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Backcountry Whopper

By William Davies

*Some folk like a lot of noise,
With crowds all having fun;
But give me peace - and best of all
A corner in the sun.*

- David Hope

The time is the early nineteen eighties when during one distinct backpack trip, a brief, but genuine encounter remains with me. The lasting impression has helped express my attitude towards the mountains and wilderness ever since.

It happened during an upward trek into B.C.'s Mount Robson Park where my good hiking buddy and I eventually wandered high up onto the Robson Glacier below Robson's glaciated NW face. Access to even the lower environs of Mt. Robson is a persistent elevation gain to say the least. And because Robson is such a massif, it is said to create its own microclimate: a guarantee for wet weather. So, with this in mind we were well prepared and glad for it, because our experience happened while it was raining.

Quite possibly it was the misty mountains that heightened our experience as my buddy and I were soul-stirred in a momentary brush with the transient closeness of a mountain man. I use the phrase "transient closeness" because it was not your familiar meet or greet the on-coming hiker scenario; it was just a passing-by event weighted by the influence of this individual's curious aura.

We planned our trip to take us up, into the mountains, but his swift figure, in all appearances seemed to not be hiking up, nor down, nor out... but fleeing! The portrayal needs to evoke lore that his "mountain wandering" amid the solace of wilderness where destination should seem meaningless, had gifted our man with...revelation.

The grey haired mountain man personified with hoary facial hair was steadfast in his motion, head down, eyes fixed. As he brushed by we noticed his mountain worthy gear and a composure signifying that no pain was being spared in shouldering his pack as he masterfully repeated the task of tracking one foot in front of the other.

Embraced by mist, swayed by the sound of dripping water, captives in an icy rock cathedral we couldn't help but be awed at the sight. Together we watched in wonder as he nimbly trekked down the trail while rainwater slowly seeped into his boot print's muddy impressions. My emotion was WOW!

I remarked to my friend that I thought what the guy was doing was great! I thought that he's gotta be at least fifty years old and not giving up. He's still out here, still pushing determinedly to interact with solitude, seeking some adventure of self-worth. Still being complimentary with nature, if only for a short time, while the self is extricated briefly from the modern world. And it is fast becoming more modern as the appetite for subjugation over nature is advancing at a frantic pace.

In the moment of encounter I felt the conviction that as I should also age, let me age with a desire to be like him. Like a grizzled old-timer man of the mountains still givin'er till the day I die, courageously fighting back my inevitable death between two clean white sheets. With wantonness to wander the mountains somewhat as a mountain refugee, as an eagle in flight on outstretched wings negotiates a mountain valley in search of new vistas. Still hiking and backpacking until I'm well over fifty years old.





That day has arrived and I now look back on my fiftieth birthday with an appreciation for health and an undeterred attitude toward wilderness. You could say that I am now a 'mid-timer', somewhat like a bridge of life's experiences between a generation of veteran wanderers and the wilderness yearning rookies. In many respects I am fortunate, even blessed, to have witnessed remarkable human achievements, senseless insults to humanity and the wondrous birth of my children.

But there has also been the witnessing of change. In our encounter with the mountain man, was his fleeing an actual evasion from the pursuit by change in the modern world? Was it from a secluded mountain vantage point that he caught in his hands a glimpse of the future, like a morsel of bread couriered to him on wings from some distant parking lot of commercialized wilderness?

Very recently, pursuit by change became a reality for me. I don't know if it was by providence or coincidence, but nonetheless, change is what I witnessed. The assault on the senses was as destructive as if you had gone to visit your prairie hometown after fifty years absence only to find the familiar row of grain elevators gone. Demolished! The salvaged wood re-planned to be used as frames for pictures of what was once a gratifying prairie way of life.

We hadn't been into the wilderness area surrounding the Cline River backcountry in nearly four years, so we decided to visit Lake of the Falls. The Cline flows partially through the Bighorn Wildland; to the south is the Siffleur Wilderness, to the north the White Goat Wilderness.

By mid-morning we were at the turn-in area beside the highway, but I noticed something I hadn't seen before. In a once forested area was now a clearing with log-type office building, three heli-pads and three helicopters. Alongside the highway glared an advertisement board "HELI HIKING TOURS." I had a feeling of angst much like Charlton Heston's final explicit utterance from the original *Planet of the Apes* - paraphrased here in consideration of others, "You've gone and done it. You bas... s, you've gone and done it!" The backcountry whoppers had arrived.

Our four days escape into the wilderness was shamefully stolen from us by the obtrusive obscene noise of what basically amounted to an alpine taxi service. Imagine backpacking all day into your destination only to have other parties ferried in by helicopter.

Imagine setting up your camp only to have another party in a helicopter hover over you, then alight at another clearing along the lakeshore because you were camped where they wanted to be. Imagine awaking to a mountain morning beside a mountain-jewel lake while in a clearing behind you there's three helicopters ferrying in picnic tables, groups of paying "senior tourists", uniformed tour guides chit chatting while others pound stakes into the 'heath' then erect a mountain party tent.

Imagine hiking-about, wanting to photograph alpine environs in peace and solitude while helicopters annoyingly fly about like horse flies buzzing around your head while "on the trail". Imagine the silence of the mountains shattered by the continual air occupation of backcountry whoppers. A portion of verse from a song by Bruce Cockburn came to mind, "If I had a rocket launcher....."

For four days I was puzzled by an oxymoron - Infuriating Peace. Mountain wilderness areas traditionally only accessible to the sure-footed white mountain goat should surely not be allowed to be displaced by "gawking 'copter patrons". To where does the mountain goat flee when its domain is invaded? For the mountain goat, and all other permanent inhabitants, the mountains are their home. Is there any other place on this planet that you would tell a white goat, or mule deer or grizzly bear to go and live?

It is inherent in all peoples that we need times of solitude - aloneness. In writings from biblical times the wilderness had been regarded as a place of rejuvenating intimacy, where the soul could draw a freshness to confront the issues of life. Helicopters are noise polluters, which disrupt the solitude of the





wilderness experience. These machines are best utilized in forest fire fighting efforts, mountain rescue, wildlife biology, etc.

For the first time ever in my life I wanted to leave the mountains in search of peace elsewhere. My romantic sentiment of being an aging mountain man, still holding the mobility of youth and more vibrant days but burdened with the cough of exhaustion from gaining the altitude of yet another favorite pass through the mountains began to fade. The end of an era had arrived.

It's an unredeemed day when the article of life by which a person chooses to define himself is eroding away. And in the end perhaps our encounter with mountain man was extraordinarily a mystic foreshadowing of ourselves. Perhaps the curious aura we sensed years ago on that tranquil misty mountain trail was our future, sensed through the medium of revelation which only solace in the mountains facilitates. Mountain man was fleeing from our second millennial world, but we've caught up with him. Happy trails mountain wanderer - may you journey in Peace.

