

# The Henry's Fork Ascent

---

By Wynn C. Phillips

I lay collapsed on my back in the early afternoon shade in the High Uintas. The incessant buzz of a mosquito came and went as he searched for a bite of lunch. I again repeated quietly to myself, "I can make it. I can make it." I was resting at the Henry's Fork river crossing, maybe six miles from the trailhead, recharging my taxed body. The renewed strength was supposed to prepare me for the last assault up and over the ridge into Dollar Lake, our destination. I knew I could make it but were my muscles getting the message? Savoring the last moments of reclined rest, my mind went back to the morning's events.

It was August 12, 1998. Aaron and I awoke at "O'dark thirty" and drove to Kaysville where we met Brett and Tyler Bass. We transferred packs and gear from the old Taurus to Brett's Trooper and jumped in, having already planned a stop for breakfast in Evanston, Wyoming. We made the stop and after Brett scared the poor waitress by asking for the Manager, and then bartering \$2.00 for 20 jam packets, we continued East and then South to the Henry's Fork Trail Head.

The ride wasn't without entertainment. Brett entertained us with stories of this and that and those and these. This was his area of responsibility in his professional work and he often traveled the roads. He knew many a person, some personally, to include the police officer in Mountain View. Brett claimed that his court mandated probationary period was over and he didn't have to worry about his driving. His actions, however, tended to show a different spirit, as he carefully and vigilantly drove through the small town.

We arrived at the trailhead, off-loaded the backpacks from the Trooper, checked the equipment, and grudgingly hoisted the monster packs on our backs. The excitement of the adventure lightened the load for about ten steps. Weaving through the log gate to gain the trail started us on our way. For me the rest blurred somewhat.

The grade of the trail, though gradual, was constant. At first one could stop and rest, and then resume the steady, plodding march. Progress was realized as we moved towards Dollar Lake. But as the plodding continued, a lurking, silent adversary started to sneak up on those of us who were older. At first the effect was only a whisper and a passing, but then the senses slowly awakened to pounding heart, the short, staccato breathing, and the clouding eyes. The threat finally pounced on me with a vengeance. I now understood. Altitude affects the old! I called a halt and collapsed on a log.

Surprisingly I recovered rather quickly and started our foursome up the trail. The process, at least for me, soon became routine. That is, I would start up the trail, my breathing quickening. I

## The Henry's Fork Ascent

---

wouldn't feel too well and I would wonder why I started in the first place. Then my quickened breathing satisfied the initial oxygen deficit and everything smoothed out to a steady, plodding march that I hoped was eating up distance. Then I would suddenly hit the wall and call a halt. That was the essence of the hike except that the time between the yell of "halt" grew shorter and shorter. The stop at the river crossing had been the longest yet. The buzzing mosquito quit buzzing, meaning he had found lunch, so I rolled over, pulled myself up into a standing position, and knew the assault over the last ridge was now or never.

The other three and myself dropped down the bank, crossed the river on the log and rope bridge, and started up the other side. The last mile or so wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. I guess because of the long rest at the river crossing.

We walked into the camping area about one hundred yards southwest of Dollar Lake at sometime around 4:00 p.m. I dropped my monster pack from my shoulders for the last time that day. Without the pack I virtually floated around the area because of the sudden lightness. I set up my tent, broke out the sleeping bag and air mattress, and rested. Wasn't life grand. . .again?

After a dinner of steak and potatoes, I climbed into the sleeping bag somewhat earlier than planned. The muscles were complaining about the strain they had endured, and the lungs were trying to adjust to sucking oxygen at 11,000 feet.

The next day burst upon us with blue skies and sunshine. So far the weather could not have been better. After a rib-sticking breakfast of oatmeal and hot chocolate, the fearsome foursome decided that fishing on one of the other lakes just might be the thing. I agreed because Brett kept mentioning King's Peak, and climbing, and "real men" can make it, and other such bantering. I thought agreeing to "walk" over to a lake to fish would divert his attention. I soon learned that "walk" had a completely different meaning, with "Pathfinder" Brett.

Now "Pathfinder" had walked "them thar hills" just a year earlier. His claimed extensive knowledge of those parts along with his voiced "unequaled mountaineering skills" he seemed to ensure a quick and effortless arrival where ever we desired to go. Pathfinder allowed that by following him, we would arrive at "Cliff Lake" quickly and with the least amount of effort. Fishing for as long as we wanted was "guarrranteeeeed." His trusty sidekick, Tyler lent support to his hero's claims.

