

DAY-HIKING IN THE SIERRA NEVADA AUGUST 13-20, 1997

After an interesting and entertaining stay in the Bay Area with our excellent hosts Sue and Marius Favret, Wendy left San Francisco for Melbourne, and the morning after I left for Fresno and the Sierra Nevada mountains. I am not particularly fit and I wasn't equipped for doing more than day or part-day hikes. I was also largely ignorant of what is available in Yosemite, Kings Canyon, and Sequoia National Parks. I found very useful *50 Best Short Hikes in Yosemite and Sequoia/Kings Canyon* by John Krist (Berkeley: Wilderness Press) which describes 50 hikes of varying difficulty from short and easy strolls to very strenuous 12 hour body thrashers. The conditions of the hike are accurately described and useful maps, adequate are provided (Krist recommends getting topo maps as well, but it isn't necessary).

I arrived at Karen's B&B in Fish Camp just south west of Yosemite around 1.30 pm the afternoon of August 13. Ideally one would stay in the park, and I had to do a lot of driving to reach trailheads. Karen is a mine of information on Yosemite, where her father had been a ranger, and on her advice I went to nearby Mariposa Grove on that first afternoon. It was a gentle introduction to hiking and to giant sequoias (*sequoiadendron giganteum*). Those photos of cars driving through a living sequoia are pictures of the Wawona Tunnel Tree, taken here before the tree fell down in the winter of 1968-69. Mariposa Grove was interesting but lacks the large number of sequoias to be found in the Giant Forest of Sequoia NP. However, it gave me the opportunity to get to recognize the trees and marvel at their size. They quite often seem to grow two or even three massive trunks from the same root system. Also, like many native Australian trees, they need fire to clear the ground for germination and so have developed to withstand wildfires during their lives of up to three millennia. Many of the trees have cavernous clefts burned into them, and the Clothespin Tree has had an archway burned out of it, so that it stands on two legs like an old wooden clothespin/peg.

On my first full day I visited the Yosemite Valley and sampled the Village. It was midday before I headed up the trail to Yosemite Falls. To begin with I missed the Falls trailhead because it was concealed by a huge number of people milling around the restrooms; so I ended up at to the Lower Falls. Eventually I did find my way, but the path up was more strenuous than I had expected, and by the time I got to the lookout at Columbia Rock (about a third of the way up) I was very weary. I had to choose between continuing to the top of Yosemite Falls, which was said not to be particularly interesting, or going down to the valley and heading for Taft Point and Sentinel Dome on the Glacier Point road; that's what I did.

I really liked Taft Point. It is on the rim of a several hundred foot drop off to the Yosemite Valley, and there are fissures in the rim that give it a deeply serrated edge. From here you can see El Capitan and the Falls opposite and North Dome and Half Dome off to the right (= east). From Taft Point it is 2.2 miles to Sentinel Dome, from which there is a 360 degree view for very little effort in climbing. I personally preferred this view over the Yosemite Valley and adjacent areas to the view from the very crowded Glacier Point a short drive down the road.

The next day I headed for Tuolumne Meadows to climb Lembert Dome and later hike to Cathedral Lake. It is a 75 mile journey from Fish Camp and I delayed my start by chatting to some people at Karen's B&B who had friends living a few kilometres from where I live at The Patch. There are stunning views from Olmstead Point about 10 miles west of Tuolumne Meadows Village; a little further east is a fine view of Tenaya Canyon from its west end. I checked out Tuolumne Meadows Village before looking for a parking spot at Lembert Dome at least a quarter mile from the trailhead. Once again I missed the proper trailhead to the west of the Dome but thought I found a trail leading eastwards. This seemed to peter out onto bare rock, but seeing two parties scrambling down the west side shoulder of the rock I headed for them. Initially I found my boots slipping on the rock, but eventually made my way up to a single climber resting on a ledge. He said I'd missed the usual trails around the two sides of the dome, but if I stuck to ledges could clamber up from where we were. He pointed out a dead tree over to the east and said to make for that and then a stand of trees to the right of (and above) that and take stock from there. A trepid fool, on all fours I clambered carefully onwards to the dead tree. En route I met the second party of people descending, one of whom said "You're not trying to climb UP this way, are you?" I was. At the dead tree I was scared of going down, being overweight and carrying a 14 pound pack on my back that might have caused me to gravitate more easily downwards; if I lost my footing there was nothing to stop my scraping my skin off as I slid down the shoulder of Lembert Dome. So, scared, I checked the route upwards, and there seemed to be small ridges most of the way. Thus, mostly on all fours and very occasionally in a semi-upright position, I traversed eastwards and upwards to the stand of living trees. There I had a longish rest with a long drink (thus lightening my backpack), and was comparatively comfortable. From here upwards, there were several possible routes but absolutely no shade. I crawled on up, stopping several times to rest. Taking the pack off was not so bad, getting it on again without losing my grip and sliding down was a little nervewracking. By now I was committed to getting to the top and, as with any hill climbing, what seems from lower down could be the top turns out not to be as you advance towards it. I longed for the sound of human voices to indicate I was coming to the

