

RETURN TO SADDLE MOUNTAIN

After 28 years, Coast Weekend contributor Matt Love revisits Clatsop County's tallest peak — and an episode from his past

Story by MATT LOVE

Several months ago, I took a “float” in a sensory deprivation chamber at the Prana Wellness Center in Astoria. It was my first time doing so, and I went into the experience with all sorts of expectations.

None of those expectations materialized.

Instead, while floating, my mind flooded with images of Saddle Mountain, and the imagery was so intense that I sensed the mountain calling me to return after a 28-year absence to reconsider a poignant episode from my past.

Only a fool doesn't heed a call like that.

I am no fool. On July 12, I climbed Saddle Mountain with my good friend Leigh Oviatt. Someone else was there with us, too, in spirit. Her name was Janet. We hiked the mountain together in 1987, as boyfriend and girlfriend. We were both 22 years old.

through an astonishing variety of different floras.

On the Sunday afternoon Leigh and I made our ascent, the parking lot at the trailhead was jammed, and we encountered dozens of friendly people of all ages and all nationalities during the two-and-a-half hours it took to reach the top and 90 minutes back down. We also met some of the coolest dogs I've come across in recent memory, including a pug and a dachshund. Yes, a dachshund made it to the top of Saddle Mountain!

As I hiked, I thought about Janet; she was attending an art school in Los Angeles when we met on the patio of a Portland bar that overlooked the Willamette River. I was working as a teacher's aide in an elementary school, coaching junior high football and basketball, and thinking about a possible future career as a teacher.

We hit it off in spectacular fashion and immediately started going out. I was blown away by her talent as a graphic designer, and she was the first woman who introduced me to the importance of having a defined aesthetic in the creative things you accomplish. She was a great teacher of art and beauty. She had the greatest laugh I've ever heard. I confided in her my secret desire to become a writer, and she encouraged me — with a little profanity — to get on with it.

During the course of our 18-month relationship, I wrote her at least 300 letters, sometimes three a day. It was probably my first book even though I didn't realize it at the time.

I visited her in Los Angeles on several occasions and helped move her back to Portland after she graduated.

We drove U.S. Highway 101 all the way to Oregon in a 30-year old pickup truck that seemed right out of “The Grapes of Wrath” with all her stuff loaded up and tarped down. It was the road trip of a lifetime.

Eighteen months. That was it. Back in Portland, I made a fatal error with her, and she abruptly moved to Seattle and disappeared from my life for what I thought was going to be forever.

Janet reappeared out of the blue a few years later, newly married to a fine man, forgave me, and wanted to forge a new friendship with me. I couldn't believe her compassion toward me. I didn't deserve it.

And a friendship is exactly what resulted, a unique friendship that imbues me to this day.

When we reconnected, Janet had become preeminent in her professional field, and I hadn't written a word for publication. She kept encouraging me and insisted that I give up conventional wisdom in pursuing my dream.

It was and remains the best advice about writing I have ever received. I only wish she could have read some of my books, especially the one about rain, which is a lot about having your heart broken and forgiveness.

My recollection of our 1987 hike is vague; most of it derives from a photograph of Janet and me at the summit. I don't recall who took it. She's wearing a gray hooded sweatshirt and I, a light blue jacket. There is a sliver of snow in front of us and

that confuses me. What time of the year did we take the hike?

We are both wearing Converse Chuck Taylors — she white low cuts, me black high tops. Today, that makes me laugh. The very idea of hiking Saddle Mountain in Chuck Taylors is ludicrous. But then again, maybe not, since I wore shabby skate shoes this time and found them totally inadequate. Hiking tip: If you decide to climb Saddle Mountain, wear proper hiking shoes or boots. They are absolutely essential for the last brutal stretch over rock scabble and wire mesh.

When Janet and I reached the top, I thought our future together seemed limitless. It was not.

When I reached the top the second time, I was hoping I would remember more about that day with Janet. I did not.

After she died, her husband graciously returned all the letters I wrote to her. I still have them; I've never read them. They have always made my hands tremble when I hold them. After my return to Saddle Mountain and revisiting my relationship with Janet, I think it might be time.

Perhaps our story isn't over.



Photos by Leigh Oviatt



Matt Love lives in Astoria and is the author/editor of 14 books about Oregon, including “Of Walking in Rain.” They are available at coastal bookstores and through www.nestuccaspitpress.com.

Submitted photo

Contributor Matt Love, right, sits with his girlfriend, Janet, in this 1987 photo taken at the summit of Saddle Mountain.

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