But yes, oh reader of well-told tales, the name "Cliff Lake" should have given us pause, even at the onset. "Cliff" would seem to infer a nearby mountain. Since the only "nearby mountain" we

---

## The Henry's Fork Ascent

---

could see was way off in the distance, west/southwest of where we had camped, the name "Cliff Lake" should have meant we were going some distance. That pause to think never happened. Pathfinder Brett was convincing, his manner confident, his soft patter of words comforting. Aaron and I were lulled into a false sense of security and off we went to "walk" to Cliff Lake.

As the "walk" extended into the Batten Death March, Pathfinder's convincing, confident, and comforting demeanor diminished. To gain Cliff Lake we hiked some three hours on a circuitous route which allowed for sightseeing of Henry's Fork Lake, Lake Blanchard, crossing a number of tributaries and streams, taking no-trail trails, and confirming that Brett's nickname "Pathfinder" was correctly labeled. We ended the ordeal in an uphill crawl through cold, wind-driven rain that found unbelievable avenues through our rain gear to our skin.

But we were not to be deterred from our mission—to fish Cliff Lake. So, casting our cold, wet lines into the cold, wet lake with our cold, wet hands, we soon found that even the fish had cold feet. Nary a bite, nibble, or spit was had from those fish whose size had been eulogized earlier by Pathfinder and others.

Knowing that fishing was useless and that the second wave of family hikers was scheduled to arrive at our camp in the early afternoon, we started the descent to camp. The crashing thunder and streaks of lightening rocketed around the valley and mockingly echoed from the very cliffs under which we fished.

The descent was generally unremarkable for me because the body and mind were numb from a double whammy. The first whammy was the residual negative effects on every leg muscle I owned because of the previous day's hiking, especially after taking a "walk" the same distance we had traveled from the trailhead. The second whammy was that the bugaboo altitude came back to haunt me. We were even higher in altitude since we climbed to Cliff Lake. Pathfinder and his sidekick went ahead while Aaron and I meandered along at a slower pace on the circuitous route. We actually went in an east/northeast direction to get to our due north camp. This completed the circle. We stumbled into camp just moments before the arrival of the second wave of family. Our timely arrival in camp saved face because we wanted to look like we were just lounging around. Wasn't that why we came up a day earlier, so we could lay around longer?

Actually, only some of the planned second wave arrived. As they described their trip, we found that Michael's pack strap had broken (This after repeated but ignored counseling by Pathfinder

## The Henry's Fork Ascent

---

earlier in the week that Michael needed to bring his equipment into the twentieth century and let go of his wooden frame, canvas webbing and horse-hair rope backpack. ) The broken pack frame necessitated that he and Ashley, his granddaughter, return home for the night. However, Thair and Ben from the East Coast branch of the Phillips family and Cory and Camron, the Brothers Kapetanov, arrived safe and sound. Thair, ex-celestial navigator and star gazer brought along his hand-held global positioning system (better known as a GPS) that confirmed what my body had been bemoaning. We were way up in the sky!

We sat around and talked into the evening. Ben, having promised to provide his girl friend "Kelle" a momento of his trip started by carving on a two-foot long, ten-inch thick pine log. He thought her name artfully carved would win her heart. After an hour or two, he decided that if he had just a slab of the log he could carve a much finer momento. He started sawing the log in two using a small, handheld saw. I left Ben sawing away by the fire and went to bed.

I hit the sack early again but this time both Aaron and I had a tent mate. It seems that Michael had told Cory and Cameron that they didn't need to pack in tents because "we had plenty of room." Well, upon their arrival, "plenty of room" meant my tent and Aaron's tent. We both cleaned out a few things and shared the tent space with the "K" boys.

The next morning I arose at my usual time (bathroom time, that is) and stayed in camp! I mean I didn't move. Ok, maybe a couple of times after Aaron walked over to Dollar Lake (the real meaning of walked) and did some fishing so I did to. But that was all the farther I was going. Now Pathfinder and his trusty sidekick Tyler had other plans. Pathfinder must have still been delirious from the high altitude at Cliff Lake and the Chinese water torture from the previous days rain because he and Tyler left their warm sleeping bags early and headed for King's Peak. Pathfinder later claimed they went because it was there, he wanted to bond with Tyler and he enjoyed the view. I think they left because of the suspected resurgence of harassment they were going to receive for the short "walk" of the previous day. Whatever the motivation, there goal was the peak and they did it in record time. They took the divide route and arrived at the apex of the peak before anyone else that day.

