

## **Once More to Wire Lake**

**By Rebecca Agiewich**

It is half an hour into our first-ever family backpacking trip and things are not going well. My little sister, age six, is crying. On top of her pack, her decrepit stuffed elephant Freddie bobs around with a little stuffing poking out of his pink, earless head.

“What’s the matter?” says my father, as if it isn’t obvious. Since leaving the trailhead, we have been hiking upwards at a suicidally steep angle with heavy packs on our shoulders. It is hot. It is dusty. On a normal Saturday, Erica and I would be living the high life: roller-skating, reading books, or watching Brady Bunch reruns. Now, inexplicably, we are being tortured.

My father crouches down next to my sister, his pack towering above him. Tall and lean with a red bandana tied around his longish black hair, he looks a little like Neil Young (though he wouldn’t know who Neil Young was if Neil Young hit him over the head with a guitar).

“My...my p-pack is too heavy.” Erica is too out of breath to even cry properly. But she makes a valiant attempt. Freddie looks at us with the blank stare of the damned. Horseflies buzz around his head.

I'm not feeling so hot myself. Seeing Erica cry, however, immediately makes me feel more perky. Plus, it gives me chance to flop down on a rock and catch my breath.

My mom says nothing. Instead, she watches the dramatics with an expression on her sweaty face that says, "Your father got us into this mess; let him fix it."

Ever since he'd first read John Muir in his early 20s, my father dreamed of exploring the high Sierras on foot. Of experiencing, like Muir had, the "white beams of the morning streaming through the passes, the noonday radiance on the crystal rocks," and the "flush of the alpenglow."

As a family, we'd day hiked and car camped. But those experiences didn't provide him with enough Muir-like ecstasy. There was no alpenglow to be found in a crowded car campground.

After a heart attack nearly killed him at 33, my dad decided it was time to make his Muir-inspired dream a reality. The doctors had told him he would never hike above 5,000 feet again, but that just added fuel to the fire. He never liked being told what to do.

So, after his triple bypass surgery in 1976 (a new and frightening procedure back then) my father set about transforming himself. He stopped

smoking, cut back on the cheeseburgers, started running. He grew fit and slender.

Then he bought a copy of *Hikes in the Northern Sierra*. From its shiny pages, he picked out a backpacking trip for his unsuspecting family. The multi-day trek to Wire Lake involved 24 miles of round-trip hiking over rugged terrain in the Emigrant Wilderness. It led to a remote Sierra Lake, filled with rainbow trout and surrounded by granite. It topped out, not at 5,000 feet, but at 9,000 feet.

In other words, the perfect hike for a group of novice backpackers that included a six-year old, an eight-year old, a chain-smoking mom, and a father recovering from a colossal coronary.

“Would it help if I carried something for you?” my father asks Erica in a gentle tone. Sometimes he is impatient with us, but not today.

My tearful sister nods. Her wavy golden-brown hair is tied into long pigtails that cascade out from under her red bandana. Her tummy protrudes in a tight yellow t-shirt that says, “Webster Realty,” the name of her soccer team.

Dad stares at her Kelty pack for a moment. It’s orange and identical to mine. My father’s pack, which he hasn’t even taken off during this interlude, must weigh 65 pounds. It makes our tiny packs look like toys.

“What if I take your sleeping pad?” he says finally, in a cautious voice.

Erica looks at him suspiciously. Even at six, she’s aware that she might be able to get a better deal if she plays her cards right.

The Sierra sun beats down on us. Dust shimmers in the dry air.

*Maybe we’ll turn around and go home, I think hopefully. Maybe we’ll get to go back to the Pinecrest Motel and eat biscuits and gravy in the diner. Maybe she’ll get in trouble.*

“OK,” says Erica at last, wiping away a few tears. Dirt streaks her damp face.

“Good girl!” says my father. Erica brightens. I droop.

Dad takes Erica’s sleeping pad off her miniature pack and transfers it to his own gigantic one. Freddy nods his faded head in approval.

