

CHAPTER 31—Lost in the Colorado Wilderness—Story

In June 1990, I attended a Lincoln family reunion (my mother's family) in Colorado. Bonny couldn't attend because of business commitments, but my mother was there, along with various uncles, aunts and cousins (by the dozens).

Several of the halest and heartiest reunionists signed up to go for a hike, starting at the 12,400-foot level of Mt. Evans. Perhaps I shouldn't have counted myself a member of this elite group because a painful knee had bothered me for over six months, but I didn't want to admit that anything could slow me down.

This wasn't an ordinary hike. Cousin Dan Lincoln, a member of the Sierra Club, had agreed to clear a trail in the Mt. Evans Wilderness. In addition to Dan and me, the group included Dan's brother-in-law, Keith, Christiane, who lived with Aunt Freddie (Dan's mother), and a Forest Service employee named Adam. Each of us carried a trail-clearing implement, including a bow saw, two axes (called Pawloskis) and two shovels. It was warm; we wore shorts and T-shirts.

A flock of white mountain goats stood on the road near where Beth, Dan's wife, dropped us off. I took close-up pictures of the longhaired beauties as Christiane urged me not to touch them since they were wild. My first official step of the hike, a two-foot drop to the trail from the road, gave my knee a jolt of pain, but I wasn't going to quit before I got started.

After a mile hike in the wrong direction we corrected the error and set about clearing trail: cutting trees that had fallen on the trail, cleaning out water runoff ditches (called water bars), and generally making it hikeable. The weather was warm and sunny, except at lunchtime, when it rained. Adam stopped at every tree to identify it and talked a blue streak, so our progress was not rapid. As long as we didn't go too fast and I was careful of my knee it didn't bother me, excessively.

Finally, Dan had to call a halt to the clearing process so we could hike out of the wilderness in time for a reunion dinner. At 4 o'clock we refilled our water bottles from supplies parachuted in by the Forest Service a week before. They had been used to aid in fighting a forest fire. Christiane, the idealist, called these supplies ranger trash. Adam defended the forest service, a government agency that could do no wrong.

At 4:30 I was lagging behind the others because my knee was hurting. I realized I was off the trail. I walked a zigzag pattern, looking for signs of a trail on the forest floor. I saw a flash of yellow ahead as Adam's jacket disappeared into the woods from a clearing and figured that if I took a course to that spot I would intersect the trail. I did that and searched the edge of the clearing in the immediate vicinity of where I thought I had seen Adam, but I didn't find the trail.

I had to get to the reunion dinner. I couldn't waste time. I was an experienced hiker. If the others could follow the trail, I could too. I plunged into the woods, in the direction I thought I had seen Adam go, sure that I would pick up the trail soon. Unfortunately, I didn't. It was nowhere to be found and by the time I acknowledged that finding it was not going to be easy I was too far away from the clearing to retrace my steps to it. By leaving the clearing I had violated a rule of search that says, "If you are lost and you know people are looking for you, stay in one place, a place where they are likely to look."

I heard the others calling me, faintly, from what sounded like a great distance. Should I return the shouts? If I taxed my voice with shouting, what would it accomplish? Even if I could make the others hear me, I was so far away from them that they wouldn't be able to pinpoint my

direction. In addition, it occurred to me that there was no sense in all of us being off the trail. I remained silent.

Since I wasn't in a place where anyone was likely to look, I set a course along the contour line, keeping the setting sun on my left in order to head north. I gradually lost altitude. I needed to find the parking lot, where a car was waiting for us. I had taken a look at Adam's map when we had stopped for water, but not thinking I would have to navigate on my own, I hadn't tried to memorize it. I did have a compass, but as long as the sun was up I didn't need to use it.

Bushwhacking wasn't difficult, but I did lose a couple of items from my pack, including an old parka, as I scrambled through brush and over and around fallen trees. Occasionally, I had to crawl for a few feet. Sometimes I carried my shovel and sometimes I dragged it behind me. Even though I favored my sore knee I made good progress, and I came to a trail within half an hour. This must be the correct trail. I took it in the downhill direction, which I assumed would take me to the parking lot.

Meanwhile, my companions returned to the clearing and searched for me for an hour. When they didn't find me Adam used his radio to call in the Alpine Rescue Team, a trained group of volunteers. They would bring dogs to help in the search: a Husky, a bloodhound and a German shepherd. My companions agreed to meet them at the parking lot.

I soon realized that I had no reason to carry the shovel. It was heavy and slowed me down. I stuck it into the ground in the middle of the trail. I wrote a note on the inside of a cardboard box that had contained sandwich bags and spiked it onto the wooden handle of the shovel. The note stated that I was heading downhill on the trail.

After considerable downhill hiking I came to a trail intersection in the shape of a T. One of the branches of the T was the continuation of the trail I was on, which a rough sign informed me was called the Cub Creek Trail. The other branch didn't have a name. I didn't have any reason to favor one over the other. I felt very discouraged. For the first time I wondered if I might get so lost that I would never be found.

I rested for 15 minutes and pondered what to do. I was out of writing materials so I wrote my name and an arrow on an orange peel and placed it at the trail intersection, inside a small plastic container, pointing to the continuation of the Cub Creek Trail. Sorry about that, Christiane.

