

Backpacking in Glacier National Park

Stewart Hendrickson

November 2, 2020, Seattle

This is another story from past experiences. Our family was living in Northfield Minnesota, where I taught chemistry at St. Olaf College. We usually took our summer vacations in August after summer research and before the Fall semester began the week before Labor Day.

In August 1972, we planned a different sort of vacation. As a family we wanted to try a backpacking trip, but with a different twist. For environmental concerns, I guess, we wanted to rely on public transportation – no long car trips. This would be our first family backpacking trip, with my wife, Betty, our son, Matt, and our twin daughters, Krista and Klara.

We assembled the necessary packs, tents, cooking gear, etc. and did a test run in a park south of the Twin Cities. Then in early August we hoisted our packs and took a bus from Northfield to Minneapolis. From the bus terminal, we hiked up Hennepin Ave to the old Minneapolis Union Depot. I'm sure we got a few interesting stares. Hennepin Ave was not the best part of the city – it was the equivalent of Aurora Ave in Seattle. We then boarded an Amtrak train headed for Glacier National Park in Montana.

After an overnight train trip, we arrived at West Glacier and claimed a campsite near the McDonald Lake Lodge. On the morning of August 9, we climbed aboard one of the old [red open-touring buses](#) traveling up the Going-to-the-Sun Highway to the top of Logan Pass. From Logan Pass we hiked about 8 miles along the Garden Wall and Highline trails to the [Granite Chalet](#), heading towards a campground just beyond the Chalet. We hiked along the west side of the continental divide with spectacular views on a narrow trail that hugged the side of a steep slope. Further on we climbed a switchback trail to Haystack Pass and then dropped down to Granite Park. This was a strenuous hike especially for Krista and Klara who were eight, Matt was almost eleven. Each of the kids had their own smaller packs, Betty and I had the heavier ones.

We reached the Chalet as many people were milling about. When we asked directions to the campground we were told that the campground was closed. A mother bear and her cub had ambled through the campground earlier that day, and for safety reasons, everyone was evacuated. Most people were advised to hike out that afternoon, but with our children, we were allowed to cook our dinner and sleep on the porch of the Chalet – an inglorious beginning of our backpacking experience.

The next morning we decided to change our plans. Rather than hike further north for a couple of days, we decided to hike about eight miles out over Swiftcurrent Pass to the Many Glacier region. We crossed the summit at 7,186 ft. and stopped for lunch just on the other side. As we were eating, some hikers came by and told

us that they had just seen a grizzly bear at the top of the summit – that news was a little disturbing.

As we continued down the trail to the Many Glacier Region, about halfway along on a clear sunny day, we just happened to look up and saw a spectacular sight – a fireball streaking across the sky from south to north with a white-to-orange leading edge and a black smoky trail. This lasted maybe five to ten seconds before it disappeared over the horizon with a loud sonic boom. Shortly thereafter we met a park ranger. When we told him what we saw, he said, "that was probably just a fighter jet" from the nearby air station. Well, if it was, it was in dire straits – obviously, he didn't see it, only heard the boom. My first thought was that it was a satellite or some other space debris coming down through the atmosphere. A couple of days later we read in a newspaper that it was indeed a [meteor that grazed the Earth's atmosphere](#), tracked from Utah into Alberta, Canada, within 57 km of the Earth's surface.

When we reached Many Glacier, we decided to splurge for comfort and rented a room at the Swiftcurrent Motor Inn for a few days. From there we took day hikes into the mountains. At the gift shop by the Inn, I picked up a book titled [Night of the Grizzlies](#) by Jack Olsen. It tells of events surrounding the night of August 13, 1967, when two young women were separately killed in Glacier National Park by grizzly bears – one at Trout Lake, and the other at the Granite Chalet campground, just where we were going to camp. That was a pretty sobering read. We knew about the grizzlies and had our bear bells, and took other precautions, but that really brought it to our attention. Apparently, for years before the bear attack, there was a garbage pit just below the Chalet where tourists watched the bears at night under lights scavenging for food. Those bears adapted to humans and the result was tragic. After that, the garbage pit was removed and the campground was closed after any sighting of bears.

***Night of the Grizzlies** is a 1 hour, 26 minute video documentary produced by Montana PBS – a dramatic and tragic story from August 12, 1967, in Glacier National Park, which you can [view free online here](#). Highly recommended.*

The day before we were scheduled to take the train back to Minnesota, we hopped on another red tour bus to the East Glacier Lodge where we had reserved a room for the night. This is one of the grand lodges just outside of the Park, built by the Great Northern Railway along the mainline of the Burlington Northern Railroad. An impressive feature of the Lodge is the massive Douglas Fir pillars supporting the lobby area - sixty giant timbers, forty feet high, with a diameter of forty inches each. We had a room in the lodge with an outside balcony.

Although the lodge had an elegant dining room, it was too expensive for our budget, and besides, we still had a freeze-dried backpacking dinner left over. So we decided to cook our dinner on the balcony using our [Svea-123 camping stove](#), a small Swedish liquid-fuel (white gas) pressurized-burner stove. One of the popular backpacking guidebooks has this advice if your Svea stove flares up while

cooking in your tent: “toss the stove out of your tent and run like hell to the nearest ranger station to report a forest fire.” Now, I was confident that we would have no such trouble, but still, I was worried that someone would pass by our room, hear the characteristic hiss of our stove, and accuse us of trying to burn down this historic log building. Fortunately, we had a nice uneventful dinner in our room.

The next morning we boarded the Amtrak train back to Minneapolis. From there we walked down Hennepin Ave again to the bus station and arrived by bus back in Northfield after a memorable trip to Glacier National Park.

Stewart Hendrickson is Professor Emeritus (chemistry), St. Olaf College, Northfield, MN; and Research Professor Emeritus (chemistry), University of Washington, Seattle, WA. He lives with his cat, Igor, in Seattle, WA.