or lean over or twist my body, urine dribbles out. For about a year after that surgery, I wore Depends instead of boxers or briefs. Gradually, the situation has improved so that these days I get by with absorbent pads that can be changed far more easily. I think I've reached the end of improvement. Leakage will be a lifelong phenomenon.

Several years ago I was diagnosed with hypertrophic obstructive cardiomyopathy (HOCM) which means my heart muscle is so thick that it interferes with effective pumping. Every time my heart beats and attempts to squirt blood into my aorta, the exit from that heart chamber gets squeezed to the point where it is difficult to push the blood past the obstruction. That means the heart must do more work with every beat. Like muscles in arms and legs that grow bigger with frequent exertion, the heart muscle grows even thicker, which makes the obstruction even worse. Yikes!

The situation was compounded when I developed atrial fibrillation. Unlike some people who can maintain fairly normal activity during their bouts of afib, my version leaves me short of breath and unable to do much other than sit in my

recliner. My afib gradually got so debilitating that I agreed to a surgery during which those misbehaving cells in my heart that were responsible for afib were frozen to death. The fancy term is cryoablation. The surgeon who performed my cryoablation in June of 2021 was a former student of mine at Wofford College. He did a really good job, but over time, episodes of afib returned. I don't get all worked up about them. I just have to sit a while. I'm OK by the next morning. Dr. O'Quinn assured me that afib won't kill me. I trust him and believe him.

Another thing: I have sleep apnea. In essence, my snoring got so bad that I'd stop breathing for a while. You can't get a good night's rest if you have sleep apnea because when you stop breathing for a few seconds, you wake up, but not completely. Since 2016, my sleep apnea has been treated effectively with a little machine called a CPAP that pressurizes air through a face mask to keep my airways open whether I'm inhaling or exhaling while asleep. Snoring is eliminated and I sleep much better.

With all these medical issues, like I said, I'm no spring chicken. Nor am I a summer chicken. Clearly I'm past my prime. I reckon I'm a fall chicken these days. Perhaps I'll live long enough to be a winter chicken.

The good news is that I have no trouble with my hips or knees like many people my age. I routinely walk up and down stadium stairs for 45-50 minutes several times a week or I'll stroll through my neighborhood on a three mile walk that takes right at an hour. I want to stay in decent shape so that I can go on outdoor adventures including wilderness backpacking with my good buddy Peter who introduced me to the pleasures of camping at high altitude in the Rocky Mountains a couple of decades ago. I've lost track of the many places Peter and I and several of his high school buddies from Idaho Falls have backpacked. We've been in the Beartooth Mountains of Montana, the Wind River Range in Wyoming, the Sawtooths in Idaho, the Cascades in Washington, and the Sierras in California.

### **A Typical Wilderness Backpacking Adventure**

Peter has a strong preference for backpacking trips of 30 or 40 miles through high country. We like to depart from a trailhead and pursue a route that ends at a different trailhead. Sometimes we hike a loop where we end up at the same trailhead from which we started. We're seeing new scenery all along the loop.

Peter and our pals Dan and John, all of them five years older than me, love these extended backpacking trips. In late July or August when the trails are free of snow, we'll gather at a trailhead. We double-check our packs before setting off in the early afternoon on the trail to our first campsite. We often gain a lot of altitude with packs that are laden with enough food to propel us through four to seven days in the wilderness. The first day is usually a struggle for me. The misery of going uphill for several miles from a trailhead unacclimated to thin air at 6000 ft elevation or higher while lugging backpack weighing 30-40 pounds is offset by the anticipation of exploring a wilderness with scenery that is impossible to capture in a photograph.

At each camp, our routine is to set up our lightweight one or two-man tents, filter some water from a nearby lake or stream, sit on some logs or our bear cannisters, and boil enough water on our tiny camp stoves to hydrate our freeze-dried Mountain House dinners. We sit around fondly recalling previous hikes. We give updates on family members and our projects. The last thing before slipping into our tents is to have a cup of Swiss Miss hot chocolate. Peter calls this important ritual "making a memory."

