



THE WILDERNESS IS WORTH CONSERVING FOR MOMENTS LIKE THESE...

By Colin Fletcher

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The rest of the world quite rightly sees America as a cockpit of rapacity and exploitation. But it tends to forget that America is also a land of altruistic idealism—an idealism that can give birth to magnificently generous concepts, hammer them into tangibilities, and then throw the whole thing open for the rest of humanity to enjoy.

The world is inclined to remember, for example, that early American settlers slashed and gutted the virgin forests of their new continent; that they slaughtered prodigious herds of buffalo almost into extinction; that they did, in other words, what new settlers had always done, everywhere—wage total war against a Nature that to them was the natural enemy. But the world usually ignores the reverse of this coin.

On the night of September 19, 1870, five men sat around a campfire in what was then the territory of Montana. The men were primarily speculators. To confirm rumors of rich mineral and real estate potential, they had penetrated deep into the almost unexplored Yellowstone River wilderness. A month's journeying had shown them commercial potential beyond their wildest dreams; but it had also revealed geysers and canyons, lakes and waterfalls, forests and mountain

peaks, and a teeming wildlife. Around the last campfire before they returned to civilization, these five hard-headed businessmen discussed the natural impulse to convert their discoveries into personal profit. But remembering the superb beauty they had seen, they spurned the certainty of wealth. They agreed unanimously that private ownership of the Yellowstone region should never be countenanced, and that "it ought to be set aside by the government and forever held to the unrestricted use of the people."

Back in civilization, they registered no land or mineral claims. Instead, they wrote and lectured on the wonders of Yellowstone's natural beauty. Their words swept across the country. Two years later, President Grant signed into law an act creating the world's first National Park. The revolutionary concept of conserving wilderness for its own sake has now spread to every continent. And in enlightened practice America still leads the way. James Fisher, a visiting English naturalist, recently wrote in his *Wild America*, "Never have I seen such wonders or met landlords so worthy of their land. They have, and still have, the power to ravage it; and instead they have made it a garden."

In Death Valley I had seen an attempt to preserve a part of America essentially as it was when the white man came; but Death Valley has been opened up by roads and amenities, as have most National Parks. In Primitive or Wilderness Areas, all man's travel tools are banned: no roads, no vehicles, no boats. Only hikers and horsemen may use the narrow trails. Compared with some such reservations, the Wild Area in the summit country of the Sierra Nevada above Lake Tahoe is small and almost tame. Its highest peak reaches barely ten thousand feet above sea level. But it is beautiful country. And it is very heavily used.

When I climbed up into the Wild Area I found a new sample of America.

At first it was lake country. Some of the lakes lay open and crisp and sparkling. Others brooded in retirement, like philosophers. Between the lakes, rough stepping stones led across creeks that vanished into snowdrifts through blue-gray doorways. Sometimes, bare gray rock was the whole scenery—menacing in shadow, bright and inviting in sunlight. But usually, mile after mile, I walked through forest. And always high above, towered snow-capped peaks.

After two days I came to the infant Rubicon River and began to follow it northward. And now, sometimes, I found myself on the edge of a meadow with a familiar look—a sunlight-and-shadow, almost too-good-to-be-true, Silver King kind of a look.

In the week I spent wandering through the fifty miles of Wild Area, I met about half a dozen people a day. And I knew that everyone I met shared one thing with me.

All the way from Mexico, well-intentioned enquirers had been saying, "Oh, but there's an easier way than that! Why don't you take the road to So-and-So?" For them, naturally, country was something that had to be passed through on the way from one place to the next. For me, places were refuelling points at each end of a stretch of country. Sometimes I had said, "Don't forget, you're interested in getting somewhere; I'm interested in going." But the idea did not always get over. Now, up in the Wild Area, I knew that everyone looked at the country with the same eyes as I did. And after a while I began to see that the Wild Area was not only a new sample of America; it was a microcosm of my walk. It was a place where people could do for a few snatched hours or days what I was lucky enough to be doing for six months.

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