While Tyler and his man-hero, Pathfinder were frolicking among the peaks, the more rational camp members were in camp or soaking a line in Dollar Lake. Thair and Ben had traveled from sea level to 11,000 feet and so altitude was bothering them some. In fact, Ben had complained of a headache the night before but it had left by morning. With the headache gone, Ben was able to devote more time to sawing a slab off his log. He quietly sawed and sawed and sawed. Other than the constant sawing in the back ground, it was a quiet morning. The nearby

## The Henry's Fork Ascent

---

bivouacked scouts that had been shattering the solitude of the mountain with their screaming had left earlier in the morning for the peak, so one could actually hear the birds and chipmunks chirping.

The morning solitude was shattered when suddenly, from nowhere and yet from everywhere, a blood curdling, toe curling, two-octave yell swept across the placid waters of the tree-ringed retreat. Before my mind caught up with my body, the hair on the back of my neck was on end. When reason returned I realized that Michael "MadMan" Phillips had arrived on scene.

Now you will recall, oh camp sock breath, that MadMan Phillips had returned to Kaysville the day before due to malfunctioning equipment. His granddaughter's backpack had however continued up the trail because of some nice horseman who had a packhorse and lent a hand. That meant that MadMan could return traveling much lighter and benefit from the equipment already in camp.

MadMan also knew that the Jorgensen Boys, the third wave of this progressive camping experience, were coming up on Thursday morning. So he made contact with them and together they hit the trailhead in the early morning hours. Though never mentioned, nor even acknowledged, the quickness of MadMan's arrival at Dollar Lake quietly came into question among those who were there. It was only logical. The shattering of our solitude occurred about high noon. Now, either he was air dropped into the site or the Jorgensen Boys carried him on their backs. There is no other explanation. The distance, altitude, and age of MadMan made the observable inconceivable. But we will leave this topic for another day, because no matter how, MadMan Phillips had arrived and the camp would never be the same.

We "yodeled" back and sent a guide over to lead them into the campsite. The Jorgensen Boys, Tab, Mica and Joshua were happy to gain the camp. They had been up most of the night preparing for the adventure. Stacking the eight-mile hike on top of their lack of rest made them very tired (not to mention the *possible* carrying of additional weight.) Once their tent was set up, they entered it not to be seen again for some four hours. Matter of fact, except for their spokesman, Tab, they were not heard from for four days. Not that they weren't there, they just didn't talk. MadMan Phillips, on the other hand, seemed to be refreshed and none the worse for wear (another indicator that any suspicions on method of arrival might be well founded.) He started into chatter that only subsided when everyone walked out of camp.

The grand entry of the third wave was interrupted by Tyler and his man-hero Pathfinder. They stumbled into camp from the King's Peak excursion happy but tired. Though MadMan

## The Henry's Fork Ascent

---

complained a time or two that he wanted to make the hike and they hadn't waited for him, He knew that the trip would have stretched him to the limit, and possibly beyond. Since MadMan was somewhat beyond limits anyway, it was best he didn't go. Pathfinder explained that because of not knowing the weather forecast nor the schedule of the various progressive waves of campers coming to our camp, Pathfinder had to commit. And he was committed.

The rest of the third day continued in the same manner, that is rest, relax, tell lies and exaggerate the truth. Ben continued to saw on his log, having almost reached 1/3 the way through. MadMan told, retold, and retold the retold stories. They included his past trips to the peak, missions to South Carolina, the trip to Hawaii, and every trip to Kaysville made in his lifetime. He recalled the 30-foot fish he caught in Cliff Lake with the 310 scouts he lead, leaving the other 523 scouts in camp who were too lazy to "walk" to the lake.

Thair threw in a few stories of his own, not the least of which was the old saga of, "I hiked the Appalachian Trail ten times in two days and it was straight up in both directions. It was so cold that my digital watch froze and didn't start showing numbers again until Spring. Why, I sneezed once and the sound froze so I put it in my pocket and took it home so I could say "bless you" when it thawed." Ben, ceasing sawing for a short second, chimed in that it was "all true and I saw it." He even remembered the sneeze thawing. Families stick together forever.

