

Ed Cottrell
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An Afternoon in Paradise

A true story of survival and revelation

“Hey, anybody want to go to Urraca Mesa?”

“Naw, I gotta work.” That was Slim. Slim was a real cowboy – he only took off his hat for showering and at the supper table.

“How ‘bout you, Steve?”

“No, man, I think I’m gonna sleep.”

Steve was my tentmate that summer – his biggest burst of activity so far had been to hike once up to the Tooth of Time, the towering Santa Fe Trail landmark less than 4 miles away. He wasn’t really acclimated to the low oxygen at this altitude yet.

That was alright – I hadn’t really expected anybody to come anyway. It was around 10:30 on a hot New Mexico Wednesday morning – you could already tell it was going to be a scorcher. Even though solo hiking was prohibited, that rule was often taken somewhat less literally by staff – the traditional chapter-and-verse “buddy system” wasn’t so important to us now that we were adults.

Since I couldn’t find a hiking partner, I set out for the turnaround on my own. The turnarounds were the drop-off points for hikers - the last connections between the Sangre de Cristo mountains and civilization, barring the 30 or so staffed camps scattered over more than two hundred square miles of wilderness. At Philmont Scout Ranch, where I was working that summer, wilderness meant true wilderness, marred only by a scattering of trails and the remarkably few traces left by the twenty thousand Boy Scouts that hiked and camped there each summer.

The turnaround was only twenty minutes away on a normal day, but I could see already that today would not be normal. The wind along the turnaround road was so fierce that I had to walk sideways and with my face turned to avoid the million tiny dirt projectiles kicked up off the dirt road. As a result, I arrived at the turnaround almost an hour after I started. No problem – I had a full, beautiful day to explore just a small portion of the ranch.

My plan was to go to Lover’s Leap, a two-hundred-foot-tall promontory with a number of legends surrounding it, before continuing to Urraca Mesa – “Magpie Mesa” in the language of the Indian tribes that once lived around it. None actually lived on the mesa, for magpie means “death messenger” in Sioux – the legends surrounding the mesa stretched at least two thousand years back. Supposedly, cattle would refuse to graze on top of the mesa, and those who tried to sleep at the top would wake at the bottom of the mesa in the morning. Stories of impish old Indians and lost scouts abounded. Indeed, there was an odd air about the place – the top portion of the mesa bears a striking resemblance to a human skull, complete with eye sockets. Huge groves of trees stand dead on the top for years at a time. According to one legend, the source of a great evil was locked in a hole near one of the “eyes” in a great battle centuries ago, and the victorious inhabitants of the Anasazi tribe, the “immortals,” fled to another dimension.

In any case, anybody who slept on top of the mesa was a “man’s man,” a truly brave spirit. I figured, why not? I don’t believe in spooks or inter-dimensional wells, so I had nothing to fear except my own weaknesses.

I made it to Lover’s Leap without incident. The Leap was located halfway up one side of the mesa, and I noticed that the wildlife was remarkably silent as I got higher on the mesa. On the Leap itself, I was nearly blown off of the narrow projection by a sudden gust of wind. Instead, I merely fell on the stone itself, backpack and all. At that point, I decided that climbing on the Leap that day was a very bad idea, just as a crew of Scouts arrived and decided that it was a good idea. I warned them, but they didn’t listen. Campers never listened unless you were a Ranger – it didn’t seem to matter that nearly all Philstaff were expert hikers. Oh, well. It was their problem at that point – I had an appointment with the mesa.

Unfortunately, my original plan turned out to be impractical. I had intended to “bushwhack” up the hill to a different trail and continue up the mesa. However, the ascent proved to be too steep, so I had to hike down the way I came and take a different trail upward. Like most Philstaff, I knew my way around these particular Philmont trails reasonably well and didn’t rely on a map except during initial trip planning or during a genuine crisis. I had the route memorized cold, anyway: “left, right, straight, bushwhack, left, right, right.” No problem.

I found the appropriate trail at the bottom after one more quick planning session with the map, and started up again.

Again, the higher I went, the less wildlife I was aware of. Often at Philmont, the wildlife are completely unconcerned about humans – I have literally stumbled into deer and all manner of smaller creatures. In fact, I cannot recall hearing or seeing a single animal anywhere near the mesa’s surface. So, I simply whistled and sang to myself as I hiked – nobody cared, because, I figured, there was nobody within two miles, even this close to base camp.

“Philmont, here’s to thee; Scouting Paradise. Out in God’s country, tonight.”

“If I ain’t happy here, I ain’t happy nowhere – New Mexico rain, when my mind starts to roam.”

“Won’t you take me back to Meuhlenberg county, down by the Green River, where Paradise lay?”

About halfway up the mesa, I decided it was time for a water break to avoid dehydration. I had brought 2 quarts of water – the recommended minimum amount for a full day’s hike, and probably overkill for this day. I sat on a stump beneath some much-needed shade and pulled out a water bottle.

Just then, I had possibly the scariest moment of my life.

Very close, and very loud, I heard a voice in my hear. That voice did not speak English – it was very close to what I imagined Sioux sounded like.

I jumped up and looked around – nothing there. The wind began a loud, sibilant rush across the grass on this mini-plateau, and nothing else moved.

I had to think about this. “OK, Ed, chill out – it’s just your head messing with you. Nobody’s lived up here for years – definitely not any Indians. Get a grip.”