summit, about a mile and 850 feet above where I'd started. Once or twice I thought I did hear voices, but the summit got no closer. As I clambered on upwards, breathing heavily and sweating profusely from heat and anxiety, I suddenly saw a man's head a hundred feet above me. Much relieved I hurried to a rock ledge 20 feet further up and had some precarious respite. Though very tired I now knew I was going to achieve my goal and eventually got to the summit puffing and panting. The ridge at the top was surprisingly narrow. There was a short drop down to a ledge on the rim where a twisted pine tree offered some shade. I sat and recovered on the pine needles at its base while overlooking the Tuolumne River Canyon. I spent half an hour on various parts of Lembert Dome before taking the approved route down westwards into the valley round the foot of the dome. Whether this route would have been less strenuous to climb up is doubtful; but it certainly would not have been so nerve-wracking, and perhaps not so dangerous. (I'm not certain that the route over the shoulder was actually dangerous or whether it just felt dangerous.) By the time I got back to the car and had stopped off for a drink in the Village, it was too late to consider the 8-9 mile hike to Cathedral Lake, so I went and sat on the beach at Tenaya Lake and bathed my sore feet in its cold clear waters. On the way home I went to Bridalveil Falls in the Yosemite Valley. As the water cascades over the rim, it blows in the breeze giving the effect of a white veil blowing sideways – hence the name. Being only a ten minute walk from the parking lot, these were overcrowded with tourists. Because it was late summer there wasn't much water and I was able to lay on rocks across the creek at the foot of the falls. It would have been perfect without so many people around. On the way home I stopped for dinner at the Wawona Hotel which would be an attractive place to stay in this southwest corner of the park. It was built at the end of the 19th century, has pretty buildings with wide verandahs, well established grounds, and good food. The other place for dinner in this area is White Chief Mountain Lodge – the cook made excellent fare from snapper and trout and the food was inexpensive, too.

On my last day in Yosemite I decided to do the Cathedral Lake hike, a two hour drive from Fish Camp. The four mile trail is easy to find and although it is moderately strenuous in parts, it is mostly a fairly easy walk. Some of the way undulates through marshy open woodland that has many pretty wildflowers in it, and makes for a delightful walk. There is a stunning view of Fairview Dome between the trees on one of the climbs before the trail gets to the open woods. Cathedral Peak is to the left as the trail climbs over its foot. Eventually you reach marshland to the west of Cathedral Peak and the lake is hidden behind a rim of granite. Going over this reveals a gem of a lake only about a kilometre long and half as wide. To walk around the lake is delightful, and on its west end there is a drop to Tenaya Canyon

with Tenaya Lake in the distance. All around there are pockets of ice on the hills and streaks of ice-melt running from them. For me, this was the most delightful hike in Yosemite.

Next day (August 18) I left for Cedar Grove in Kings Canyon, which requires a trip back south into Fresno on route 41 and then east on route 180. The 180 is bordered by fruit farms – plums and citrus, I think. Any wild grassland was burned golden brown in contrast to the cultivated plantations. The journey along Kings Canyon Road was pleasant enough but not wonderful and you enter Kings Canyon National Park at Big Stump Basin. The basin has a loop trail around a sequoia stumps left after logging in the 1880s. There is also evidence of how the sequoias shatter when they fall, and the measures taken to featherbed them as they fall to minimize wastage – though the top third of the tree was often left to rot. In fact these trees rot very slowly – hardly at all in a century. The huge size of these trees is awe-inspiring. At the so-called Mark Twain stump (it isn't made clear how it gets this name) I took a picture (for them) of four large visitors from San Bernardino spread across the stump with plenty of room between them and on each side. The wood is little use except for fencing rails and matches and it seems a terrible waste of something that has taken between 1,500 and 2,500 years to grow.

I moved on to Grant Grove to take the loop trail around the General Grant tree, the Oregon Tree, and many others. Like a good tourist, I went through the tunnelled out trunk of a fallen giant. In the mid-afternoon I set off for Cedar Grove along the magnificent, very deep and very long Kings Canyon. I took no pictures because the good stopping points were nearly all on the other side of the road at places it would have been somewhat dangerous to pull into. I planned to take pics as I drove back out – as in fact I did. The road climbs above 6,000 feet and runs way above the south bank of the Kings River for miles and miles, then drops down to cross over at Boyden Cave and snakes along the north shore to Cedar Grove. From the price of a night's lodging there, I expected Cedar Grove to be much more upmarket than it was; but it is the only hotel in the wilderness and it is closed for half the year. Lodging is on a floor above a shop and a snack bar. (The monopoly enjoyed by the snack bar is not exploited: food there is pretty basic but inexpensive.) The rooms are much like those in a no star motel, though the linen was clean. There was the usual warning about not leaving any food in the car so as to avoid attracting bears, because a mother bear with cub had been seen around the lodge grounds. The lodge is beside the rapid flowing South Fork Kings River that rushes turquoise and white among the granite rocks; there are many picnic seats along the river bank, and it really is a beautiful place to be. Before turning in I went along to check out Canyon View (not worth stopping for) and Roaring Falls, which were pleasant and about two minutes walk from the road. I had a quiet night and no bears disturbed my sleep.

