The Other Side of the Mountain

By Patti Walsh

We called ourselves the Pinecliffe Trailbailers—in a nod to the unincorporated community in Gilpin County, Colorado, where my friend Patty lived. As such, we set out to hike, pike, or otherwise strike up, down, and around the ridges and gulches that hunched beneath the icy shadows of Arapaho Peak in the vast mountains west of Boulder.

No matter how high you climb, however, no matter how many rocks you examine, no matter what lens you use to photograph every last peak, against blazingly clear or torturously steel-clad skies, you can never unlock a mountain's mystique. But we tried.

Like the bear in the children's song, we went over the mountains to see what we could see. Sometimes it was a breathtaking view of the Continental Divide with snowy peaks scraping the sky. Or a glimpse of the Moffat Tunnel, which burrows under it. Or the rugged, remote, and wrung out remnants of what was once Ute country.

But sometimes, it was just the other side of the mountain.

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Early on a fall morning in 1979, Patty and I set out on a 13-mile day trip across the southern col of Mount Chittenden, which squats below Arapaho Peak and the Arapaho Glacier. Our plan was ambitious, but very attainable. We'd take the Jasper Lake Trail, crest the Divide at Devil's Thumb Pass (elevation 11,775 feet), then loop back.

Fit and outfitted, we shared our plans with loved ones and stuffed our backpacks with a topographical map, compass, food, water, flashlight, matches, and waterproof clothing that could double as emergency overnight protection, but we had no intention of needing that.

"Pinecliffe Trailbailers!" we called, and headed to the ski village of Eldora in nearby

Nederland.

Arriving at the trailhead mid-morning, we made our way to the site of the old mining town of Hessie. At an elevation of 9,000 feet, we sated our lungs and souls with rarified air as we set upon the Middle Boulder Creek Trail. After a few miles, we veered northwest on a pack trail.

We made good time. Stopping for lunch along the creek, we dangled our feet in the cold mountain water. Patty, with a long henna-red braid cascading beneath a light brown Stetson, raised a can of lager to memorialize our adventure.

"To the Pinecliffe Trailbailers." She toasted us. I reciprocated the gesture and recorded the sentiment with a photograph.

Skirting Chittenden's peak, we pressed on toward Devil's Thumb. Although the terrain was demanding, explosive displays of mountains, rapids, and wildflowers eased the trek. We continued our ascent for a couple of hours until we reached the pristine landscape of Jasper Lake. In awe, I began to set up my camera while Patty consulted the topo map, compass, and sky.

"We don't have time for that," she chided. I felt as if she had caught me stealing cookies before dinner. "Not if we were going to cross the Divide and make it back by dark."

We never considered doubling back. I reluctantly repacked my equipment, but my brain's shutter continued to click away as we climbed a thousand feet from Jasper's 10,800-foot elevation. According to the map, we were pretty close, but neither of us read those tight contour lines as steep inclines.

I mentally recorded the disappearance of vegetation. Wind-sculpted bristlecone pines gave way first to the stunted and dead-looking krummholz, and finally to lichen clinging to rocks. We clung to rocks, too, at one point hugging a sheer cliff as we side-stepped along a foot-wide ledge. Okay, maybe it was two-feet wide. But below was nothing but air and scree.

We assumed that having crested the Divide, we should have been heading down. Instead, we scrambled into the sky as trail markers guided us along the Divide's jagged backbone. I dropped to all fours, my heavy legs relying on desperate fingers to claw my body up rocky rubble in thin air.

My heart pounded—was it altitude or panic? It didn't matter. My lungs craved oxygen. I couldn't walk and breathe at the same time. Did I say my heart pounded? I settled into a rhythm. Step. Breathe. Pound. Pause. Step. Breathe. Pound. Pause. But it wasn't enough.

"Hurry," Patty exhorted. "If we have to spend an emergency overnight, we need to get below treeline before dark." She was right. Although the sky was still full of sunshine, shadows were deepening. Whipping us from all directions, a cold wind reminded us that hypothermia kills. "Just over the next ridge we'll see Denver," she would promise. "Then we'll be on our way down."

Although the sprawling city lay directly southeast of us, there was no sight of Denver over the next ridge. Or the next. Or the next. All I saw was the backside of a red-haired woman in a rock-colored Stetson that kept disappearing over each successive fold of rock.

"Here," she said at one point, bribing me with me a brownie. "The sugar will give you a burst of energy."

A brownie?

"I … can't … *walk*…. and … *breathe* … at … the… same … time," I sputtered in exasperation, precious reserves of air bursting from my air-starved lungs. "And … you …want … me …to … *walk* …. and … *breathe* … and … *eat?*"

I didn't eat the brownie. But about that time, I promised myself a beer and a brandy just to get down alive. That completed the mantra. Step. Breathe. Pound. Pause. Beer. Brandy. Step

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Then we saw Denver. And the next problem.

Beneath the intensely blue sky, rippling with clouds, the Sun was poised to sink behind jaggedly endless snow peaks, hiding the trail and its markers. In controlled panic, we consulted the map and compass. We searched—on, around, and under every rock for something—anything—that would tell us where to go. We spotted a small cairn with one rock offset to the southeast. It was the only thing that could be read as a sign, so we followed it.

Unsure of whether we were following a trail or a dry creek, we nonetheless knew we were moving in the right direction—down and east. We prayed that we were headed toward Eldora, but anywhere off the mountain was a good start.

Trees began to reappear and thicken as the rough terrain gradually leveled out and the wind died down. At dusk, we passed an unoccupied tent. We paused, not knowing if we wanted to encounter a lone camper in this isolated stretch. Perhaps he would be good company if we needed to spend the night. Perhaps not. We kept walking.

As sunlight disappeared above, the night lights of Eldora twinkled below. We spotted my car, alone in the parking lot, maybe a quarter mile directly below us.

“Let’s just head down there.” I pointed in its general direction.

“We stick to the trail,” Patty said, without breaking pace. “It’s safer. Ravines and cliffs are hidden in the trees.” Resisting the urge to bushwhack our way to the parking lot, I heeded her wisdom.

About a half hour later, the Pinecliffe Trailbailers collapsed into the safety of my car. We stopped for a beer and a brandy in Nederland before heading back to Patty’s house.

When I fell, exhausted, into bed that night, I could not sleep. It was not the day’s beauty,

peril, or painful joints. It was the mountain itself. Towering over my dreams, it mocked me.

For I had dipped my toes into its life-coursing waters, pressed my body into its cold face, and clawed my hands and feet across its age-worn wrinkles. Somewhere, as I scrambled for breath and a glimpse of Denver, I thought I had sensed its pulse, tapped its soul, and tasted its vast omnipotence.

But with grit still under my nails, I realized we had hiked the mountain not to grasp it, not to conquer it, not to unlock its mystique. No, we had hiked the mountain to see what we could see. And all that we could see, and all that we could see, was the other side of the mountain, as far as we could see.