



Exploring Mount Rainier

By Frank L. Henninger

Mountains are unique features on our planet earth. They are the direct result of geologic upheaval and violent fracturing of the earth's crust. Human beings have considered them both sacred ground, the land of the gods, and ghastly anomalies, despised for their intemperate climate and unattainable summits. Men cannot seem to decide if the appeal of mountains is due to how large and high they are or how small they make us feel. I am sure both are true for many of us. Mountains are mysterious, the repository of secrets of the natural world, by their very existence a direct challenge to the abilities of man. What makes mountains sacred is that they are usually pristine environments, and to human minds pristine nature is intrinsically sacred. Most climbers and inhabitants of mountains are not men, but bears, beetles, butterflies, bobcats, mountain goats, sheep, chamois, gorals, takins, marmots, ibex, musk-ox and mountain finches. Men are the least common creatures on mountains.

My love of the outdoors and wilderness began in my childhood. I loved to explore the forests and streams near my suburban home in Bucks County, in southeastern Pennsylvania. My favorite woods were about five minutes from home, a place with many trails, a modest little creek and even a swampy area with tall cattails. I spent many an afternoon there during the 1960's with siblings and friends, running or riding our bikes down the trails, building "forts" and tree houses, or damming the creek with logs, sticks and mud. Sometimes, we just sat under the trees telling childhood stories. My love of mountains is the primary, though not exclusive, focus of my personal love of wilderness. My own deep yearning for wild experiences, and the similar experiences of others, fascinates me. This fascination has led me to many personal

expeditions in the great outdoors, including two climbs on Mount Rainier-in the summers of 1999 and 2000.

Mount Rainier is the crown jewel of the Cascades Mountains. Sacred ground to Native Americans, who called her “Tacoma” and would not set foot on her, she now draws many to her lofty flanks. Many know her today as simply “The Mountain.” With her summit at Columbia Crest at an elevation of 14,411 feet, she towers over the surrounding landscape, much of which is at, or close to, sea level. She is the most dominant physical feature visible from anywhere in the Seattle environs, visible even from many points out on the Olympic Peninsula and even from Portland, Oregon. She sits in the center of Mount Rainier National Park, which comprises 330,000 acres in Washington State. She is one of the most accessible and climbable of major peaks in the continental United States and is the highest peak in Washington State and in the Cascades. Mount Rainier is also the 30th highest peak in the entire United States and the 5th highest in the contiguous 48 states. Her geographic proximity fifty-six miles from Seattle adds not only to her renown, since so many see her regularly, but also to her accessibility. Having excellent guide services like Rainier Mountaineering, Inc. within the national park that bears her name also supports the possibility of climbing her, even for novices like me. About 10,000 people attempt her summit annually; of these, only about half succeed.

The sight of a mountain like Mount Rainier, to those of us who love mountains, causes a brief increase in the pulse and a sudden, quiet, yet involuntary intake of air through pursed lips, as though our whole being is saying, “Wow! Look at the beauty of that!” This physical reaction is usually followed immediately by the thought, “I must go there. A mountain lover like me has a desire for mountains that could perhaps be best described as “mountain lust.”

In an interesting twist of fate, the very office-bound indoor job in which I daydream so much about mountains led me to the possibility of climbing Mount Rainier. Through my business relationship with JanSport, Inc., I met Skip Yowell, co-founder and current Vice President for Global Public Relations. In 1990 Skip visited our campus with Lou Whittaker, founder and owner of Rainier Mountaineering, Inc. since 1968. They showed slides and lectured about their 1989 trip to Mount Kangchenjunga, at

28,169 ft., the third highest peak in the world, located in the Himalayas. I was fascinated with their mountain experiences and privately resolved that I would, someday, have such an experience myself. Shortly after this initial meeting Skip invited me for the first time to climb with him on the annual JanSport Dealer Climb of Mt. Rainier. JanSport has been conducting these climbs, using the guide services of Lou Whittaker's Rainier Mountaineering, since 1974. I politely thanked him and said I would consider it for some undetermined future year.