Even though I have a lightweight sleeping bag and an insulated air mattress, I don't sleep well at altitude. Our first night could be anywhere from 5000 to 8000 feet. Without my CPAP I snore impressively and wake myself (and sometimes my buddies) multiple times during the night. They've learned to pitch their tents far from mine.

When daylight finally comes, I'm usually the first one out. I'll retrieve the food bags which have been hung from a tree branch to be inaccessible to any bears which might be around. Or, if we're above the tree line in bear country, I'll fetch my bear cannister and use it as a camp stool. I'll fire up the camp stove and have water ready for coffee and oatmeal when my pals emerge from their tents. Most mornings when the early light is dramatic, Peter and I go out on solo photo expeditions before coffee and breakfast.

We're not usually in a hurry to take down the tents, stuff everything into our backpacks and embark on the trail. We have a destination in mind for our next campsite based on distance (4-8 miles) and the difficulty as indicated by the

spacing of contour lines on the topographic maps that we consult throughout the trip.

If John Long is on the trip, he always takes the lead. He goes at a consistent pace, whether it is uphill or downhill and pushes on regardless of the terrain. After about an hour, he finds a scenic and/or interesting and/or sunny or shady place to stop and rest for 10 or 15 minutes. We recline on our backpacks or lean against a boulder or fallen tree if there are any. Of course, we'll chat, sip water, munch on some nuts or suck on some dehydrated fruit. Then we hoist our packs, adjust the waist belt so that our shoulder straps are comfortable, and head on up (or down) the trail in anticipation of lunch.

John and Peter are choosy when it comes to a lunch spot. They like a good view and something to lean against. Lunch is typically peanut butter smeared on a tortilla, a slice of summer sausage, a slab of cheese, maybe some mixed nuts, raisins, or a Cliff bar. All is washed down with swigs of water that we pumped and filtered before we left camp. For some of us, lunch is followed by a nap of 30 minutes or so. My boots are off so my sweaty feet can breathe. I tilt my hat to shade my face, and within a few minutes I blissfully lose consciousness. Somehow, we all manage to rouse ourselves somewhat synchronously. After a brief consultation with the topo map to confirm our progress and confirm our destination, we shoulder the packs again and set off, hiking for hourly intervals interrupted by brief rest stops until we approach the location we envisioned for camping.

I love to watch John and Peter at this time of day. They meticulously evaluate the slope of the land, the proximity of water, and the suitability of any logs that might serve for seating around the "kitchen" which materializes when we set up our camp stoves and unpack our food bags. They anticipate the direction of sunrise so their tents can be warmed by those early rays. For them, selecting a camp site is a serious commitment. There have been times when a site does not meet their standard, so we push on a bit further to find a place worthy of our exertion. It makes me very happy when the first place we consider is deemed suitable.

A subtle nod of the head or "This looks good," is a great relief to me. That heavy pack comes off for the last time until morning. I'll look around for a flat piece of earth devoid of roots and rocks far enough away from my colleagues to avoid

disturbing them during the night. I pitch my tent so that the zippered “door” faces our prospective “kitchen.” If we’ve chosen well my first view in the morning will be a majestic peak bathed in yellow light mirrored in the still waters of an alpine lake.

Once the tents are up, there’s often time to explore before supper. We scatter in all directions, each of us pursuing scenic solitude. We converge before sunset. We’ve learned by experience to set a rope to hang our food bags before it gets dark. This means securing a rock to the end of some parachute cord, tossing the rock over a sturdy limb of a tree located far enough from the campsite so that if bears or other critters come to investigate, we will be safe. One or two of us return in darkness after we’ve “made a memory.” In the narrow light of our headlamps, we tie our food bags to the end with the rock and pull those bags 10-15 feet above the ground. The free end of the rope is tied so that our sustenance remains safely suspended.

So you’re thinking, what about a toilet? Well, that is an issue. The proper thing to do for a “Number Two” is to dig a hole about six inches deep. I have an orange plastic spade for the task. I’ll go far enough away to be out of sight and scent of the tents. The soil is hard, rocky, and often rooty. Digging is difficult but not impossible. I’ll hover over the target, but my butthole must not be where I think it is. I often miss but my aim improves with each day we are out there. Some of my hiking buddies can go days between pooping which some refer to as “moving some mud.” Not me. I play at least one movement of the Mountain House Symphony each day.

