

Wallace Stegner in the High Uintas: Where and When

– Dan Styer; 24 October 2022

One of my favorite authors is Wallace Stegner, “the dean of western [US] writers”. He writes often of nature, of wilderness, and of the grit and determination of people who face nature and the wilderness. In May 2016 I was hiking the Paria River area in northern Arizona, exalting in the beauty but worried by the dryness, when I found cold delicious water gushing from a cliff alive with ferns and orchids. Stegner’s words popped unbidden into my mind: “It is a lovely and terrible wilderness, such a wilderness as Christ and the prophets went out into; harshly and beautifully colored, broken and worn until its bones are exposed, ... and in hidden corners and pockets under its cliffs the sudden poetry of springs.”

Where did Stegner’s love of wilderness come from? One source must have been a 1923 walking trip he took with a group of Boy Scouts into the Uinta Mountains east of his home in Salt Lake City, when he was fourteen years old. (This appeals to me, because I took my first backpacking trip at that same age.) He wrote about this trip sixty-six years later in a charming 1989 essay “Crossing into Eden”. In the fall of 2022 I decided that I would recreate Stegner’s trip in honor of its centennial. To do so I had to uncover some details about the location and timing of Stegner’s trip. I found this information through a close reading of “Crossing into Eden”. Here are the portions I found useful (these excerpts omit most of the essay’s charm, but keep the information):

First there were thirty miles of dirt road through a dwarf forest of piñon, juniper, and sage. ... Then, at a ranch on a creek where the dwarf forest gave way to scrub oak and yellow pine, we abandoned the wheels and started hiking. We were to follow the creek up the canyon; the packer would catch up after a few miles.

It began as a stroll through flowers. Then the country stood on end and the creek roared out of a formidable gateway. Hades Canyon, this gulch was called, and it earned its name. ...

Resting after a steep scramble, we [found that our destination was still away by] four more miles. More than an hour, maybe two if it didn’t soon level out. To our relief, it did just that. ... Through the tops of the firs we saw snow peaks to the north. That would be the Uinta crest, thirteen thousand feet and more, bounding the northern rim of our high basin.

[We walked] sometimes through mature, open, resin-smelling forest, sometimes across meadows so dense with flowers—red, blue, pink, yellow, white—that at every step we crushed a dozen. ...

[We walked past a lake that] was almost perfectly round, a half mile in diameter. ... There was a grassy glade above a crescent of black-sand beach. ... [W]e reluctantly went on. ... [When we found the camping site selected by the packer] we went to the edge to look.

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. ... There are no mosquitoes on that cliff-top. ... And this air, at ten thousand feet, hits the bottom of the lungs like ether.

[The lake was cold, and dense with cutthroat trout.] Our sleeping tents are pitched in a half circle facing the cliff and the east, but the weather is so fine that we sleep outside. Night after night we awake at odd hours to see the black sky with big bright stars burning holes in it. We watch the Dipper and Cassiopeia do their slow dance around the Pole Star, and the misshapen boat of the moon sail up and over and down. Finally, we wake to find the east lightening, going pink, the flat clouds in that direction taking fire. Lying snug, we wait until the sun surges up over mountains far to the east ... long shadows stretch, and on the cliff edge, haloed with pure light, the [pine] martens have appeared. ...

I can tell you that the high basin we penetrated was the Granddaddy Lakes Basin in the Uinta Mountains of northeastern Utah, that the lake we camped on was called Wall Lake, and that we reached it with the help of an outfitter whose post office was Hanna, on the Duchesne River.

So the location appears straightforward: The Eden-like-lake is Wall Lake in the Uinta Mountains. A lake of that name does exist in the Uintas, but it's not in the Granddaddy Lakes Basin, it's not oval, and it's not four miles from the top of the steep stretch of Hades Canyon. I looked at topographic maps carefully: From the top of the steep stretch of Hades Canyon (today the location of Grandview Trailhead), it is two miles to Granddaddy Lake, which is almost perfectly circular and about a half-mile across. This seems like the lake with the crescent black-sand beach. And two miles beyond *that* is a smaller, oval lake at elevation 10,200 feet, with mountains far to the east. Topographic maps show that this lake has a nice flat area to the southwest that would make a good campsite with views both to sunrise in the east and to Polaris in the north. I believe that this lake, Fish Hatchery Lake, was Stegner's camping site.

At the foot of Hades Canyon is Defa's Dude Ranch, 11 miles north of Hanna, Utah, and 40 miles north of Duchesne, Utah, which is on US route 40. The satellite view from Google Maps shows that it's at the southernmost edge of the pine belt. There is no official US Forest Service trail up Hades Canyon, but the satellite view suggests a trail starting from latitude 40.5433, longitude -110.8627. Frank Defa, an Italian immigrant active in the Hanna area as early as 1914, was almost certainly Stegner's packer.

So much for the "where"; how about the "when"? When Stegner hiked, flowers were in bloom both at the foot of Hades Canyon and in Granddaddy Lakes basin high above. I am not expert in the flora of the Uintas, but this suggests late June to me. Cordell M. Andersen, at

<https://cordellmandersen.com/trip-1-2010-the-granddaddy-basin-and-lessons-learned/>

describes a hike in Granddaddy Lakes Basin from 24 June to 26 June 2010: no mosquitoes, no snow blockage, many wildflowers.

By contrast, Jack Brauer, at

<https://www.mountainphotography.com/gallery/stillwater-uintas/>

writes that “In late July [2019] we backpacked into the High Uintas Wilderness in Utah ... the mosquitos were so abominable up there that we bailed ... [there were] clouds of hundreds or thousands of the vampire drones swarming around us at all times ... this trip in the Uintas takes the crown for the ultimate mosquito hell.”

July in the Uintas doesn't sound like Eden to me.

And the moon in the “black sky”?

When the moon is a waxing crescent (between new moon and first quarter), it goes “down” during the night between sunset and moonset;

when it is waxing gibbous (between first quarter and full moon), it goes “up and over and down” during the night between sunset and moonset;

when it is waning gibbous (between full moon and third quarter), it goes “up and over and down” during the night between moonrise and sunrise;

when it is a waning crescent (between third quarter and new moon), it goes “up” during the night between moonrise and sunrise.

So if the moon went “up and over and down” during Stegner's trip, it had to be between first quarter and third quarter. In June 1923, this would have been between 21 June and 5 July.

My plan is in place: I'll hike up Hades Canyon to Fish Hatchery Lake in late June of 2023.