Sighing, I peel myself off the rock. I will not complain. On principle, I am not against complaining—loudly if necessary—but right now I’m trying to prove that I’m superior to my wimpy sister.

“You know,” my dad says to me conspiratorially, as he helps me put my pack back on, “you’re one tough kid.”

My spirits rise. I envision the extra Milky Way bar I might receive as a reward for my toughness.

We keep trudging upward on the arid, rocky trail. Dust fills my nose. I breathe heavily; we are already at 8,000 feet. Horse poop scents the rarefied air. There is nothing to look at except a few patchy trees.

Do adults really think this kind of thing is fun? My dad looks excited and alert, seemingly unaffected by the weight of his giant pack. But my mom looks miserable and red-faced. She's puffing harder than any of us. No doubt she desperately wants a cigarette.

Erica, meanwhile, has a new swagger to her step. As we toil upwards, she now chatters enthusiastically at my father, describing in great detail the latest episode of "Lost in Space."

Brat.

That trip was the first in a string of wilderness adventures that stretched over the next nine years. Our family took up cross-country skiing. We hiked in the Alps, climbed the highest fells in Wales, and trekked the trails of the Lake District in England. And every summer, we returned to the Sierras.

Throughout these wanderings, my dad's heart served him well. He bounded over trails, carried heavy packs, and bravely brought bickering children with him on all his best escapades.

Often I'd forget that he'd ever been sick. I stopped worrying that he might one day be sick again.

Lunchtime. It's our second day of hiking, the day after my sister's meltdown. We are in a place called Salt Lick Meadow, and it's bigger than any meadow I've ever seen. Purple lupine and yellow larkspur dance across the green grass.

My parents are sacked out on a rock soaking up the sun. But Erica and I, with the entire meadow to ourselves, are chasing butterflies.

They are everywhere. Landing on flowers, flitting through the air in flashes of yellow, black, and orange. I've never seen so many butterflies. We rarely catch them. If we do, we're shocked by their frantic fluttering in our hands and instantly let them go.

But we are completely absorbed in this game. The toil of the last 36 hours is forgotten. The heavy packs. The endless walking. My sister's incessant chattering about her favorite TV shows. Triscuits, which are gross.

Now there are only butterflies.

A few hours later, we've labored along windswept ridges and sweated through lunar landscapes of granite and scrub. Occasionally Erica and I are distracted from our pain, for example, when we pass by small, unnamed tarns and we fight to name them.

"That one is Becky Lake!"

"No, it's Erica Lake!"

“NO! Narnia Lake!”

Up and up we go, breathing fast in the thin air. My parents ply us with lemon drops and trail mix when we get whiny (which is often). Milky Way bars are only for dessert.

Then, suddenly, we arrive at a junction. The air is still. Flies buzz around us. “Wire Lake, ¼ miles” says a beat-up wooden sign with white lettering. An arrow points off to the right.

For a moment, no one speaks.

“A quarter to the first kid who sees it!” says my dad. Instantly, my sister and I are re-energized. We race ahead of our parents.

I want to win! My boots kick up dust as I run down the trail. Erica is right behind me. It’s not fair! Her pack is lighter!

I plunge forward. Her footsteps recede. I’m gasping for breath. Where is the lake? All I see are trees!

Something flashes silver in the distance. I move faster. My pack bounces on my back. Ouch!

Then a patch of sun-struck blue shows itself through the trees.

“I see it!” I yell. Erica nearly crashes into me.

Together we zoom toward the lake. It gets bigger, bluer, and more dazzling with every step.

I feel like a butterfly suddenly, light and free.

The trip to Wire Lake became our family tradition. Erica and I loved the lake. There were rocks to jump on and trees to hide in. We raced leaves in the water, rode horseback on logs, and played never-ending pretend games on the lake's granite-studded shore. And every year, we competed for that quarter.

My parents had a different relationship to Wire Lake. They didn't run around and play there like we did. Instead, they sat still and looked at things. (Booring). They also took endless pictures of the lake at sunrise or sunset. Dad was always trying to capture alpenglow on film.