And so it goes, day after satisfying day. A breakfast in chilly air while the sun promises warmth. Coffee and conversation. Eventually, there is an unspoken agreement that the time has come to pack up and move on. Each day is another day in paradise as we move at a pace slow enough to savor the sky and clouds, the mountains, lakes and streams, and the wildflowers. Each day concludes with hot chocolate. One or two of us make the short trek in the darkness to hang the food bags or leave our bear cannisters. Inside my tiny tent, sleep comes quickly to my weary body and mind, both of which are happy to be in this place.

If this description of wilderness backpacking doesn’t sound like something you’d enjoy, that’s OK. My Daddy and many others never understood why I was so eager to experience deprivation and discomfort in exchange for being in places that

can only be reached by self-propulsion. I know many people who enjoy golf or tennis. Those hold little appeal for me. Yet I'm grateful for people who pursue those diversions. They aren't claiming precious parking spots at the trail head or crowding the trails or competing for the best campsites. And I'm not competing for their tee times or court reservations. Fair enough!

The last day of a backpacking trip is bittersweet. By then, our bodies have adjusted to the altitude and exertion. Our packs are lighter because, if we planned well, we run out of food just before we reach the trailhead. The hike out is less of a struggle because it is mostly downhill. The air becomes incrementally thicker. Each stride is assisted by the pull of gravity.

There is a tremendous sense of accomplishment when we arrive at the trailhead and shed our packs for the final time. Sometimes we get a snapshot of the group. Not the type for overt expressions of fondness, we self-consciously give each other manly hugs and appreciative grins. I have the answer to my unspoken concern from the onset of every trip: "Can I do this?" My grimy body, a few pounds lighter by now, confirms "Yes, I can." I have a personal sense of triumph as I quietly congratulate myself with an affirming, "I did that! I've still got what it takes!"

We know what lies ahead in the next few hours. We'll find a restaurant, wolf down a hearty meal, perhaps preceded by a salad, and swig a chilly brew. We drink water we didn't have to filter. There is the extravagance of ice! Our next priority is to shower away the dust and sweat of a satisfying expedition.

This was our routine for many years when I believed I was, if not a spring chicken, a summer chicken. But it changed several years ago when Dusty Dave Whisnant joined our jolly group for the first time for a wilderness backpacking trip in the Sawtooths.

### **Hiking with Dusty**

Dusty was several years older than us. Even after his diagnosis of Parkinsonism and in response to that diagnosis, he kept himself in good shape by walking five miles or more almost daily. He prepped for this adventure by loading his backpack for brisk walks through his Spartanburg neighborhood. He did this for months prior to our trip. But on the first day, he was exhausted before we reached our destination at the Cramer Lakes about 10 miles from the trailhead at the Redfish

Lake Inlet. Somewhere along that trail which ascends about 1700 feet, Dusty simply couldn't carry on without assistance. At a conclave on the trail it was decided that Peter and another strong hiker would go at a quick pace to the campsite a mile or so ahead, empty their packs, and return so that Dusty could be relieved of some of the contents of his pack for the last segment of the hike. That's what happened.

During supper that night, Dusty stated that he wasn't up for the remainder of the hike that Peter had planned, which called for making a big loop of about 40 strenuous miles, some of them "off trail." Like Dusty, my struggle to reach the campsite had gone beyond being an enjoyable hike to a seemingly endless series of switchbacks. I volunteered to be Dusty's partner for the rest of the trip. Peter devised a plan for Dusty and me. We would hike with our group as far as we felt like it the next morning and turn around when we'd had enough. For me, that turned out to be the Cramer Divide (9400 ft) where we sat for a nice lunch. Peter and the rest disappeared over the Divide. I hiked back through what felt like a lunar landscape to a tainn where Dusty waited for me. The two of us had a very pleasant second night at Cramer Lakes. We roamed around the lake with our Nikon cameras, gleefully collecting photons in that superb setting.