Cameron was starting to create his own stories that he could use in later years with his kids. His slow application of natural camouflage around his face, ears and nose was done so well that he was disappearing into the earth right before our eyes. This condition had started the day before but it takes aging for camouflage to become real effective. In fact, he often reclined in the dirt next to the fire and literally disappeared from sight. We would only notice him again when smoke would start curling up from his melting sneakers, giving away his hiding place.

Wet was Camron's general status. He had chased fish and fowl, chipmunks, and any and all rodents around and through Dollar Lake, soaking himself below the waist. He had crawled into his sleeping bag in that condition, turning down any offers of warm clothes or help and had stayed awake most of the night shivering like mad (oh the lessons of the school of hard knocks.) Well, this third night was not going to be the same. Aaron, along with others to include me, put Cameron on a checklist and schedule and he slept warm, comfy, and sound the rest of the trip. Sound in this case refers to sleeping "in sound" not "soundly."

As earlier mentioned, Cameron shared a tent with Aaron. Aaron and me have had separate tents for camping after our first camping experience years ago. Snoring was an immediate

## The Henry's Fork Ascent

---

deterrent to any type of rest or relaxation within 20 or 30 feet of where Aaron was sleeping. So in this case Cameron was in this "sound" environment.

Bedtime for MadMan Phillips was a sight to see. Running on his earlier observation to the "K" kids that there was plenty of tent space and having carried up a light pack because he would use Ashley's equipment brought up by the pack horse, MadMan was without a tent. There just wasn't one available. But MadMan was not to be denied a night's rest. Aaron, bringing with him a hammock because of sleeping habits in Brazil, offered this device for a place that MadMan could call home. Once strung between two trees and having been instructed by Aaron on the proper method of sleeping in a hammock (diagonal as opposed to end-to-end) MadMan prepared for bed. After getting the sleeping bag just right in the hammock, he carefully crawled in, not wanting to upset the cart, as it were. Once gaining equilibrium the great camper of campers slowly pulled the plastic sheet over everything, hoping to keep the mosquitoes and rain out, should either threaten. Well, other than the racket of snoring which was another reason no tent was offered to MadMan Phillips, all seemed peaceable. And in fact it was. Only in the early dawn's light could one see that, because of the constant downward pressure of extreme weight on the securing ropes, the hammock had sagged to where MadMan's butt was dragging the ground. Now this wasn't all bad because the stability provided by the butt on the ground kept him from swinging in the wind.

Although MadMan would have claimed a good night's rest even if bears had mauled him and lightning had struck him and rain had drenched him, he told us he had a good night's rest because he was a "mountain man!"

Friday arrived with the sun coming over the Eastern Mountains and the night's reverie broken by the crackling of fire curling along new wood. MadMan Phillips' fish stories were still ringing in our ears from the night before as we planned the day. After some discussion, group-think took over and the majority voted to hike to Cliff Lake. Hike we now knew was the correct term. I wouldn't let them say walk or anything like it. Ben reluctantly set aside his half-sawed through log and joined the crowd.

We were on our way but this time the hike would be different. Technology in the form of a latter-day liahona GPS was our compass in the hands of Guide Thair. He had already programmed in way points, turn points, cross points, lateral points and point points. He calculated sun spots, gravity affect, wind speed, mountain angle and true-north variance. There was no way we would lose our way. He knew where to go and how to get there. Unfortunately the GPS system didn't understand rain runoff, lateral water, standing water, rushing water and ponds. It

## The Henry's Fork Ascent

---

couldn't predict deep gorge, large rocks, big trees or thick brush. After a somewhat circuitous route we once again conquered the surrounding ridge of Cliff Lake.

With a beautiful blue sky and sunshine to our back we enjoyed the leisure pass time of fishing for the "big one." The water was so clear that it was easy to see the fish 20 to 30 feet from the shore. Although not quite as large as alluded to by MadMan Phillips, catching one would make any one happy. The rub was in the catch. It was spawning time and the fish were not too interested in what we threw out as bait. Some of the stuff even tempted me to nibble such delights. It was amazing the will power those fish had in turning down the delectable snacks. Camron, though, was not deterred (from fishing, that is.)