Often my father and I would fish for rainbow trout. We'd do it at dusk, just the two of us, as a soft pink light descended over the lake and the trout rippled the calm water in their hunt for flies.

We hardly ever caught anything more than a few inches long. Even so, when we did, it was exciting and horrifying all at once. The slimy fish would heave and flop, its rainbow scales shimmering as I struggled to get it off the hook without hurting it—a task that fell to me because my father was allergic to fish and wouldn't touch one for fear of breaking out in hives.

When I finally threw the trout back in, adrenalin pumping, dad would congratulate me on a job well done. I'd bask in his approval. Its glow suffused me just like the setting sunbathed the lake with hot pink and orange.



Eight p.m. Our family sits around a campfire, encased in down jackets. It feels like we are the only people out here. A few other backpackers are camped nearby but we can't hear or see them.

A distant wind blows through the trees. The lake slaps against the rocks. Around us, the night is very black except for our fire.

I scoot closer to my mom. She stares into the campfire. In its amber glow, her face looks mysterious. Erica, on my mom's other side, is blabbing about how Freddie needs some kind of "operation."

I glance at my dad. He is looking up at the sky. So I look up at it too. My mouth falls open. A minute ago there were just a few stars. Now there are more than I have ever seen in my life.

"Did you know," said my dad, "it would take millions of years to reach some of those stars?"

My mouth falls open a little more. I try to imagine getting in a spaceship and traveling for millions of years. I can't imagine it. I feel very small all of a sudden. My heart starts to pound.

No one speaks for a moment. I don't want to look at the black sky full of stars, but I can't look away. I shiver inside my down jacket.

"Everything you see in the sky is part of the Milky Way Galaxy," says my dad.

The words “Milky Way” distract me. “Did they name the galaxy after the candy bar?” I ask.

My parents laugh.

“What?” I am indignant. But at least I’ve stopped shivering.

Finally my mom says, giggling, “The galaxy was there a long time before the candy bar.”

“It’s billions of years old,” says my dad.

“Oh,” I’m disappointed. Yet when I look up at the immense night sky it seems much friendlier now. Then I look away, eyes dazzled. I warm my hands over the fire and listen to my sister’s soothing prattle.

My dad will sleep outside tonight, with the bears and the stars. But I’ll sleep inside the tent squished between my mom and Erica, and that’s just fine with me.

Years later, the moment of weightless discovery I felt as I raced toward Wire Lake for the first time still drives me forward. The love of adventure born in the high Sierra has taken me from stormy ridges in Patagonia to frozen peaks in the Cascades.

Erica, too, has become a world traveler. Freddie, however, disappeared under mysterious circumstances. (One theory is that our golden retriever

Samantha ate him). My mom stopped smoking long ago, and, at age 65, hikes everywhere from the Himalayan foothills to Italian hill towns.

My father had a heart transplant in 1986 and died in 1998. He hiked until the last few years of his life.

In 1999, my mom, sister and I scattered his ashes on a ridge above Wire Lake. Though grief made that trek plodding and tearful for us mortals, my father's spirit now roams unencumbered in the Range of Light.

As an adult who often flees to the mountains, I now understand something my dad said to me as a kid. "The reason I like backpacking so much," he said, "is that you don't have to think about anything except putting one foot in front of the other and what you're going to eat for dinner."

Back then, I couldn't relate. To me, the walking part was the least tolerable. The fun part was chasing butterflies, playing cards in the tent, or fishing for rainbow trout. And Milky Way bars, which we never got at home.

I had to acquire my own adult cares and worries to "get it." The mountains helped Dad to live in the present moment. My father was more aware of his mortality than most, but in the Sierras, his uncertain future receded. He could lose himself in the beauty of the wilderness—just as I do now, and just as John Muir did before both of us:

"Our flesh-and-bone tabernacle seems transparent as glass to the beauty about us, as if truly an inseparable part of it, thrilling with the air and

trees, streams and rocks, in the waves of the sun,—a part of all nature, neither old nor young, sick nor well, but immortal.”