The next morning Dusty and I descended about eight miles to the boat dock at Redfish Lake. We caught a boat back to Redfish Lodge where we enjoyed a beer and a burger. Peter had given us the keys to his van and several suggestions of hikes we might pursue in the region around Stanley while he and the others continued their loop hike.

Peter had recommended that we hike to Fourth of July Lake in the White Cloud Mountains across the valley. This turned out to be a manageable 2.2 mile trail gaining only 700 feet in elevation (1). We had that spectacular lake with the strange name to ourselves. Next morning after breakfast, we hid a couple of beers in a rocky stream and put only what we needed into our backpacks for an ascent to the ridge above Antz Basin. Dusty led at a pace that he found comfortable. We reached the steep ridge above Antz Basin by lunchtime. Dusty waited there while I "bagged" Blackmon Peak at 10,307 ft. (2) It is marvelous to be on the very peak of a mountain with absolutely no obstructed views. I could barely see Dusty far away and far below. The return to the campsite at Fourth of July Lake was all downhill.

We celebrated our fine day with two canned beers from the stream. They weren't nearly as cold as we'd imagined they would be, but they were beers and we were backpackers and we were happy!

After camping three nights at Fourth of July Lake, we drove into the tiny town of Stanley where we rented a tiny cabin with a shower. We ate restaurant food. We slept in beds. We ate eggs and bagels for breakfast and drank strong coffee out of thick glass mugs. In that state of satiation, we drove north out of Stanley per Peter's recommendation to the trailhead for Alpine Lake. We covered 3.8 miles to Alpine Lake. We established a campsite on a huge boulder towering over the lake early in the afternoon. It is good thing we arrived when we did because many other backpackers appeared throughout the afternoon, claiming each of the scattered campsites, all of them inferior to ours. Our plan for the next day was a day hike to Sawtooth Lake which meant ascending steep switchbacks for about a mile. Meanwhile we had an entire afternoon to relax. We reclined on our massive overlook. We napped. We munched on cheese and summer sausage and trail mix. We squandered hour after hour with nothing to do and nowhere to go. I had never experienced such profound peace and contentment in my life until that afternoon. That was the first time I remember having absolutely nothing to do and nowhere to go. I watched as the sun ebbed lower in the sky, pushing shadows further up the mountain slope across the glimmering lake.

Next morning with packs containing only lunch, water, and raingear, Dusty and I hiked to the splendid Sawtooth Lake (8435 ft). We ate lunch as we reclined on a pile of logs with a most memorable view of Sawtooth Lake. After a second night at Alpine Lake, we drove back to Stanley for burgers and beer. In lieu of a shower, we took a long dip in Sunbeam Hot Springs, a popular destination along the Salmon River where anyone can pull off the road and scramble down a steep embankment to pools where boiling hot water mixes with the cold water of the Salmon River. People soak there, periodically rearranging the rocks that form the permeable margins of each pool so that the water temperature approaches their ideal.

Dusty and I spent a few more leisurely days camping and hiking before we returned to meet our party back at Redfish Lodge. Dusty and I had discovered our preferred mode of wilderness adventure: hike in and up for a couple of miles to a

scenic lake, establish a campsite where we'd stay a few nights, do some day hikes with light packs, and then drive into town for food (usually high in cholesterol), cold beverages (often an icy IPA), and a shower (not always a hot one.) I named this "Alcohol-Cholesterol Hiking" and have been a strong proponent since its inception.

A few summers later, I planned a trip for Dusty and myself. By then, Dusty was over 70 years old. I think he really appreciated me organizing several Alcohol-Cholesterol Hikes that were not too strenuous for the two of us yet got us to isolated places like Ruffneck Peak (9407 ft) in the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness and Titus Lake (8920 ft) near the Galena Pass at the head of the Sawtooth Valley. I remember thinking to myself, "I hope somebody will be a compassionate hiking partner for me when I am seventy."

