

Road Romp 2004

Day 9: Friday, 18 June 2004

FOCK 2: The Missed Trail

Back in the Mobe, I popped open a Snake Dog IPA and started for the valley. Yosemite is a big place, though, and even when things look close on the map, they take a while to get to. In the lower ground, the park became mostly woods again. Between the trees, there were occasional tantalizing glimpses of tall rocky crowns, but the park was predominantly dense forest as the road veered east and approached a tunnel.

The tunnel itself was a cool sight. Very unfinished, it was hewn from the rock and left that way. It was "finished" only at the immediate entrance, and the rough and ragged rock still forms the tube. One row of yellow lights lines the tunnel "ceiling" above the centerline, and there is a curb on each side, but otherwise, it is just the innards of the mountain.

And when you come out -- BLAMMO! -- you are hit with one of Yosemite's signature sights: Tunnel View! I did what I'm sure a lot of people do: jump on the brake, and cut hard left into the parking area for this overlook so I would not miss this view. I was in mid-move when I saw that there was a readily accessible parking lot on my side of the road just a few yards farther up. Pedestrians scattered like pigeons, but I missed them by several feet anyway.

Tunnel View had been the best photo that I had taken in the 1990 pass-through, even better than the Glacier Point pix. The afternoon lighting had set up El Capitan on the left, Bridal Veil Fall on the right, and Half Dome in the distance. But that was a 35mm photo, and I craved an even better digital one. I had scanned that glossy photograph into digits, of course, but, like most such scans, it didn't look exactly right. One of the primary quests of this ramack was an upgrade of that particular photo.

Trouble is, I was a bit confused. Even standing here, looking right at the view, I somehow believed that the coveted view was actually out there to the west, possibly at a spot labeled Valley View, which made sense, or out beyond the tunnel at Inspiration Point, out towards the western exit of the park. This seemed logical too, since I knew it was an eastern-looking view, and I remembered it being right near a tunnel. Uhhh, tunnel? Tunnel View? Helloooooo.

Anyway, what screwed me up was the weather. Clouds had begun to clutter the sky, and, between the mitigated morning sunshine and the reversed angle of illumination, I just did not recognize that this was my Position A.



The picture on the left was what I saw on this now cloudy morning. The picture on right was taken on a sunny summer afternoon 14 years before. Despite the relative dimness of the more recent photo, all I can say is "Duhhh."

Driving down into the Valley, the viewpoint for Bridal Veil Fall snatched me. It is a short stroll from the parking lot to the Fall. And, yes, it is officially "Fall," singular, not "Falls," plural. I guess that's because it is just one drop, with no braches, like Niagara has, and no steps, like Yosemite has. But that's just a guess.

A bit out from the base of the Fall, there are heaps of big rocks that lots of kids were clambering around on. The rocks near the top of these piles were pretty slick from the spray. Still, kids were crawling around like spiders while the parents watched. They weren't my kids so I didn't give a hoot, but I have to admit that I saw trouble brewing.

Back in '90, the Summer Tour entourage had left Max to go have a look-see at Old Inspiration Point, which is down the trail a bit from Inspiration Point. The overlook itself didn't provide a perfect enough view, so, naturally, we had to hop the wall and bound out across the rocks to try to get a hundred feet closer. There were also a couple of tumbling waterfalls out

among these rocks. Totally oblivious to the fact that all this stuff was on the wrong side of the barrier, we hopped and jumped from big rock to big rock to work our way down to the pool of cold, clean water that the waterfall poured into. Dumb luck must have been on our side, because the lower rocks were slick and wet, yet we just went into Deer Mode and lived to tell the tale.

After a quick dunk in the cool pool, as I was climbing out, my foot skidded on the slippery rock and my leg went shooting straight down between two large, very hard, boulders. For some reason, I didn't fight the tumble, and just let myself fall where I would. When all the



Bridal Veil Fall

motion stopped, I was on my stomach, my left leg was straight out behind me, and my right leg was sunk up to the hip in this narrow gap. My foot was held very tightly between two rocks, as if they were saying, "move one muscle, and we snap your freaking ankle."

I snickered at my position. Trying to yank my leg out would have led to cracked bones, and torn tissues. My leg went in relaxed, I somehow reasoned, so it would come out the same way. I let the leg go limp, and easily slid it out of the rocks' grip. Bobby and Kelzo never even knew about the mishap.

All's well that ends well, they say, but the incident left a mark in my mind. I've never been that close to broken bone. An inch either way and I would've been in deep shit. So, I couldn't help recalling that moment as I stood here watching the clambering kiddies at Bridal Veil.

