

## Recrossing into Eden

– Dan Styer; 16 July 2023

Wallace Stegner, “the dean of western [U.S.] writers”, is famous for his novels like the 1972 Pulitzer Prize winning *Angle of Repose*, but I like best his short, nonfiction essays. One of these, “Crossing into Eden”, concerns a pack trip he took in 1923 at age 14 years into the Uinta Mountains of northeast Utah. He describes a tough walk up Hades Canyon into the flower-strewn meadows of the Granddaddy Lakes Basin, ending at an east-facing cliff where the “land fell away at our feet, the sky opened like a hot air balloon filling, a gust of blue. Twenty feet below us was deep water, spread out before us was an oval lake. We were between curves of blue like a clam between the valves of its shell. Nobody said a word. We watched the breeze move on the water, darkening that blue; we saw how the blue shaded into green under the forested far shore; we felt, as much as saw, how infinite the sky was, with clouds and snow peaks dreaming at its edge”. He and his companions stayed for several days at the cliff top, and in the mornings they woke to see, haloed in the sunrise, seven rare Pine Marten kits, with bodies “so slim and undulant that they might be swimming instead of running.” At the end of the essay he gives the name of this special site: Wall Lake.

About 2016 I decided to re-create this trip on its 100th anniversary. The first problem was that there is no “Wall Lake” in the Granddaddy Lakes Basin. In my October 2022 essay “Wallace Stegner in the High Uintas: Where and When” I examined geographical tidbits in Stegner’s essay and concluded that Stegner’s “Wall Lake” was probably a stand-in for Fish Hatchery Lake, in part because the topographic map showed a steep slope west of Fish Hatchery Lake, a steep slope that might well include a twenty-foot cliff.

On 7 July 2023 I set out from Grandview Trailhead, near the top of Hades Canyon, to backpack into the Granddaddy Lakes Basin. I camped overnight above Granddaddy Lake. Stegner had seen Osprey here, I saw a Bald Eagle.



*Granddaddy Lake*

I walked north through woods to Fish Hatchery Lake. From the trail's passage east of the lake, I spied one rockfall on the west that could be Stegner's twenty-foot cliff. With great anticipation I walked off trail to find it. At the top of the rockfall was a steep slope that could *never* be a campsite, much less the Edenic one that Stegner wrote about. Fish Hatchery Lake was indeed beautiful, but not in the way that Stegner describes.

Perched atop that steep rockfall, my anticipation shattered, I wondered what to do next. I pulled out my "High Uintas Wilderness" map. My eye drifted to Palisade Lake, which fit the geographical clues as well as Fish Hatchery Lake did. Furthermore, the trail led to the west side of Palisade Lake, in concert with Stegner's story of taking the trail directly to his cliff-top campsite. And one meaning of the word "palisade" is "cliff", so perhaps the lake was even named after the cliff Stegner described. A final puzzle piece snapped into place in my mind: Another meaning of the word "palisade" is "wall", as in Stegner's "Wall Lake", so perhaps Stegner had just changed the name with a twist. (Stegner often did this: The Zodiac Mine in *Angle of Repose* is based on the real-life North Star Mine of Grass Valley, California.)

So I walked back south and then north again on a different trail leading to Palisade Lake. The trail to Fish Hatchery Lake passed through forest, but the trail to Palisade Lake passed through forest *and* meadow, just as Stegner described.

This trail came out atop an east-facing cliff plunging about twenty feet straight into the water.



*Palisade Lake from cliff at latitude 40.6347°, longitude -110.8071°*

The match between this site and Stegner's Eden was so strong that I had little doubt I had found the right place. In the next few days I would walk past more lakes: Granddaddy, Betsy, Mohawk, Pine Island, Lily Pad, Rainbow, Lost, Governor Dern, Daynes, and Jean. All were beautiful. None but Palisade Lake matched Stegner's description.





*Mount Agassiz above Governor Dern Lake*

Naturally, once I found Eden I was in no hurry to leave. I relaxed. I snacked. I showered in the waterfall just to the north (soapless, of course). Now as a hundred years ago, the place makes a delightful campsite, and some visitors had built a fire (illegally) and left trash in the ashes (again illegally). I cleaned up the trash. The botanist in me grew interested in the local plants. I'm not an expert in Uinta flora (I live in Ohio) but I carried Janet Wingate's books *Rocky Mountain Flower Finder* and *Alpine Flower Finder*, and I'm reasonably certain that I found these twenty-four native plant species in the 100 yard by 20 yard area of Stegner's Eden: Columbine, Dusky Penstemon, Tall Chiming Bells, Shooting Star, Snowball Saxifrage, Snowbed Draba, American Parsley Fern (*Cryptogramma acrostichoides*), Woodland Star, Rosecrown or Kingscrown (in bud), American Monkshood (in leaf), Wild Strawberry, Corn Husk Lily (in leaf), Fern-leaf Daisy (both white and lavender), Shrubby Cinquefoil (in leaf), Rosy Pussytoes, Meadow Pussytoes, Arnica, Avalanche Lily (in seed), American Bistort, Sibbaldia, Yellow Waterlily (in leaf), Spring Beauty, Swamp Black Currant, Rockcress. But also, the invasive exotic Common Dandelion. I didn't bring a trowel, so I used my eating spoon to dig up and remove as many Dandelions as I could.

[I would like to remove more, but it's unlikely that I'll ever return to the Uintas. If you live in the area, and care about wild beauty, I suggest that you visit Stegner's Eden annually in late June or early July (it is only 5.6 miles from the Grandview Trailhead) with weed killer.]



*one bag of trash and two bags of Dandelions removed from Stegner's Eden*

And I also just watched: the mountains, the trees, the clouds, the stars. A raven flew by just under the cliff top. At sunrise, two Chipmunks ran around instead of seven Pine Martens: less rare but equally delightful. And just as I left the place, I saw a large "vee" wake in the lake. I carried no binoculars, but I suspect a Beaver.