

Two Climbs

by Gerry Rising

Everyone who has climbed in the Adirondacks has stories to tell. I certainly have many. Making my way from the peak of Street to Nye through a dense cloud. Racing down Allen to beat rapidly progressing hypothermia. Wondering just how many more ridges I had to mount before I would reach the top of Couchsaraga. Climbing up ice-coated Skylight against a trail-filling waterfall trying to sweep the legs out from under me. One April watching a climber come down from Lower Wolfjaw, shed his clothes at the side of John's Brook and sit down in the middle of the stream to bathe. That same night listening to saw-whet owls exchange whistles.

Those were great times, many of them far more comfortable in the retelling than in the experiencing, but two hikes stand out in my mind. Both involve family. I'll tell you about them.

But I preface these early 1960s episodes by telling you that in those days I weighed 65 pounds more than I do now. I had been a football coach for eleven years and at the end of each season when I no longer exercised on the playing field I would add another four or five pounds. By then I was in about as bad physical shape as I am now 55 years later.

In any case on the first of those climbs I went with my older brother. You must realize that my brother and I come from opposite ends of the universe. He is a patient ditherer who could – and does – spend hours on any project. I on the other hand have the patience of a four-year-old. Vern has always been the athlete of our family; I remain a wannabe. At the time of our outing he weighed 145; I weighed 235. We could have been taken as Laurel and Hardy.

We set a date to climb the Range Trail together, a mistake right from the start. I'm sure you know this trail. I now see that Backpacker Magazine rates it as "one of the toughest day hikes in North America"; another journal names it "the Northeast's most spectacular hike:" 12 mountains over 25 miles, 10,000 feet of ascent. But we weren't going to do this as a day hike. We would camp out along the way. Of course, that represented a trade-off: more time against the extra weight back in those days before down sleeping bags.

The follies began at our campsite on Meacham Lake. I got up at 7 and packed up to get going. My brother rose too but insisted on a morning of tinkering. Believe it or not, we finally left camp for the drive to Keene Valley after lunch. We got to the Roostercomb trailhead at about 2:30 in the afternoon. You can just imagine the temperature of my blood by that point.

But that was not the end of the delay. After another 45 minutes I found myself standing with my pack on my back waiting for Vern to fool with the fishing rod he insisted on carrying. I gave up and off I went. I had waited long enough.

This was just as well anyway. I knew from previous hikes how my brother operated. Always in better physical condition than me, he would forge ahead but then stop and wait for me. But as soon as I arrived, off he would go again, leaving me in full knowledge of how I was holding him up. So now I at least had a head start.

Unfortunately, this was compromised when I took the side trail, at the time unmarked, up Rooster Comb. I didn't realize I was on the wrong trail until I found I was headed back

northeast. Back I went and on toward Hedgehog. I didn't know if I was still ahead of Vern until he came up behind me. The first thing he asked me was whether I had enjoyed the view from Rooster Comb. He had climbed all the way to its top and still caught up with me within a few miles.

Now we began that familiar pattern: Vern forging ahead and resting until I caught up. This went on as we made our way over Hedgehog and on up toward Lower Wolfjaw. We didn't even make it to that peak before darkness forced us to stop and set up camp.

And it was then that we discovered that neither of us had brought the canteen of water. I already felt as though I was crawling across a desert and tomorrow would be worse.

Indeed it was. Beautiful August day, full sun and hot on those open slopes. It was one of the most difficult of my life. I probably could have wrung out my clothing to give me water but that would have been full of salt. By noon I was already dragging. I felt completely dehydrated. But on the way up a steep pitch on Armstrong I discovered a tiny bit of relief. There was a patch of moss hidden under a rock in the middle of the trail. The climb there was so steep that I found myself looking straight at it. From it a drop of water descended.

I got out my tin first aid kit, dumped its contents into a cloth bag and held the tin below the moss. When I squeezed the moss, a few spoonfulls of water dripped into the pan. In five minutes I had perhaps a quarter cup of brown water which I promptly drank, even licking the pan dry after doing so. No champagne has ever tasted better than those brief sips. They weren't much but they at least gave me the incentive to continue.

The rest of that day passed in a haze. The views I'm sure were spectacular but I paid them no attention. My whole focus was getting out of there. If I had any sense at all, I would have insisted on taking the trail from between the Wolfjaws down to John's Brook Lodge, but I missed that chance. On over Armstrong and the Gothics and down that cliff into the col before Saddleback.

And there I finally did insist we abort and we headed down to the Lodge. I remember little of that evening when we arrived except plunging my head into the creek and climbing into bed. That was the only time in my life when I ever slept for more than 24 hours without awakening.

And what did my brother do during that free day? You guessed it: he went fishing along John's Brook.

If I came away with nothing else from that experience, I retain my love of moss. I understand now that the water I drank was full of nematodes and other microscopic denizens, but I cared not then and I care not now.

The other hike may seem anticlimactic after that one and, although it was also a challenge, it was under more pleasant family circumstances. This was my climb, again in the early 1960s, of the Macintyre Mountains with my then eight-year-old son.

Another beautiful August day. We set out from the Adirondack Mountain Club parking lot early in the morning (my son was even then as antsy as I) and made it up past the side trail to Wright by about 9. Then on over Algonquin at about 10 and finally at Iroquois by 11. Great sightseeing along the way.

But then I made one of my standard stupid decisions. At that time there was a trail down the back side (the southwest side) of Iroquois. I thought, what the hell, it's early and we've made it so far so easily, let's give it a try.

Of course, you don't give such a trail simply a try. You do it or you don't; turning back is not on the agenda. Remember that this was not the trail that today descends from between Iroquois and Algonquin. I understand that it is steep enough, but this one was nearly impossible. It was like Gothics without the helping line.

And anyway, the recommended loop climb of the MacIntyre Range is up those steep trails and down the easier slope, the reverse of our direction.

We were only about a hundred yards down this trail when an incident occurred that remains now over a half century later burned into my brain. I was descending just a step or two below my son when a tree root on which I placed my weight snapped and I fell. I didn't simply slide. Instead I was thrown into a head-first dive landing fortunately on my back. Remarkably I was completely unhurt but as I lay their upside down I looked back up at my son.

I think that he aged perhaps 10 years in that instant. His wide eyes registered perfectly, "What am I going to do?" I have, of course, always felt strong affection for my son but I can easily say that I loved him most at that very instant.

The moment passed and we continued down, but the descent proved once again that down can be just as grueling if not more so than up. Once again we didn't get full benefit of the spectacular scenery along Avalanche Lake, we were too exhausted to enjoy it as we should have.

I was so tired that I wondered at this little boy's stamina. On hikes when I was his age I would ask adults if they ever had the delightful experience of carrying children. But he came through far better than I did.

He still does.

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Message from the Chair, Janet Kowalski:



At our monthly ADK Niagara Chapter meeting on January 10, 2017, Gerry Rising (pictured), ADK member, 46-er and former *Buffalo News* 'Nature Watch' Columnist, honored us with an evening to remember, as we listened attentively to him read personal essays from his new book titled "**Birds and Birdwatchers**". Inspired by this special occasion with ADK friends, Gerry also read the above newly composed essay to the group and he graciously agreed to share this printed version with our chapter.