I thought all this in the process of rapidly grabbing my gear and hauling my tail up the hill at a good jog.

After a few moments, I settled down again, and brushed it off as the wind and heat combined with the otherwise eerie silence of the mesa. I knew I wasn't crazy, but my mind could play tricks, too.

A few minutes after this, I reached a cross roads where the sign was no longer pointing correctly. This happens sometimes – bears like to sharpen their claws on the sign posts, and they get knocked over occasionally. So, I did the logical thing to do – I looked at the map. I knew my route had changed, so I figured out where I was, and took the right-most of the three forks, heading slightly downhill. I noticed that I had a beautiful view of the Tooth of Time from this small ridge, but, regrettably, had left my camera behind. I noticed, too, an odd little flowering cactus by the edge of the trail – funny that this should grow here.

After about fifteen minutes, I hit a sharp uphill switchback – a point where the trail reverses directions to maintain a constant grade, or uphill angle. Time for a water break.

I noticed the trail leveling out. I noticed, too, an odd little flowering cactus by the edge of the trail – funny that this should grow here.

That's not right.

How? What? I made a circle? Oh, well. It's impossible to get seriously lost at Philmont, so I looked at the map again. I thought. "Oh, for crying out loud – I missed an intersection! The cabin's only a hundred yards that way!" I took the middle fork.

Time for a water break.

I notice an odd little flowering cactus by the edge of the trail – funny that this should grow here.

Oh, no.

i look at my water – hmmm. only about half a quart left. i should be there now. alright. i need to eat – i have some banana chips somewhere. i'll just sit here until i figure this out with the map.

ok. this makes no sense – the right and middle forks go up, but loop around? there's no loop on the map? the left fork goes down? i should go up. this is bad. alright – i'll check out the right and middle forks again without my pack.

no luck – they definitely rejoin here.

i decide to try the left fork. i stop eating the banana chips and start off. wow, it's hot. must be ninety today. i'm going too far down

gotta go back which way did i come from these forks make no sense

I finally hear the wildlife I've been longing for – but it's a magpie, right above me. A death messenger.

OK, Ed. Settle down. You're not heat exhausted yet. Think – where are you at? Clear your head – try some math. What's the integral of x ? x squared over two. OK. Good. I've still got my senses.

I notice an odd little flowering cactus by the edge of the trail – funny that this should grow here.

"Stop thinking about the damn cactus – you're obsessed with the cactus."

"Who was that?"

Whoa. Now you *are* losing it.

I look at my water – only a few sips left now. How'd I ever get myself into this mess? I look at my map – I must be right here. How'd I ever get myself into this mess?

I try the right fork again – no, what am I doing this is wrong
 i notice an odd little flowering cactus by the edge of the trail funny that this
 should grow here

if i aint happy here i aint happy nowhere new mexico rain ain't here when i need
 it most

gotta go back lost gotta go back can't make it up not enough water can't make it
 down too far not enough water last thing i do'll blow whistle maybe somebody hear
 maybe time for rescue never gonna see friends again family gonna be statistic no college
 degree never see dog again never see cactus again

I had a sorely needed moment of clarity.

Think – you crossed the creek, you met the rangers, you took a right, you took a
 left, you heard voices (what was that anyway), you're here.

You missed a turn, idiot!

Oh, for crying out loud! It is left i should go down then up then be there i am
 stupid for crying out loud

pick up pack left foot right foot one behind the other left... left...left... behind...
 damn magpie go away come again some other day hot steep trip ouch rocks are sharp
 integral of x is e m c squared edward michael cottrell squared on the mesa help me

water only a few sips left gotta drink it now no good if i die first not enough to
 ration crew passing by ? need some ? help ? you alone ? no yeah yeah no ok later

What did I just do? Did I just turn down water? Precious Water? I've lost it. Got
 to write a farewell note – no Paper. OK. Whistle. No Whistle. I'm a goner.

*i notice an odd little flowering cactus by the edge of the trail funny that this should grow
 here*

where's that magpie won't leave me alone stupid bird thinks its all that

god forgive me my trespasses

goodnight, ed

***“amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me i once was lost but
 now am found was blind but now I see”***

My Philmont imprinted Bible fell out of my pack onto my limp pale hands.

Water of Life.

Stand up. Pick up the pack. One foot, now the other. Almost there.

left, left, left left left, up up and away. Thank you God.

I entered the Urraca Mesa camp and drank more water than I had all summer
 long.

“Hey there, staffer. You stayin' with us tonight?”

“Uh, yeah, thanks.”

“Need anything? Some water?”

“No, thanks. I've got plenty of Water.”

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Author's note: The events related here are as truthful an account as I can give of that fateful July day when I found wisdom and revelation on the haunted mesa of Philmont Scout Ranch in Cimarron, New Mexico. I have merely related my thoughts as I recall them – fragmented as they were. Nothing was added or left out, to the best of my recollection. My rather foolish actions do not necessarily reflect policies of Philmont or the Boy Scouts of America. To those who go hiking: always take a map, always take a whistle, always take a partner, and never trust your memory. The lyrics referring to “New Mexico Rain” come from the song by that name, by Michael Hearne; those about “Paradise” from the song by that name, by John Prine; and those about Philmont come from the Philmont Hymn. I am going back to Philmont in less than one month from this writing for my third consecutive summer, my second on the Philmont Staff, with greater wisdom and appreciation for the country that I love.

-Ed Cottrell
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