

Old Age and Trickery

October 1, 1999

Although the days were getting short, I decided to do a day climb of Mt. Whitney via the main trail. The trail starts at Whitney Portal, at an elevation of 8350 feet, and ends at the summit at 14,497 feet. It's 11 miles each way, 22 miles round trip. Because the trail loses and regains some elevation near the top, the total gain is about 6600 feet. I almost always go at a slow and pleasant pace, to conserve energy and to enjoy the day. Knowing a few shortcuts saves a little time, and I expected to be back down before dark.

The phrase "taking shortcuts" may give the wrong impression to knowledgeable hikers since it evokes the image of "cutting switchbacks." Cutting switchbacks can damage trails and is rightfully illegal. By "taking a shortcut," I mean "going cross-country for a while"—perhaps half a mile or so—and there is nothing inherently wrong with that. You are allowed to walk off trails in our national parks and forests! It is important, of course, to make sure you don't cause any damage at trail entry/exit points.

Some of these shortcuts are reasonably well known, and I see rangers and others on them now and then. The routes typically follow natural terrain and may travel on pieces of older Mt. Whitney trails. I learned a couple from my mentor Carl Heller around 1970, and discovered the rest on my own.

This day I planned to take four shortcuts, beginning with the old start to the main Mt. Whitney trail, west of the Whitney Portal pond; it intersects the current trail at the John Muir Wilderness sign after ten or fifteen minutes of hiking. Then, after a half mile on the trail, the next shortcut strikes upward for about 500 vertical feet, to rejoin it next to a large downed log by a pretty cascading waterfall. After crossing the logs that span the creek a little farther along the trail, the third shortcut heads up a draw to Bighorn Park (elevation 10,300 feet). Finally, the fourth one takes a direct line from Trailside Meadow (11,200') to Trail Camp (12,000'). There are a couple of other shortcuts I know about and use sometimes, but they were not in my plans today.

Having been retired for almost ten years, my time was slower than it used to be: perhaps 7 hours up and 5 hours down. To put this into perspective for people who aren't familiar, these are good numbers—even for fit people quite a bit younger. But I do this a lot, and have evolved a protocol that is pretty efficient. As alluded to earlier, I could make it a little faster but it wouldn't be as enjoyable.

On to the story:

Having spent the night at my "secret" camping spot below Whitney Portal, I drove to the parking lot. It was about half an hour before sunrise. I parked next to a group of five others who were also getting ready for the climb. They looked to be in their 30s.

They said they were from a runners' club in the Lake Tahoe area, and hoped to make a quick ascent today. So I offered, "Would you like to travel together? I can show you a few shortcuts which would save you a little time." I don't recall their exact words, but they amounted to "No, we don't want an old guy along to slow us down." Of course they spoke more respectfully than that, but I knew what they meant.

Now, I'm only normal, and a discussion like this sometimes gets my competitive juices flowing. So, as we left the parking lot at 6:20—they via the current trail and I on the old trail—I decided to have a little fun. With no delusions about winning any "race" that day, I planned to hustle along as best I could, hoping for a credible performance, and show them a thing or two about the senior crowd. In spite of the fact that I live about 4000' lower than they, I felt that my regular sojourns to Sierra Nevada elevations would give me a little advantage in acclimatization. But they had the age advantage!

I knew that my shortcuts would help, and that this bit of trickery would serve me until their youth and vitality were eventually too much to overcome.

I would take the first shortcut and try to get in front. They would certainly pass me shortly, and I would hustle to the next shortcut and hopefully get in front again. I would play this game of leapfrog as long as I could. Then, if luck were with me, I would eventually arrive at the summit not too far behind them.

I moved quickly up the old trail. It's quite a bit shorter so I was sure I would get ahead. But, as I approached the JMW sign, I heard voices off to my right, on the other side of the creek. They were coming much sooner than I had expected...because they were running!

