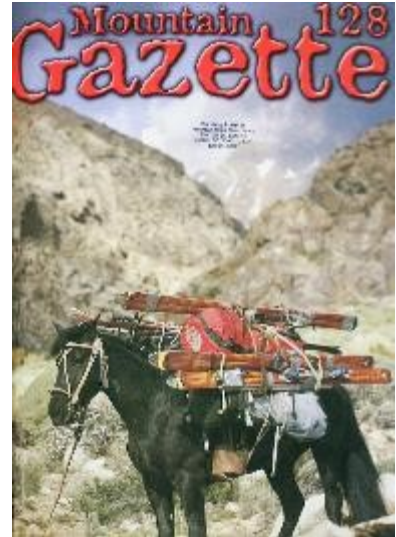


Alcoholism and other mountains I've climbed

By Brendan Leonard
© 2006 Mountain Gazette



At 5 a.m., I was the only person enjoying a Camel Light at the trailhead for Borah Peak. I was also the only person who fired off about ten of them the night before in the campground at the base of the peak. I was nervous, and that's what you do when you're a pack-a-day smoker and you're nervous: You smoke a pack and a half a day.

I was working in Idaho Falls for the summer, and to celebrate the occasion of my only two consecutive days off that summer, Tim came down from Missoula to visit. We had discussed a possible trip to Yellowstone, but chose Borah instead. My rationale was that if we only had time to climb one mountain in Idaho, it might as well be the highest one.

A few feet up the trail, it was evident that I had no business trying to climb the 12,662-foot peak. The climb was only 7 miles round trip, but climbed 5,200 feet to the summit in those three miles, like a rock staircase to hell.

The list of peaks I'd climbed before Borah was short, but unimpressive: Mt. Sentinel, the 5,200-foot shoulder of grass that stood guard over the University of Montana campus in Missoula. The trailhead is at the end of South Fifth Street, and Tim and I had actually hiked up the backside one afternoon, arriving at the top just after dark. We didn't take any water, or jackets, for that matter, and I even smoked a cigarette at the top to remove any doubt of the depth of my mountain knowledge. An hour later, we were eating cheeseburgers from the McDonald's on Broadway.

I felt like quite an idiot smoking a cigarette while looking at the mass of a 12,000-foot mountain, but I had no choice. A year before, I had been sitting in a group therapy room in Iowa, listening to a lady named Sue talk about how her doctor had given her six months to live eight months earlier. She had cirrhosis, but was going to stay off booze for the rest of her life, however long that was. And Sue said to me, "You're lucky, you have your whole life ahead of you," because I was only 23. I hated her for saying that. It's pretty easy to tackle addiction "one day at a time" when each day could literally be your last if your liver decides to explode. When you've got about 17,000 One Day At A Times left to go without drinking a cool, refreshing

Budweiser, it's harder to be an optimist.

After I graduated from my substance abuse treatment program, I spent seven days in jail, OK'd things with my probation officer, and moved to Missoula to go to graduate school. My parents dropped me off, leaving me without friends, a car, money or any idea of how to relate to people without buying them shots of whiskey. I spent my first nine months there doing classwork, renting movies, not meeting girls or friends, and holding onto a tenuous sobriety with a combination of coffee, cigarettes, and Internet pornography, broken up with a twice-a-week coffee date with Tim, who was the first person I met in Missoula and my only friend.

A few hundred yards up the trail, it was evident that I had no business climbing a 12,000 foot mountain. I survived the first 3,600 feet up Borah's southwest ridge without passing out, coughing up blood or curling up in the fetal position and crying. I let Tim lead the way and just did what he did, hoping no one would recognize my inexperience. As we started to scramble over Chicken Out Ridge, I realized that mountains were really just big piles of rocks, not the giant waves of sculpted granite they appear to be when you're driving past them. Also that if I slipped off the rock mohawk that was Chicken Out Ridge, my mother and father would be holding a closed-casket service back in Iowa in a couple of days.