Ahh, such treachery lurks behind beauty, eh? There's a lesson there, but I have no idea what it is. But, since I'm single, maybe I learned the lesson long ago without realizing it.

Right after leaving Bridal Veil, the view to the left of the



El Capitan

road was dominated by that mammoth rock of rocks, El Capitan. I could easily see why that is not a one-day climb. That sucker is HUGE! More than 1000 yards, straight up.

Of the many waterfalls adorn the park's cliffs, the largest is Yosemite Falls, which I passed as I got a little deeper into the valley. YF happens to be the fifth tallest waterfall in the world, and the tallest in the United States.

From the valley floor, it seems mighty tall, and there are dandy high views of it from Glacier Point and Sentinel Dome.

Waterfalls always amaze me: they pour around the clock, and around the calendar. It's the same with any river, I suppose, but it's more impressive when it plummets 2,425 feet – nearly half a mile from top to bottom.

Anyway, just after passing Yosemite Falls, the late-morning cloudbank rolled in like a wave and the whole park soon became immersed in melancholy gray. The amazing photos that



Yosemite Falls

I so avidly sought were not coming to fruition, and it vexed me; it was not like I could just come back next week or something. Those photos were Reason #2 for configuring this ramack in the first place, and not getting them would be a major setback. With luck, I hoped, the clouds would sweep by and be gone in minutes. But minutes went by and it was not happening.

By noon, my mood was matching the sky, so I did the only logical thing: laundry. Better to do it now than to miss prime sunshine sitting by the dryer. There wasn't a ton of it, but some of my favorite shirts and shorts had picked up enough sweat and grime to qualify for Rude status, and giving them a cleansing would only help the overall ambiance in the van. If the sun had been out, I would have just let them fester, but, given the relative gloom of the moment, a freshening of the garments seemed to be in order.

The process itself was a breeze. The Housekeeping Camp had plenty of large capacity appliances, a wall-mounted detergent vendor, and a bill changer at the ready. It was a tad odd,

though, that some of the washers could not be used because they had been "winterized." Exactly what that entails, I have no idea. And why you would winterize anything in June was a bit of a puzzle too.

As my apparel swished and chished in the washer, I took the opportunity to tidy Moby up a bit. While it tumbled and chumbled in the dryer, I slapped a little PB on a couple of slices of wheat bread and chowed them down while comfortably reclined in Moby's living room. All in all, it was a good chill-out. After all, you don't go to Yosemite so you can fret and stress over stuff. You go there to relax, and I had been getting a tad too antsy about this photo stuff.

With clothes clean, the urge to hike rekindled. There was a bright side to the dim day: the cloud cover did indeed keep the temps down some. Though hiking in brilliant sunshine makes for more vibrant scenery, it also makes for a much hotter day. So, with a new make-the-best-of-it mindset, I parked Moby and readied for one of Yosemite's most popular and famous hikes: The Vernal Falls Trail.

But this parking lot that I had found seemed pretty far from the trailhead. The map was a bit vague, but it sure looked like a short series of rights and lefts would get me a whole lot closer. So, I navigated Moby down a couple of narrow roads, and squeezed into a roadside spot that must have been just vacated. Patting myself on the back for such a good find, I packed my camera and batteries and notbook inside my shoulder bag, grabbed the Luckless Log, and set out.

The first few minutes were uninspiring. It was just a sidewalk next to a tree-lined road. Foreplay, I figured. Then, a curious sight struck me: my previous parking spot. How the hell had I ended up farther away?? Damn map had betrayed me. [In retrospect, this did not bode well for an afternoon of reliance on that selfsame map.]

Oh well, it would've been even stupider to go back and move Moby back there, so I just laughed at myself and walked on. I placed my faith in Yosemite itself to guide my way, and looked for the usual signs and placards along the trail that would direct me to my desired destination. I mean, they **had** to have signs, right?

After about ten minutes of sidewalking, I reached a bridge over the Merced River, which was pretty small at that point, and saw numerous people sitting waiting for a bus. There were a couple of small, mappish signs there, but they were not especially detailed, and didn't point the way as vividly as I had hoped. I had the vague notion that going straight ahead would keep me on the Muir Trail, which, I believed, contained the section called the Mist Trail. I wanted verification, but I wasn't keen on asking anyone. I wanted to find it on my own if I could. Like most guys, I'd rather get lost on my own than let someone know how clueless I am.