### **Hikes with Tom and Phillip**

As my confidence grew, I arranged for a hiking adventure in the Sawtooths and White Clouds with my brother-in-law Tom, who, like me on my first wilderness backpacking adventure started off with excessive gear. One of the great satisfactions and challenges of wilderness backpacking is to carry only what you need. If you've packed well, during any 24-hour period, you'll use everything except emergency and first aid items. If the weather is dry, you won't need your lightweight raincoat and rain pants, but you might put them on as another insulating layer if the air is chilly at supertime or breakfast. I convinced Tom that he wouldn't need many of the things he had packed. He reluctantly left them in the rental van but eventually admitted that I had been correct. Tom loved our hikes to Hellroaring Lake and Fourth of July Lake, each separated by meals in Stanley with showers. He had a strong affinity for my Alcohol-Cholesterol Style Backpacking.

A summer finally came when my son Phillip and I could take a hike together in the Sawtooths. We did Alcohol-Cholesterol hikes to Fourth of July, Alpine and Sawtooth, and Cramer Lakes. I watched with pride as Phillip easily bagged Blackmon Peak. I joined him on that summit a little while later. We celebrated with selfies. This was the first summer after my prostatectomy. I was still wearing those cumbersome Depends. Phillip dealt decisively with that problem. Each night, he'd build a campfire large enough to burn those soggy diapers so I wouldn't have to carry them.

## **The New Normal: A Recent Hike with Peter, Dan, and David**

I was in my forties when I first started hiking with Peter. This was before the sleep apnea, prostatectomy, HOCM, atrial fibrillation, cryoablation, a stroke, and five broken ribs. These accumulated infirmities place limits on what I can comfortably and confidently do in the wilderness. After missing several summer hikes with medical issues, I was eager to join Peter for a hike in August 2025. Peter arranged for our friend Dan and Dan's 35-year-old son David to meet us in Packwood, Washington. Dan, a high school classmate of Peter's, has recently undergone two stem cell injections in his left knee. Even after this intervention, hiking downhill is painful for Dan. Dan asked Peter to plan a hike less ambitious than usual so all of us could have a pleasant outdoor adventure together. Peter chose The Goat Rocks Wilderness in the Cascade Range near Packwood, Washington.

After coffee and a breakfast muffin in Packwood, we drove an hour or so along gravel roads to the trail head. Each of us had packed carefully in advance so we hoisted the packs and off we went. It was a beautiful sunny Wednesday. Our tentative destination was about four miles in and about 900 ft up. We had provisions for four nights.

In preparation for this hike, I had been "doing stadium stairs" for weeks. I push myself to go for about a mile and a half with 1900 feet of elevation change (950 feet ascending stairs and 950 ft descending.) I manage to do this comfortably, but Spartanburg is only 700 feet above sea level, and a backpack is not part of the equation. Even though we are gaining only 900 feet to get to campsite, here we are a bit over 5000 feet. I'm hauling about 30 pounds or so in my pack plus two liters of water. I had to admit that, like Dusty so many years ago, no amount of advance preparation can convert a fall chicken to spring chicken. I slipped into afib.

Dan and Peter were clearly concerned about me. "What can be done about the afib?" they asked.

"It usually resolves .... on its own. I'll probably be fine .... in the morning," I panted. "We must be close ..... to the campsite..... so we don't have to .... be in a big hurry," I proposed, trying to project optimism. "Don't worry.... My cardiologist says 'Afib won't kill me.'" He might be right.

After a few minutes, my breathing slowed as did my heart rate but my pulse was still irregular. When I was sufficiently rested, we resumed the hike. Sure enough, we found a campsite about a mile away. I watched again as Peter evaluated the setting and was relieved when he pronounced it acceptable. I sensed that had I been in better condition, he would have kept searching for a better site. I was grateful that he deemed this place good enough. In my state of fatigue, I didn't select my tent site well, so for the next four nights, I slept on a cattywampus slope.

My pack was heavier than usual for a four-night trip. This was the first time I brought a portable CPAP. It required a two-and-a-half-pound battery. According to the literature, that battery should give me three nights on the CPAP. Those claims were true. I got three really good restful nights of sleep there at almost 6000 feet elevation. On the fourth night with the battery drained. I slept fitfully without the CPAP. Lesson learned! Even though the CPAP and battery are heavy, the tradeoff is worth it if I can sleep well. Those items will be with me on future wilderness backpacking trips.