Once across the ridge, we traversed a short snowfield one at a time. I did the chicken dance across it and Tim snapped a photo as a guy behind me warned, "Don't get cocky." The last few hundred feet to the summit was a boulder field with no easy way through it. I had to just keep climbing up and to the left until I ran out of rocks to climb.

I didn't know what to tell people in Missoula when I first met them. For the first time, I had only me; I didn't know anybody who knew anybody and no one recognized me anywhere in town. I met cute girls in class, and when they'd ask me what I liked to do and other getting-to-know-you questions, I didn't know what to say. Whatever I did say probably made it obvious that I spent most of my time alone, chain-smoking and drinking coffee. I didn't get any dates. A few people invited me to parties and out to some of the bars downtown, but I declined because both of them scared the shit out of me.

I was through having fun with nature about two minutes after I did the dance

across Chicken Out. The rest was 100 percent physical labor and zero percent enlightenment. I started to hate rocks; the bigger they were, the more I hated them. My feet hurt and my legs were tired, but I knew I couldn't turn around. I just kept my head down and scrambled up and up.

Then I was on top, and the east side dropped away into waves of rock all the way to the horizon. Behind me the sky rolled into a plain a mile below. I picked out a crop circle on the valley floor and wondered how far away it was. A guy took our picture, calling it the "hero shot."

After a rest, we started down, and I confidently said, "Well, it's all downhill from here," totally unaware of the hell that is going down a mountain you can scarcely climb up. I ran out of water a couple minutes after we scrambled back down past Chicken Out Ridge.

My legs were not capable of descending the southwest ridge. I began to trip and stumble every few steps, and my mouth hung open. Tim outpaced me all the way down, stopping every 20 minutes or so to make sure I hadn't bashed my head open on a rock.

I was glad to be hiking down alone, especially when my legs really started to give out and I fell on my face every time I tripped on a rock and couldn't recover in time to remain upright. I wished for a quick death or a gondola ride down.

When we got back to Idaho Falls that evening, I called everyone I knew and told them about it, puffing away and leaving out the embarrassing parts.

I left Idaho to drive back to Iowa for my friend Jarrett's wedding. On the way home, I stopped in Denver to see another friend and I insisted we climb Mt. Elbert. After three false summits, we reached the top, and I didn't say, "Well, it's all downhill from here." I realized then that I had the bug.

Back in Iowa, I got my mountain photos from my disposable camera developed and put the one of me on top of Mt. Elbert on my parents' fridge.

At the wedding reception, I was forced to confront a large crowd of people I didn't really know, all of whom had access to large quantities of cheap liquor. I had a seat at the head table and had to stay the entire night since I was a groomsman. Before the toast to the bride and groom, I had asked the waitress to please fill my champagne flute with water instead. She didn't, so just before

we raised our glasses, the groomsman next to me downed my glass and I refilled it with water. I drank the water to the happy couple's future, and the hint of champagne still in the glass almost floored me with the fear of What Did I Just Do and the total uncertainty of What Do I Do Now That I Just Did That.

My stomach felt punched and I sat the glass down and took a second to calm myself. Fuck. Okay then. I tightened my grip on my 17 months of sobriety and hung on for the rest of the night.

I'd met alcoholics and addicts who'd found Jesus and immersed themselves in church life after sobering up, and folks who found AA meetings to attend every day of the week and sometimes two on Saturdays and Sundays, spending all their spare time talking about their drinking problem instead of spending it drinking. I didn't.

When I got back to Montana, the fall semester began and I knew what to say to girls when I met them. Tim and I climbed Lolo Peak, the peak that filled my windshield every time I drove southwest on Brooks Street. I climbed Trapper Peak, a wicked-looking sawtooth just south of Darby on the Montana-Idaho border, by myself. After that, I decided to write my master's thesis on peak bagging.

Anymore, cigarette smoke smells like lost hope to me. Now, I see photos of mountains and I find them and climb them. I do it obsessively. I spend days off climbing and nights planning trips. I neglect other things in my life, hoping there will be time later, sometime later. When is later, I don't know. I wish I had time to relax, to sleep in until noon, but I can't, knowing that there are mountains out there.

I am running from something, and I am okay with that.

