

Climbing into the Saddle

Story and photos by
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The sun is high, mid-day. Breezes soft as eagle down eddy down rugged mountain trails, seeking nooks and chasms, the soft underarms of flat Hemlock boughs. An Edward Munch sun: blood-red, penetrating, sensuous — I'm back on Saddle Mountain.

And leave it to me to go hiking with two women, both in superb shape with a gait ordained like fleet-footed goats. And a man, strong, easy and lanky. All this two days before my 67 birthday. All this in — let me say — fair to midline shape.

But listen, all you Silvers; this hike is for you, for us. This bluebird day, Saddle Mountain is steeped in sunlight, stubbled with sunlight. Swabbed, sluiced and swathed in sunlight. Has something shifted? Wildflowers dot the rich green landscape like so much confetti. Count the plants on your fingers if you must: Indian paintbrush, foxglove, western trillium, buttercups, a stunning yellow lily called the "Tiger." Asters, figworts and sedums. And salmonberries. You're right: We've used up all our fingers. And thimble berries. And blackberries, sweet and ripe.

Darice Grass is one of the two mountain goats. She cooks at Cindy Hayward's Willapa Bay AiR, an artist in residence facility in Oysterville, Washington. Cooks very well, indeed. I know that firsthand. She cheffed at the Shelburne. She is an inquisitive cook, true to the natural and the bold. She walks just as boldly.

Luey Anderson is my wife's sister. At middle-age, she works out hard, and it shows. She is fit, lovely and sensitive. Her spirituality runs deep. Most the way up the mountain, the ladies raced ahead.

Nels Flesher is the Lutheran minister in Chinook. He is of sharp mind, long-legged and retains a propensity toward Christian kindness. I say that because he hung back with me, pacing his ascent with my slower footfall. We slowed for plants and overviews and discussed trees. We dissected logging and its aftermath, good books ("Zealot," "Plover," "The Boys in the Boat" and "Dune," for a few) and the prophets and Messiahs. And the disciples of Jesus Christ.

John Muir came up last. "That man transitioned his love of nature like a light that emanates from a body." That assessment by Nels caught me speechless. The preacher is an admirer of the environment. Muir, in his own way, was a preacher and a prophet. His legacy saved the West, or at least presentable patches of the West. Like John the apostle, he changed attitudes. John the apostle and John Muir the naturalist rise up like the twin peaks of this mountain.

As near as I can tell, Saddle Mountain has been logged twice. Now it belongs to the people. That's you and me, a few of the lucky. You simply must hike here. You don't have to climb to the top, to the 3,283-foot summit, or complete the 5.5-mile hike. The trail unwinds like an enchanted fairy tale, one with a happy ending. Vistas are spectacular. Plant life is an education and an illumination. And all this is close to home. The trail head is about 40 minutes south of Astoria, the River City. The twin pinnacles and saddle have dominated the skyline since the First Peoples. It rises up today above a long penetrating blanket of coastal fog, and it soothes.

The ladies slowed their pace. Nels and I caught up. The trail steepened. My breath quickened hard. My heart beat



The views from Saddle Mountain are of forest, clear cuts, hills and valleys.



A maidenhair fern clings to the steep cliffs.

pulsed like the Little Drummer Boy. The mountain was dry as ancient bone. The four of us talked about that. You know, global warming. A bad fire was burning in Wenatchee. Another on the Olympic Peninsula, the wettest spot in the Northwest. For lack of water, the Central Valley in California (the great farm belt) has slumped by a foot. Seven states in the West are in severe drought conditions, and — get this — we (all us people) don't like to talk about it.

An hour later, the summit approached. I kept thinking about John Muir, his vision quest, his wins and losses.

From this lofty pinnacle — as far as eyes can see — the world is logged and manicured. Below the mountain, all is clear-cut, not once, but twice. Clear-cut all the way to California. Where great cedar kissed the sky, third-growth Douglas fir dominates. Life expectancy is 33 years, annual three to four percent rotations. Highbred Fir rarely reach 16 inches in diameter.

But our mood wasn't dour. We were excited, ebullient, proud. I was certainly. Once more, I had reached a summit. How many more years, I thought, can I do this?

Butterflies were mating



Nels Flesher looks up at the summit of Saddle Mountain.

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on the mountaintop. Ravens croaking and flowers blooming. We dug into our day packs. I had leftovers from Drina Daisy's, wonderful morsels of lamb and cheese and sausage. I emptied my water bottle, stared at the space before me, which at the time of Muir, would have been nearly impenetrable wilderness. Today, the majority of Clatsop County is in private timber. Pacific County is nearly 80 percent. Well, we are a capitalist nation, a country exalting in dollars and profit. We are, aren't we? George Weyerhaeuser bought up much of the Pacific Northwest, becoming, in time, the eighth richest man ever in the United States. Back then, five acres cost a buck. Wilderness, after all, was an obstacle to be overcome, to be conquered, logged, graded and sold. Some things don't change. Perhaps, we should not be too critical of

our predecessors. Are we that much different? To quote Bob Dylan, "Money doesn't talk, it swears."

We scurry down the Saddle. Dry clay and loose gravel crumble under foot. I picked the wrong shoes. Several times I slide onto my rump. High in the trees, raven cackle.

Native legend tells a story about thunderbird. The bird laid eggs on the summit of this mountain. Angry gods shook the mountain (Were they mad at wily raven?) and the eggs fell and shattered. The First People descended. In truth we know they arrived in tiny numbers about 12,000 years ago. The land sustained them with a cornucopia of plenty. Living was rich then. The Chinook people multiplied. Salmon were as abundant as a man's thoughts. Thick as the lush berries that dangle from heavy limbs along the trail. Eat the berries and be joyful. I can hear Muir saying something like that. Or another version by William Carlos Williams. "They were delicious, so sweet, and so cold."

How might Muir define this time and place? How might another modern poet, say, William Stafford? How will we define a later time and place called home?

This is what I offer: Take a hike up the Saddle and then come home inspired and go to work for the land. Study our history and plan a bright future. At least here, among the evergreen and painted flowers, our children will inherit a small piece of paradise. Beyond us, in four compass points, paradise is defined by the harvest of 33-year old highbred Douglas fir, mostly, 14-inches in diameter. Is it fair to say, if left alone, they might become giants? Oh! Let the light within John Muir shine upon the world.