It was in 1998 when I was reviewing possible topics with my graduate advisor for conducting an "Independent Study" semester in completion of my Masters degree at Villanova that an idea first hit me. I could schedule myself to climb Mount Rainier with JanSport the following June and record the personal experience as part of my research. What a great idea! Of course, my wife quickly saw the confluence of conditions and desires that led me to this inescapable conclusion-I would call Skip Yowell at JanSport and sign up for the next climb.

Having booked my spot on the summer 1999 JanSport Annual Dealer Climb in late August 1998 gave me a distinct advantage in preparation for the climb. By virtue of arranging to be on this scheduled climb so far in advance, I had almost ten full months to prepare. I realized that to rise from virtual couch potato status to that of a well-prepared adventurer I was going to need all of those months to prepare.

Before this decision in my life I had been a normal, almost sedentary adult, participating in physical events such as the occasional hike in a nearby park, weekend afternoons of kayaking on a local lake, or casual bicycle riding. Nothing I did physically was regular, consistent or particularly challenging. I knew from my first conversations with Skip Yowell and Paul Delorey (then President of JanSport) that I needed to not only embark on a planned system of training, but that I needed a lifestyle change. I needed to begin daily cardio-pulmonary fitness training and climbing-specific training. I also decided that, at 223 pounds on my six-foot frame, with an arthritic left knee, I wanted to lose about 20-30 pounds before the climb.

So, through a planned program of dieting and exercise, I prepared myself physically for this adventure. I lost 20 pounds by the end of January. Every pound I lost was that much less of my own weight that I would be carrying around all the time, but

especially on Mount Rainier. Everyone with whom I spoke who was a climber, or has done this climb with JanSport, gave the same advice-get in good cardio-pulmonary condition, to handle the altitude better. Also, I was advised to spend as much time as possible walking with a weighted backpack, preferably up and down hills or steps, gradually increasing the amount of weight.

The admonition that appears on the Rainier Mountaineering web site for their five day Camp Muir Seminar kept coming to mind- "You cannot over train for this event." The philosophy behind my training strategy was to eliminate every possible reason for not summiting Mount Rainier that was under my control. If I could be as ready as possible physically, I would not only enjoy the climb experience more, but would stand the best chance of summiting. That is, if the mountain's weather allowed us, on the selected day in June 1999.

Finally, as the trip approached, I began to find that I had a growing sense of readiness and anticipation. I believed that, no matter what, I would go to this mountain and climb, that I would be safe, happy and capable, and that I would treasure it for the rest of my life. I just needed to continue the course I had started and everything would be enjoyable, challenging and rewarding. I was ready; the mountain was waiting.

And so, I have climbed Mount Rainier twice, and attempted her summit, and in the seeking found much of what I expected, and much I did not expect. I climbed Mount Rainier in June 1999 as part of the JanSport Annual Dealer Climb. We did not get a summit attempt due to extreme weather on the upper mountain. But I did have my first taste of real mountaineering and lived for five days at Camp Muir, at 10,000 feet on the south side of the mountain. In June 2000 I repeated the experience and this time got higher on the mountain than before, to Ingraham Flats at 11, 200 feet. But once again bad weather and avalanche risk kept our team from going for the summit. Both trips had many memorable experiences and I learned much about my personal response to extreme physical challenges and the mental attitude that it takes to prepare for and pursue a dream of this nature. On these climbs I have been in the company of several famous mountaineers, such as Lou Whittaker and Nawang Gombu Sherpa. Training and climbing with them and their comrades at Rainier

Mountaineering has been a privilege for which I am forever grateful. I will return to Mount Rainier again in June 2002, still hoping to get to her summit. But I have learned the lesson firsthand that it is the journey that is the true destination.

I am a member of the infamous “baby boomer” generation, born squarely in the mid 1950’s. As such, I share a common childhood experience with the millions of others also born between 1948 and 1962. Like many of my generation, I was more philosophical, idealistic, romantic and spiritual than my parents. I constantly asked “Why?” I think, for me, the answer to that question inevitably lies outside, in the wonderful landscape and geography of North America. The older I got the more personal my philosophy became and the more my spirituality became connected to the world of trees, streams and mountains.