We enjoyed our Mountain House Happy Meals after it got dark. We made a memory before turning in. I thought to myself, "The most difficult day of this trip is behind me!" The next three days will be day hikes with light packs along the most scenic portion of the Pacific Crest Trail in Washington. We are in the Goat Rocks Wilderness! On my most recent backpacking trip four years ago, we had done a thirty-mile hike from Walupt Lake to White Pass that included this segment. I knew from experience that we were in for some terrific scenery.

Thursday was a fine day. We hiked a mile to the junction of the PCT, turned south and contoured around the treeless expanse of Cispus Basin until we reached Cispus Pass (6400 feet) where we had lunch and I got my usual nap. On the way back to camp, Dan, David and I had plenty of time to soak our feet in the chilly headwaters of the Cispus River. Freebird, a solo through-hiker, sang as she played her ukulele on a boulder just above us.

Friday was a day like no other I've had on any of these hikes. There was no morning sun. Only mist and fog. Or was it rain? Visibility was pitiful. Everything was damp. We lingered at the campsite until 11 am, hoping for better weather which never came so we set out in our rain gear, this time turning north at the junction with the PCT, ascending to Snowgrass Flats which is famous for

exuberant blooms of wildflowers. We trudged along in the mist and rain. We noticed several very nice campsites just off the trail. We promised ourselves to use one of these on our next trip to the Goat Rocks.

At the next trail junction, we huddled under a clump of trees for lunch. The rain was steady now. The situation was not conducive for a nap. In fact, it was so miserable that Dan and David decided to go back to the campsite. Not wanting to disappoint Peter, the two of us pushed on for a little while until we entered a boulder field that suggested just enough shelter from the wind and rain for us to attempt a nap. I managed to get my head and shoulders far enough under a sharp boulder to keep those body parts dry. I got a decent 30-minute nap. Peter and I woke up about the same time. We slogged further along the wet trail until we reached a stream. It was there in the misty rain which limited our view to maybe 50 yards that Peter lamented, "It makes you wonder what's the point?" Such welcome words for me. I cheerfully responded with, "If this is as far as we go today, that's fine. We can really take our time getting back to the campsite. There's nothing else to do. We may as well go slow and enjoy what we can."

Almost immediately after we turned back, we saw a most unusual rock formation consisting of hundreds of small slabs perfectly interlaced. It took on a very different appearance when wet. A little further we stopped so that Peter could get good pictures of a fractured boulder with beautiful curving planes. And then we noticed the most magical thing of all. On the brilliant green leaves of low-lying lupines, beads of water lined up in transparent spheres. Where those leaves converged on the stem, a huge drop of water sat. Through it, one could see tiny green lines corresponding to the stems. This gave the illusion of a magnificent multifaceted diamond. Neither of us had ever seen anything like this. Peter worked his big Nikon camera to get photos while I used the last of the battery power in my cell phone to record these aquatic miracles.

Why we had never seen these water formations before? The surface tension of water causes it to bead up on a waxed surface. I hypothesized that tiny droplets of mist on these leaves merged into larger and larger drops which eventually coalesced into those huge but fragile jewels in the center. I speculated that typical raindrops splattering on the leaves would not permit such large water droplets to form by this delicate incremental process. I realized that perhaps only under these

conditions of mist could such beautiful drops form. Such a unique visual reward for hiking in these less-than perfect conditions!

We encountered several through-hikers who had begun their hike on the PCT in April or May at the California-Mexico border. Yesterday along the Cispus Basin under ideal conditions, we chatted with Freebird, Freight-train, and Snack. They aspired to reach the end of the trail at the Canadian border before snowy weather would force them to abandon their quest. I felt genuine sadness for those through hikers who had the great misfortune to be passing through the Goat Rocks Wilderness on this rainy misty day when visibility was so shallow. I tried to imagine their disappointment, having long anticipated this segment as one of the highlights of their thru-hike and said to be the best in all of Washington. Even if they could access reliable weather forecasts from the PCT, would they be willing to jeopardize their chance of completing their epic journey by waiting for better conditions to hike through wildflower meadows of Snowgrass Flats and the jagged ridge-line trail of the Knife Edge?