With true grit he once again wandered the shore in search of that one, good bite—and he got it! Once the fish was on his line, he didn't know what to do with it since he was standing knee-high in water. Through both luck and skill he worked the fish over to the bank where help arrived to secure the landing. The official measurements of the fish were 16 inches long and weighing two lbs. You couldn't have found a prouder guy. Tab also hooked on to a good sized fish, beating Camron's fish in length but not in weight. Ben, having traveled literally thousands of miles to stand next to this body of water and fish, pulled one in that had sentimental value rather than size and weight.

The day seemed to slip by with each cast of the bait. Again we descended the mountain to our quiet camp in the meadow below. The numbers of people were growing and it for sure someone would open a McDonald's in the very near future. One group of campers that settled in near our camp was made up of survivors of cancer who returned to King's Peak each year to prove they had the fight to overcome all adversity.

The night was announced by purple lights playing off the surrounding peaks and the calm of both wind and water. Drawn to the fire like insects, we sat around and reminisced about the last few days and the good times we had. We talked again of brothers and friends, of good times and bad. We talked of Pathfinder and our "walk" to Cliff Lake. We talked of the miracle appearance of MadMan Phillips, hardly out of breath after eight miles. We talked of the no talking of the Jorgensen Boys. Yes, we remembered all we could of the recent past because we didn't want to think of the near future—the hike out the next day. But we were determined to take it like men! And so we headed for bed.

Our goal the next morning was to depart for the trailhead by 9:30 a.m. and we came real close to meeting the goal. After breaking camp we started to empty our packs of the extra foodstuffs



## The Henry's Fork Ascent

---

we had brought but not consumed. Packages of English muffins, jars of peanut butter, soups of all types, crackers and cheese galore, and other sundry items were placed in the last, sacrificial fire before we departed.

The Jorgensen Boys decided that they wanted to try for a new record in getting to the trailhead (new since no one knew of any previous record). So off they went with Aaron joining them. The residual campers started in a more reasonable manner, placing one foot in front of the other in a much slower cadence. Camron, now carrying a pack with less weight, still thought that he had the weight of the world on his shoulders. Pathfinder, having experienced whining by others in his scouting days knew the remedy—distraction. Starting with a few questions on computer games he skillfully led Cameron along the trail of all known games, high scores, techniques, and how to win "the big one." With the distraction of talk, Cameron forgot what he was carrying and ceased any complaints. With the chatter of computer games in front, blended in with the steady beat of shoe on trail in the center, the clack clack of my walking stick in the back, all synchronized with the ebb and flow of booming base sounds of the river, it was quite a surround-sound natural experience. The beat went on for just under four hours. As we wove through the trailhead fence and walked to the cars, those who went before started up the expected welcoming banter of "what took you so long?" and "you guys are really slow" and like phrases of derision. They didn't understand that they had paid a price by hiking out in three hours. The price paid was enjoying nature at its best.

Once all equipment was loaded in the two vehicles, and we started on our way, driving out was an adventure unto itself. MadMan Phillips had borrowed the new "K" truck from Dan. It was a monster silver pickup with king cab, heavy-duty everything, and turboized lug nuts. This machine gave MadMan a feeling of driving superiority and a chance to show that he had the "right stuff" even if he didn't climb King's Peak. As the shortest route to the traditional burger bar was discussed, MadMan thought he could get there faster one way than Pathfinder could going another way. The obvious challenge was on.

As Pathfinder meandered into the parking lot of the burger bar, the Silver Monster was already there. Upon joining the turbo-charged riders already in booths, no one would even allude to the techniques of power-slide cornering, straightaway hair raising acceleration, or riverbed air-catching jumping used by MadMan Phillips in his quest for honor. In fact, some of them couldn't even speak. Of course MadMan talked as if he had driven the road using the same techniques he would use to haul five ladies from a rest home. So the truth concerning this portion of the adventure might never be known unless the vow of silence is broken.

## The Henry's Fork Ascent

---

Well, the latter-day mountain men returned to the valley of Zion with five days of beard (for those who could grow one,) mountain grime on their clothes, bodies, and feet, and large smiles on their faces. The excellent, safe trip would go down in each family history with each hiker recounting his own story. Pathfinder would have more than one story to tell, and MadMan Phillips would recount his epic story in three volumes. Oh, and yes, Ben gave up on carving and bought a small trinket for Kelle.

Me? I wrote this factual account so that the true story will forever be memorialized as the "Henry's Fork Ascent. "

September 1998