Despite a sign saying that the snack bar opens at 8, in fact it opens at 7; however, I didn't discover this till too late to get an earlier start. The plan was to climb up to Cedar Point Overlook and later hike to Mist Falls. The trailhead to Cedar Point Overlook is about five minutes walk north from the lodge. The trail is switchback for nearly two miles as you climb about 1,500 feet from the valley floor to the rim above it. Once the switchbacks stop you walk west for about half a mile, climbing a little; and after passing through some charming woodland you reach a rock ledge with superb views to the head of the valley to the east and some miles down the valley to the west. Best part of a mile below is Cedar Grove and the Kings River racing over the rocks. The peaks of the Monarch Divide and those bounding Paradise Valley can be seen to the north. It is a pleasant and peaceful spot.

The trail from Cedar Grove to the Overlook is a good trail, and though the climb up was strenuous, the way back down was easy to run. I had time for a cool shower before setting off for Mist Falls. These are reached from a trailhead at Road's End, about six miles east of Cedar Grove where the road gives out because there is no way through the southern Sierras for motor traffic. For one and a half miles the trail is level, open, dry, and rather boring as it follows the South Fork Kings River. It then enters a shady area of trees and ferns and at 2 miles there is a bridge over to the right across Bubbs Creek but our trail climbs and follows the west bank of Kings River. The trail goes through woodland and across bare rock in many places. At about 3 miles, as the trail crosses a large rock outcrop, you turn round and see The Sphinx behind: a peak with a huge outcrop set within a larger depression near its summit (to me it looks more like a clitoris than a sphinx). Eventually you come to Mist Falls, and they do indeed create a mist, even in late summer. All the falls in the Sierras would be better seen after snow melt in the spring, I guess.

August 19 was my last full day in the Sierras and I left Cedar Grove for Lodgepole and Tokopah Falls in Sequoia National Park (Kings Canyon and Sequoia are different but contiguous parks, and one administrative unit). Having hiked about 15 miles the previous day, I needed a relaxing one, and Tokopah Falls is only about three and a half miles there and back. It is an easy walk from the Lodgepole Campground along the north bank of the Marble Fork Kaweah River. The path gets a little hazardous at the very end part which has been blasted out of bedrock, and I had to be careful not to trip up or twist an ankle. The falls themselves were very disappointing, being merely a trickle of water. My next stop was the Congress Trail in the Giant Forest. This is the place to see all manner of *sequoiadendron giganteum*, starting at the General Sherman Tree, the world's biggest tree in terms of its volume of wood. Many sequoias are really immense and it isn't obvious that the Sherman Tree is the biggest. In the Giant Forest there are hundreds of sequoias sometimes in stands of

a half a dozen or more. What struck me forcibly in this popular recreation area was that the vast majority of tourists seem less impressed by the trees than with having their photo taken on, in, or at worst standing beside one. Despite warnings that these trees are shallow rooted and people should keep their distance, tourists of all kinds (American, Hispanic, Italian, Slav during my short visit) were stomping all over their roots with no regard for the fact that their juvenile actions might well kill a tree that has survived over a 1,000 years. From the Giant Forest I went to check out the Autolog (you can drive a car onto a fallen tree), and the fallen Tunnel Tree which has an arch cut so's you can drive through it; then I climbed Moro Rock. This is a rock dome rising to 6725 feet (a quarter mile above its foot) that has commanding views of the country all around and is well worth the strenuous climb. You see not only the peaks all around, but also the switchback road down the Kaweah Canyon leading to Three Rivers. This road I took for my last night in the Sierras, spent at the Gateway Lodge just outside the park gates. I can recommend the accommodation and the attached restaurant on the bank of the Kaweah River.

On August 20 I had time for some hiking in the morning before cleaning up, packing my bags, and heading for Fresno to fly back to Australia. I decided to hike Paradise Creek and Middle Fork Loop. The former trail starts in the Buckeye Flat campground. I parked at Hospital Rock and walked to the campground (en route I discovered that there is a pull out just outside the campground where it would be possible to park). Inside the gateway you turn left and the trailhead starts behind campsite 28 (there is another trailhead behind 25). The trail was fine to the bridge that crosses Middle Fork Kaweah River. On the other side, Paradise Creek is to the right. There are all manner of trails all over the place here and I never found the one I was looking for. However, going up either the river or the creek is enjoyable, though the journey up the creek is marred by a water collection pipe that runs alongside it. This does not seriously detract from the several attractive pools. After a while I returned to Hospital Rock to look at the pictographs there, said to have been done by predecessors to the Potwisha (Western Mono) people who lived hereabouts when whites first came.

My last hike started a couple of miles down the road, opposite the Potwisha Campground and at first follows the Middle Fork Kaweah River. The trail passes numerous bedrock mortars – depressions in the natural rock created by the indigenous people to grind corn and the like. Above the mortars are some more, and better preserved, pictographs. I climbed up to get close to these and took several photos. These pictographs were the last interesting thing I saw in the Sierras. After this short hike I cleaned up and packed at the campground, and set off for Fresno and Australia.