By the time Peter and I arrived back at the campsite, I was shivering. The shoulder straps of my backpack had compromised the waterproofing of my raincoat. Water had penetrated and soaked my down jacket. My hiking shoes and socks were saturated. The sun had neglected us for the entire day. So here we were in this soggy state. Even if campfires were allowed at this site, it would be very challenging to get a fire going with wet wood. We muddled through supper in a light rain, after which I chose not to have a cup of hot chocolate. I would have welcomed its warmth and sweetness, but I had no spare packs. I convinced myself that hot chocolate in the morning would be more invigorating than hot chocolate now so I didn't "make a memory" with my pals that night. But I'd certainly had a memorable day with the discovery of aquatic jewels on those lupine leaves.

It rained hard during the night. I was awakened several times by drops pelting the rainfly of my tent. Inside I was dry and comfortable and hopeful that the rain would end soon. As a gray Saturday dawned, the rain subsided. We emerged from our tents and gathered for coffee and oatmeal. My decision to delay my hot chocolate until morning proved to be a good one. Midmorning the clouds parted just enough to permit sunlight to shine on logs nearby. We took advantage of this opportunity to dry out our wet gear, clothing and shoes.

As we waited impatiently for evaporation, I challenged my companions with a question. “What would be the most ridiculous item to have at this wilderness campsite?” I had already given this some thought. “My first thought was a pool table, but now I’m thinking a pinball machine!” How absurd! Either would have to be helicoptered in. It would be challenging to find a level space for a pool table. The pinball machine would need electricity. The flashing lights and arcade sounds would be so dissonant in this environment. I was quite pleased with my choices, but my pride was shattered when Peter suggested, “A treadmill.” Who would hike four miles uphill with a heavy pack to get on a treadmill where electric-assisted walking takes you nowhere? I immediately conceded. Peter’s victory was so devastating that neither David nor Dan dared to reply.

By noon the feeble sun had dried our gear just enough for us to venture forth. Again we headed north on the PCT and broke for lunch at the junction with the Snowgrass Flats Trail. After lunch, Dan and David marched on while Peter and I got our naps in the bright sun. A little while later, we found Dan perched on a mighty overlook searching for wildlife with his binoculars. He studied a pair of golden marmots frolicking nearby. Peter and I strolled past the boulder field where we napped yesterday. Peter paused to make photographs. I kept going. I lost sight of him by the time I reached the stream where we had turned back yesterday in the rain. The sun and the vast scenery beckoned me onward toward what had been our ultimate goal for this trip: the Knife Edge.

Peter, Dan and I had traversed the Knife Edge four years ago. It had been the highlight and high point of that trek. When planning this trip, Peter anticipated crossing the Knife Edge twice in one day hike, once going northbound and then returning southbound. Alas, we were running out of time. It soon became obvious that neither of us would get to the Knife Edge today. Even so, I kept going until, coming across a rise, I was treated to a fantastic view of Goat Lake (6420 ft). I knew this would be as far as I’d go today, so I stood there alone for many minutes, savoring the view and my achievement. When I had stayed as long as I dared, I headed south again along the PCT. After less than a mile, I met Peter, coming in my direction. Peter remembered the view of Goat Lake from four years ago. It is only 20 minutes behind me. Together we returned to that vista. As we took it all in, David appeared on the trail above us. He had made it as far as the Packwood Glacier before turning around. The weather was threatening across the crest. Dark

clouds churned up the eastern slope. David took off southbound to rejoin his dad. Peter and I followed at a slower pace, pleased that we had seen Goat Lake before time and threatening weather forced us to turn back.

Of course we were disappointed not to have crossed the Knife Edge, but we were confident that we had the stamina to do it had conditions allowed. That was a good feeling for me.

