

WVC on Flat Tops and Devils Causeway

The White River National Forest in Rio Blanco county is not so different from the many others in Colorado, but for me it has always held a fascination that I felt for no other. At home when I would look toward the majestic Flat top mountains, bare of all timber, and blue in the distance, I would get a sort of funny feeling in my stomach, that left me with a ~~feeling of~~ sense of half fear, half awe. I guess I was really in love with them and the surrounding country. In winter, when on rare occasions you could see the wind driven snow sweeping off the high plateaus while all was clear in the valley I would dream that some day I would build a cabin on the highest ridge and then allowing myself to be snowed in, would stay through the winter, sometimes trapping if I felt like it, or just trapping around on snow shoes and having all the wonderful adventures in the wilds that a boy can picture to himself. In summer with the green timber reaching up to the base of the rocky slopes and the blue skies above and indeed in all seasons of the year it was the one place that I considered the most perfect in the world, where I could live perfectly happy forever.

The summer I was 11 my father suggested we go on a camping trip and I insisted we go to this place and could not be won over by the idea of better fishing in California Park or the mountain lions and the old haunts of rustlers in the Ladore Canyon country, or a half dozen other places that were suggested, and in the end, because I was as stubborn as a boy can be, I won out and there we went.

Besides myself there were two friends of mine and my sister who was an experienced camper. Even though she is a woman and my sister, at that I must admit that she is better with horses than I.

Our main objective was what is known as the Devil's Causeway

which I had heard about many times from my father, who had been there in the days of no roads when there were mountain sheep aplenty; he had killed some and once had even caught a young lamb in the deep snow when it could not travel as fast as its mother.

The Causeway is a narrow ridge connecting two main Flat Tops that look like the rim of an extinct volcano crater and may have been for all I know. It is not a natural bridge but was formed by the soil eroding away, leaving only the bare rock. It is only two feet wide at its narrowest spot in the middle, with a two hundred foot drop on either side.

The first year we trucked our horses about forty-five miles, as far as automobiles could go and then went horseback from there. We didn't reach the Causeway that year, being gone only three days and lost most of the time, but I didn't mind so much because we had a wonderful time anyway.

The next year we did not get to go there but the year afterwards we went again, this time riding all the way from the ranch a distance of about forty miles to the edge of the forrest with an extra fifteen to the Flat Tops where the Causeway is. There were only three of us then my sister, a fellow from Denver, Bill Waggener, and myself. Since none of us knew our way after we reached the forrest, and because we had a passion for shortcuts and because of a certain sheepherder who was not to adept at pointing out landmarks we found ourselves farther from the Causeway on the fifth day than we were on the third, so we gave up trying to find it, and after a day of fishing rode home.

It may seem as though we were awfully slow but with our inexperienced packing that would not allow even a modest trot for fear of falling off and being

lost a good three-fourths of the time it isn't as bad as it sounds. The next year we went again the three of us who had gone the year before and two other boys from Denver Leonard Coburn and Phil Zang. This time by using some of the shortcuts we had learned the year before the distance was reduced about fifteen miles. Also since we were much stronger and more experienced, we could pack our horses better, and we threw a diamond hitch that any prospector could be proud of.

Finally on the fourth day after such wandering the long awaited thrill came. We found an old game trail and followed it for at least five miles until it came out of the timber and we climbed up on top of the Flat Tops which are as their name applies large mountains all above timberline that look like they had been scraped off with huge bull-dozers. We could see for miles, even as far as Berthoud Pass one hundred miles distant.

We rode on top of this high plateau exhausted by our climb and the thin air until we came to the Causeway itself. We left our horses which were too tired to run away and by sitting down we could inch our way across. About a quarter of a mile along this ridge there was one place that looked like we might be able to climb down it. We flipped coins to see who would take the horses back, and my sister lost, so while she went back to get the horses the rest of us started climbing down. Several times I slipped, and, cowboy boots not being the approved footgear for climbing, came near breaking my neck.

After an hour of this we were almost to the floor of the canyon when Phil who was then in the lead yelled to us that he had found a coyote den. I rushed to the spot trying to think if I had ever heard of a coyote living in the rocks 11,000 feet up. We were all puzzled till the sharp-eyed Phil saw the inhabitant flattened upon a ledge of rock above. It was a wildcat the first I had ever seen but I knew it at once with its yellowish gray color short tail and tufts of hair

hair in its ears, and it did not seem pleased to see us. We all grabbed for rocks and began to throw at it. I was standing by the den, when reaching for a rock I saw one of the young not as big as a month old kitten sticking its head out of the hole to see what all the commotion was about. I stood like a statue and watched it advance a little farther blinking in the sunlight. When he was far enough away from the den I stuck my foot between him and the hole and while he was clawing at my boot I popped my hat over him. Reaching under the hat with my gloved hands I grabbed the kitten by the neck and held him up for the others to see. The kitten let out a mournful yell almost like a child, and before any of us knew what was happening the parent leaped from her perch and dashing among the others was upon me in a second. She jumped at my arm which held the kitten and began clawing and spitting. She knocked my off balance so that I dropped the kitten and fell backwards striking my head on a rock as I fell. It did not knock me completely out, and I rolled on my faestomach to protect my face as she jumped at me again. Before she could do any damage however all three boys were there to help me and kicked her off. They eventually killed her with rocks and gave the skin to my sister who still has it.

I was pretty lucky, I guess, to escape with only a cut on my head and a few scratches. I might have been hurt worse if the others had not been so quick to act.

When we got back to our camp my sister insisted on putting iodine on the scratches and cuts. When I trustingly consented she blithely poured the whole bottle on my sore dome. I ran yelling like a madman to a nearby stream and ducked my head in the water but it still stung more than the blow itself. It was long after the iodine stains were out of my hair that I forgave her for this cruel act.