Dropping my pack at the side of the trail, I walked back to the creek to fill my canteen. I returned to my pack and sat down for a drink. After about a minute, they passed by—walking now—and were little surprised to see me. Not much was exchanged beyond simple hellos.

I waited until all had passed, then got going again. Of course, they were lengthening the distance between us. Soon, though, I reached the beginning of the second shortcut. I thought I could beat them to the downed log and cascade, but worried about building up an energy debt that I would pay for later.

At 7:10 I was at the log, again filling my canteen from the stream. I sat down and took a few bites of my sandwich. After about ten minutes, the first of the others passed by. I could see that the altitude and exertion was affecting him a little. This time, the comment: "Nice shortcuts." I asked if he wanted to see the next one, but he declined. His crew was beginning to string out, but after a few minutes all had passed by.

I started hiking again and was soon at the third shortcut. This one is very nice, and I knew I could gain at least 10 minutes on the way to Bighorn Park. So I was not surprised when I got there and they were nowhere in sight. At 7:45 I was at the nice spring that is halfway through Bighorn Park on the left, and sat down for a drink again. And again the

leader walked by, soon followed by a couple of the others. They were now clearly intrigued by what was going on. And I was having a good time!

I started following them again, enjoying “the game,” but the really helpful shortcuts were behind me. Going a little slower now, I was nevertheless able to keep them in view up to Trailside Meadow. I struck off directly to Trail Camp. But I was tiring, and did not think I could get ahead of them this time. I was also beginning to wonder if I would have enough energy left to make the summit at all.

I got to Trail Camp and looked around. None of them were in sight. They were either way ahead and already on the famed “97 Switchbacks,” or had flamed out and were behind me. Either way, I did not want to lose time thinking about it. I continued on toward the 97 Switchbacks, constantly looking ahead and behind.

Finally, at 9:20, I saw them. The leader and one other had just reached Trail Camp, now 400’ below me. They must have stopped for a break. Unbelievably, I was ahead!

But they were gaining. The best I could do was to keep moving, resigned to the certainty that I would soon be behind them for the rest of the way.

A little short of Trail Crest (13,600’), the two passed me. The other three were certainly way behind and, in fact, I didn’t see them the remainder of the day. So I had only the two in front to think about.

We were all tired now, and exchanged barely a nod as they passed. I gradually fell to about 100 yards behind, but that distance—remarkably—stayed reasonably constant. None of us stopped to rest. I was beat, but it was obvious they were, too. I would have given a shiny new dime to have conserved some of my energy, arriving at this venue a little later but a little stronger.

It was too late for second thoughts. As we passed the notch between Keeler Needle and the Mount Whitney summit plateau, less than half an hour from our goal, I was still at least 100 yards behind—with no hope of catching up.

Soon we came to an easy-to-miss junction. At this point the current trail is obvious in its continuing westward march—actually heading in a direction away from the high point here—but there is also a hard-to-spot section of old trail that cuts sharply right and up toward the summit. Taking the old trail saves well over a quarter mile of hiking. But, because of its steepness and the fact that most people are dead tired by this point, several years ago the trail was routed due west, at a very gentle incline, before swinging in a long wide arc around to the east and toward the summit again. Much longer now, but far less arduous.

Ahah! Seeing that my adversaries were staying on the current trail, I made the sharp right upward turn. The exertion was considerable, but I persevered and touched the

summit hut at 11:40. I looked around. The other two were not here. I never saw them again.

After 15 minutes I started back down and, with shortcuts, managed to get to the Portal a little before 4:00.

I have made faster climbs up Mt. Whitney, when I was younger, but perhaps none were as inwardly satisfying as this one. Yet I succumbed to some foolishness that day, and the climb itself was not pleasant. I had never seen these fellows before and will undoubtedly never see them again, so the victory held little meaning.

Still, now and then, I think of that day...when a group of five men half my age didn't want an old guy along to slow them down.

There's a saying that old age and trickery will always win out over youth and vitality. Cute, but quixotic. However—this time—old age and trickery did carry the day.

—Bob Rockwell