As usual, our Last Supper was a celebratory feast. Dan produced a tin of smoked oysters! With only the four-mile hike to the trailhead tomorrow, I could eat without fear of running out of food. The threat of rain was diminished. After an overcast start, the day ended sunny and swell. We anticipated an easy descent to the vehicles in the morning.

Alas, my hike back to the parking lot became increasingly uncomfortable. Sure, I was acclimated to the altitude and exertion, but my backpack was heavier now than when we first walked in. The reason: Those absorbent pads for my stress incontinence! Throughout the trip, I stowed the used ones under the rainfly outside my tent. On the night it rained, they absorbed to full capacity, each one becoming a saturated swollen sack. I stuffed them into a garbage bag inside my backpack. It was like carrying a bag of honeydew melons for four miles. By the time we reached the parking lot, my lower back ached fiercely. Lesson learned! Next trip those pads will accumulate inside a garbage bag where the only moisture they absorb is the dribble from a happy well-hydrated hiker.

I was delighted when this hike met the final requirement to be classified as Alcohol-Cholesterol Hike. That distinction was justified as the four of us sipped beer and ate tacos at Packwood Brewing Company.

Dan and I thanked Peter for planning such a pleasant hike that took into account our limitations yet provided just the right combination of physical challenge and scenic serenity. It was a pleasure to have young David along. He provided stories from his career as a ballet dancer with companies in Richmond and Calgary, his time as barista at Starbucks, and his plans to establish a beachhead for his family in New Zealand to escape the crazy politics in Washington, DC and elsewhere that threaten America's democracy. It was reassuring to know that there was spring

chicken among us who could quickly seek help on our behalf should that become necessary.

### **Dealing with the “What If’s.....” and “What’s Next?”**

Even for spring chickens, there’s always the possibility of misfortune: a sprained ankle, getting lost, *Giardia* or some other water-born illness, miserable weather including the possibility of lightning and snow even during the summer at these elevations, a bear encounter, an equipment failure such as a camp stove that doesn’t work, a water filter that quits, a tent and/or air mattress that leaks, and so on. I bet you can easily extend the list using your imagination.

We fall chickens must rely on knees and hips and backbones rendered less resilient by decades of everyday life. Some of us must deal with sleep apnea and stress incontinence. There’s the additional threat of going into afib or worse, a heart attack or a stroke. A reasonable person would consider all these “what if’s” together with the deprivation and discomfort and expense associated with being away from home, and conclude, “Wilderness backpacking is not for me.” I can understand that choice. I don’t think I can convince those people, including my very rational Daddy, that days and nights in the wilderness with my friends are worth all the risks. I choose not to be immobilized by fear.

I very much look forward to being a fall chicken again during future summers with my friends in the Cascades or Sierras or Beartooths or wherever we can ascend to thin air and the exhilaration of expansive vistas. I especially anticipate a trip to the Goat Rocks Wilderness with my son Phillip in the summer of 2027 when I’ll be 70. Perhaps he will encourage me the way I encouraged Dusty in days gone by. I want Phillip to see The Goat Rocks with me. It’ll be glorious to venture again into the wilderness with my spring chicken son! I hope to do the Knife Edge together, but even if we don’t or can’t, I eagerly anticipate another fine father-son adventure where we carry everything we need, and nothing we don’t. Of course, will bring Swiss Miss hot chocolate, but we don’t really need that to make a memory.

Onward,

GR Davis Jr

5 October 2025

- (1) I like to record distances and elevation changes, days and durations, and other data that many people consider superfluous. I include those numbers here to remind myself of the particulars of a hike, and with hopes that someday someone might find this information useful as they plan a hike.
- (2) A peakbagger is a hiker, climber or mountaineer who attempts to reach the summit of mountains, peaks or hills. I don't consider myself a peakbagger, but I do like keeping track of the higher elevations that I've attained. I apologize for including elevations in this account, but I'm a numbers guy like my Daddy, who calculated his gas mileage every time he refueled. For each vehicle, the gas mileage varied over a narrow range. Boring. At least my list of peaks summited is more varied, and to me, at least, more interesting.