The bus pulled up, and as it loaded, I asked the driver where I should go. She had no idea; if it wasn't on her route, it might as well have not existed. I saw a fairly young guy in a park uniform, so I asked him where I would find the Vernal Falls Trail. This may have been a tactical miscue, as he may well have just been a janitor or a trash collector or something along those lines. He pointed straight across the bridge, and said, "I'm not sure, but I think it's right across the bridge. There's a sign, I think, but I'm not sure." He sounded unsure.

I thanked him with veiled skepticism, since I had been there already and had not gotten much help from that sign, and headed back there.

The sign that was there pointed up a soft dirt path, which some indications that it was the Muir Trail. With a recollection Vernal Falls was on the Muir, I figured that had to be it, and with a shrug and a WTF, I hit the dusty trail.

Detailed hiking maps are sold at Visitor Centers or Park HQ's, but until this crisis, it never even crossed my mind to go buy one. If I had been planning a multi-day excursion across the Sierras, then it would be the most essential thing of all, but this was just a curious little day hike, and I fully expected small signs would be arrowing the way, so my ilk would not end up meandering like bewildered cows all over the park. But sometimes in life you don't get what you expect, or you do get what you don't expect. Either way, you have to just deal.

It didn't take long to figure out that I was on the right path to the wrong place. There was no incline to speak of, and you would expect that you'd need some kind of climb to get from a valley floor to the top of a waterfall. Hmmm. And my dirt horse trail was still annoyingly close to that roadway. But, I figured, let's see where it goes.

My hopes rose as it finally branched right and began to climb. After about 200 feet, however, it dropped and rejoined the flat path again. But, at least it had remained in the woods instead of following the sidewalk.

After about ten more minutes, I saw two young women walking my way. I gave them a friendly hello, and asked if they were returning from Vernal Falls. They made a pretty good effort at understanding English, and shrugged, giggled, and said in a strong middle-European

accent, "My-roar Lay-ick." I knew they meant Mirror Lake, which was not the right way at all. I had to smile at them – two girls giggling in a German accent was really cute – but I was finding it difficult to be cheery.

This hiking thing was not catching fire today. My mind wasn't meshing with Yosemite's somehow. We just were not clicking. After driving 4000 miles to get here, it was just a teench disappointing.

But, WTF, it was what it was, and I was gonna make the best of it. So what if I was on the wrong trail? I'd check out Mirror Lake anyway. Maybe it would be wonderful!

After only a few more minutes, I found myself back at the forest's edge, and standing in a field on the backside of Mirror Lake. It turns out that the road I had been paralleling was the shuttle bus route, and I could have been dropped off about 400 yards from the viewing area. I chuckled at myself for being such a dumbass, but congratulated myself on being on the opposite side of the lake from the crowd of people who cluttered the clearing and the sandy beach. That was way more folks than I felt like being close to right now.

The Lake itself was really just a wide spot in Tenaya Creek, where the flow of water gently pooled, and was smooth enough to reflect its backdrop.

From where I stood, Mirror Lake seemed pretty lame, and I had to wonder why it deserved its own trail and shuttle bus. I walked off the horse trail, out from the cover of the trees, and into a level field of long grass that lay between the water and the woods. "Nice spot, I suppose," I muttered, "but nothin' special." Then I turned to head back to my trail and stopped cold. "Ohhhhh...", I said aloud, suddenly understanding.

My eyes just rose and rose and rose up the sheer wall of granite that must have been reflected in Mirror Lake. "Holy ... shiiiiit ...," slowly eased across my sunburned lips. Half Dome loomed above us all, very tall, and absurdly solid. Standing almost 4800 feet high from wide base to rounded crown, it commanded scrutiny. My eyes got lost in it. There is just **so much** rock there! And its shape defies logic. "Where the hell is the other half?" ran through my brain, "Where did it go??"



It was actually nearly a mile away, but its bulk still dominated my field of view. Half Dome looks much like any other rock that has been split in twain by a mighty hammer-smite, with sharp edges and an almost smooth face, but it was almost a mile high!! The 101-story Taipei 101 Tower in Taipei (where did you think the Taipei Tower would be?) recently seized the title of World's Tallest Building, at 1670 feet. From here, that tower would reach barely one third of the way up Half Dome.

There were other sharply rising rock formations standing at HD's feet, each of which was a pretty darn good hunk of granite, but they all looked puny by comparison. One, in particular, stood very high and close to Mirror Lake, and

would have been impressive in its own right if it did not have something that looked like a freaking planet rising up behind it.

After an appropriate period of gawking, I closed my mouth and thought about the What Now aspect of life. Maybe crossing over to the normal side of My-Roar Lay-ick would be good to do. I walked across the field and neared the bank of the creek.