My trail of wilderness experiences eventually led me to Mount Rainier, my own sacred Mt. Meru, and my personal, mythical Mt. Analogue. And it has also led me to write at length about the transformation that these adventures have caused in my life. My tale is an odyssey of sorts, a quest, a pilgrimage, and a search for meaning on sacred ground. It is the autobiography of a wayfarer, a seeker of “the way.” I have attempted to explain the ineffable, using the tale of a journey that is simultaneously physical and metaphysical.

To use a term I learned many years ago in reading Robert Heinlein’s science fiction classic, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, I have always been interested in “grokking” the universe. That is, I seek to know and understand, through the power of my own intuition and awareness of the world around me. A formal definition of grokking might include “to cogitate” or “exploring the noosphere.” My climbs of Mount Rainier were as much about grokking the universe as they were about physical challenge and learning new skills. I hoped to grok my way to some new realizations about life, and to begin charting a new course from my mid-life years to wherever and whenever my years ended. I understand it to mean “thinking really hard” about something, usually of a philosophical or spiritual nature. Others might use terms like contemplating, analyzing or extrapolating.

I realize now that for most of my life I have “sought the higher ground,” both figuratively and literally, with my interests in both philosophy and mountains. It is,

perhaps, a unique form of acrophilia. My two trips to Mount Rainier were pilgrimages to a sacred mountain. They have been personal journeys of discovery and spiritual exercises. Through them I have a deeper connection to what I understand of the divine and a clearer understanding of my place in the universe. Mount Rainier is my cathedral; the sounds of gear clinking, sleet hitting my helmet and crampons crunching on ice are the choir. And the actions and events I participated in there are sacramental to me. Like any good pilgrimage, there I realized more deeply both my physical mortality and my spiritual immortality. I have to admit that all of this has been quite a lot to grok, or “wrap my brain around.” Much of my life has been a pursuit of the pure, the true, and the possible, essentially discovering my own sense of spirituality. I was pleased that on the mountain, as the world literally fell away and was below my awareness; I found that my spiritual awareness increased and became increasingly more available to me. The trick now is to take the realizations and awareness with me to the land beneath the clouds, down the mountain. The allure of the mountains is stronger now than ever. Once you have breathed the rarefied air of the mountain and felt its spirit move within, you dream of the next time.

The famous American naturalist, John Muir, said, “The clearest way into the Universe is through a forest wilderness.” He believed in the transcendental philosophy that saw natural objects and places as the earthly manifestations of God. He personally had many experiences in which wilderness inspired and refreshed him and about which he wrote marvelous accounts for us to read and emulate.

Fortunately we are living in times when concern for the environment and the preservation of natural wilderness areas is growing worldwide. And not a second too soon, either, as we all read the more dire warnings about global warming, depletion of natural resources, record number of extinctions and impending environmental holocaust. There are many outspoken voices and organizations calling for stricter controls on environmental pollution, greater allocation of large areas as wilderness tracts and a new wilderness ethic. These are quite literally “voices crying in the wilderness” and are also “voices crying for the wilderness.” They all want to preserve something that is a primal human experience-the experience of wilderness. This new wilderness ethic calls for two basic human priorities-careful stewardship of and personal contact with wilderness.

Our human population of more than six billion continues to grow, with estimates of nine billion by 2050. As more and more of us flock to the wilderness to reconnect with our universe, and with ourselves, these priorities will be even more important. Individual personal wilderness experience is the key to the global transformation required to remedy the ecological crisis on planet earth. We must commit ourselves and our governments to protect the pristine wilderness lands that we still have.

I encourage you, the reader, to begin planning your own wilderness pilgrimage to the destination of your choice. It does not matter when or how or where you go, just that you experience it in your own special way. Find a way to refocus on that internal compass that points the way for your life. Be a seeker of wild places. You do not have to summit any mountains to be an amateur mountaineer, nor swim the English Channel to be a swimmer, nor hike the entire Appalachian Trail to be a backpacker. Just do what you can to infuse wilderness experiences in your lives, whenever and wherever possible. And find your own spiritual frontiers as well, and dream of what lies just beyond what is visible and apparent at the moment. Be your own philosopher, fitting together the puzzle of your life here on earth.