Three guys had just begun to walk across from the other side. They were all about thigh deep when I first noticed them, and they were stepping carefully. I was surprised that Tenaya Creek was that deep; it looked wimpier than that. Then, in a step, one guy was up to his waist. With another step, he was chest-deep, then armpits. Then, guy #2 splashed out of sight and came up sputtering and cussing.

OK, the creek was a tad too deep for carefree fording at this point. With a shrug, I headed back to my horse trail. On the way, though, I noticed a very narrow footpath that threaded off into the woods. That seemed more like wilderness hiking to me, so, wildman that I am, that's where I headed.

The path was an improvement. At least I felt more like I was exploring. People had clearly walked this way before, but only the esoteric few. It was good to sneak away from the crowded trails. And, even better, the path eventually ended, leaving me to blaze my own way among the thick trees and bushes along the creek's south bank. Hiking is so much more true when it's just you and the trail, without other people infringing on your Nature.

After many more minutes of woods walking, it was time to change direction. I had been following the creek, ducking under low-hanging branches, and stepping over even lower ones, and listening to the burbling of the rolling flow.

Tenaya had shown no signs of being wadable. Shoulder-deep seemed to about the best I had seen. Without a pack containing a very non-waterproof camera and some what-not, I would have just plunged and strode, but my gizmos held me back.

Then, opportunity knocked. Two medium-sized trees had toppled – from the looks of things, only weeks before – and lay side-by-side, solidly spanning bank-to-bank. If it had been one tree, I might have taken the chance. Two trees made it easy. Having the Luckless Log with me made it a no-brainer.

The Luckless Log has been a faithful traveling companion since I first cut, barked, and whittled it into primo shape back in the late 1980's.

It was my first canoe trip at Algonquin – yes, the site of the Pasta Italiana feast – and the amount of foot travel that was required had caught me off guard. From our campsite at Luckless Lake, Dash, Ban, Cliff and I were foraging for firewood and we found a long and unusual piece of birch. It might have been a branch, but I think it was a narrow trunk. It wasn't anything but a dead stick any more though, because it was lying on the ground with a lot of other wood that had probably been smooshed by some heavy snow and ice. It was about nine feet long – oops, I mean, 2.75 meters long (we were in Canada) – and a very uniform one inch (2.54 cm) thick for the whole length.

What caught our eye, though, was the strange swirl in the center. It looked like someone had tried to tie a knot in the tree. Something very heavy must have fallen on it when it was a young, and forced it to grow down-then-sideways for a little bit. Then the heavy something must have been removed or averted, and the little tree resumed its straight vertical course. Until, of course, it got broken off and killed.

We marveled at the shape for a moment, and then I proclaimed the stick as my own, rescuing it from a fiery end. The next dilemma, of course, was which way to cut it. A nine-foot walking stick is impractical, unless you're the Pope. The swirl was exactly midway, so I did a few test-holds, checking for grip-friendliness and such, and made my choice. A quick zip of the folding handsaw ensued, and the Luckless Log was born.

It promptly proved itself as the "Stick Of A Thousand Uses." It seemed to be suited for every task that needed doing. Its curved handle made short work of the awkward task of hoisting our packs up onto branches to keep them out of reach of the creatures of the night. On solo van rides, LL enabled me to reach all the way to the bed of the van, hook the straps of my duffle bag, and drag it forward so I could fetch a desired or needed item of clothing or what-have-you. And with an easy reach from the driver's seat, the rounded knob was perfect for gently flicking off ceiling lights that had inadvertently been left on, and the length made it easy to adjust the sideview mirror when it had been knocked askew.

Luckless had been an ice crusher, a putter, a whiffle ball bat, a clothes hanger, a door lock, a stretching device, a map roller, a hole plugger, a fire poker, and foonbag finitum. A loosely-moraled woman that I once knew even suggested an erotic, latex-coated use for it, but I am confident that that was never acted upon.

The Luckless Log was the quintessential hiking stick. Yet, when I was in Zion's Narrows during RR2K, I had stupidly left it in Blue Man, not realizing the hike I was getting into. And, naturally, I did not have it with me for the SW '03 frolics with Chief; airline personnel probably would have frowned upon the Log, cynically seeing only its potential for harm, and not its propensity for good. With BM miles away at a Park-n-Save, I did not want to risk being told to leave "that stick" behind in order to get on the plane.

Thus I was not – you hear me, NOT – going to leave the Log behind in '04.

And, as I steadied myself onto those toppled trees to cross Tenaya Creek, Luckless turned what could have been a precarious balancing act into a casual stroll. The third foot that it provided supplied stability and confidence, and I walked across those trunks like Gene Kelly singin' in the rain.