I followed this trail for five minutes, until it started uphill. This had to be wrong. I returned to the intersection, turned the orange peel 180 degrees and set off along the other trail. Within 20 minutes it too was going steadily uphill. In addition, it was poorly maintained and was rapidly disappearing. It would soon peter out, altogether. As I headed back to the intersection again I realized that neither of these alternatives was correct. In fact, all three directions from the intersection went uphill. Wherever I was, it wasn't anywhere near the parking lot.

After I reached the intersection for the third time I took off my shorts and put on my jeans, even though it was still warm. I placed my sweatshirt within easy reach at the top of my pack, nibbled on some of my remaining food, checked my water supply (adequate, because I had refilled my canteen at the supply drop) and got out my compass and flashlight. I remembered that by a stroke of good luck I had some new batteries in my pack. I placed them in the flashlight.

My companions arrived at the parking lot and met the members of the Alpine Rescue Team there. Charley, the leader of the Team, dispatched Keith to drive to Dan's house and acquire an item of my clothing for the dogs to sniff. When Keith arrived, relatives asked him

how the hike had gone. He said, “Well...Alan has disappeared.” That put a damper on the festivities.

Charley put together a profile of me by asking questions of Dan and the others. He was impressed with my experience and decided that I probably wouldn't panic, even alone in the wilderness. Little did he know. In addition, he said most lost hikers stayed close to where they got lost. Sorry about that, Charley.

It was 7:40 p.m. I could bivouac at the intersection and would be found eventually, I was certain, but it was clear that I would still have to hike up one of the three trails to get out. It was better that I do the uphill hiking now while I still had some energy. I didn't want to retrace my steps so I chose to continue in the direction in which I had been headed, on the Cub Creek Trail. Once again I turned the orange peel 180 degrees and set off. I vowed to follow the trail until I got somewhere—wherever that was. The trail went up—and up—and up.

I heard noises of engines in the distance. Maybe the trail was heading up to a road. With renewed hope I plodded onward and upward. The noises continued, intermittently, but after half an hour they didn't seem to be any closer. I finally figured out what caused them. They were the sounds of the airplanes landing at the Denver airport. I must be directly underneath the flight path. No help there.

Resigned to a long hike, I went slowly to conserve my energy and my sore knee. I was continuously thirsty, but I only sipped at my water. I worried about my relatives worrying about me. At dusk I saw a large shape lying in the middle of the trail. I approached it cautiously. It didn't move. I identified it as a bull elk, complete with velvet-covered antlers. That shook me up. Then I saw the large hole in his side and realized he was dead. I walked on by. His pungent animal odor followed me for some distance after I passed him.

Some of the searchers found my shovel on the trail and reported that fact by radio to Charley and the others. There was modest rejoicing. At least I was still alive and on a trail.

I started to use my flashlight, flicking it on and off to save the batteries. The trail was well maintained and I could sometimes follow the cut through the thick growth of evergreen trees, even with the flashlight off. A waxing quarter moon also added light when its rays could penetrate the trees. I got off the trail a few yards and immediately corrected my mistake. I had to be extra careful now.

Then the trail came to a dead end. It disappeared, just like when I had first gotten lost. It occurred to me that although I would probably be found eventually if I was on a trail, my chances deteriorated significantly if I wasn't. I had to get back on the trail, but I had to be extremely careful how I looked for it. Half a dozen times I returned to the spot where I thought I had left the trail and headed in different directions, but the result was always the same. No trail. Finally, I retraced my steps another 15 yards and found that what I had thought was the trail wasn't. Fortunately, the real trail now appeared as a white strip, lit by the flashlight and the moon.

Relief flooded through me. Moving more slowly and cautiously than ever, I continued along the trail. It leveled off and headed downhill. I learned later that I had hiked over Shadow Mountain at 10,500 feet, from a low of 9,000 feet. The moving shadows caused by the flashlight shining on the bushes beside the trail looked like animals slinking through the night. I searched nervously for bears. Why else would this be called the Cub Creek Trail?

Then I received the first really good news since I had found the trail after I became lost. I passed a sign, facing in the opposite direction from where I was heading. I turned around and

read it. The sign welcomed hikers to the Mt. Evans wilderness area. I reasoned this meant that I must be *leaving* the Mt. Evans wilderness area—and, hopefully, approaching civilization.

Another sign marked the national forest boundary. This boundary followed the trail in the form of a barbed wire fence. Could those be lights in the distance? They were—more signs of civilization. Should I leave the trail and go cross-country, directly toward the lights? No. I had done enough foolish things for one day. There was no way to judge how far away they were.

At about 11 p.m. I reached a fence that marked the end of the trail. I was never so glad to see a "No Parking" sign. I was now on a dirt road. There were houses along the road. I would go up to one of the houses and ask for help.

Most of the houses were dark. I took the road in the downhill direction, looking for a house with lights on. I spotted one with a relatively short driveway. I shone my flashlight on the porch by the front door and a large dog, stationed there, started barking at me. I decided against this house. It occurred to me that dogs and people made this area more dangerous than the woods.

Another lit house. I walked cautiously up the driveway. No dogs. Onto the front porch. No door. The porch continued around to the side. The door must be there. I peeked around the corner at an uncovered window of a brightly lit room. A bare foot was in evidence. The picture was clear. A man was facing the window, probably watching television. I had to pass the window to get to the door. When I did the man would either have a heart attack or shoot me. I retreated to the road.

The road went steadily downhill, but it seemed to continue forever. I flagged down the first moving car I had seen since coming out of the woods. Blinded by the lights I couldn't see the occupants. I said hello, and from the response I knew there was a teenage girl in the car. After a few seconds I could see that there were two of them. Afraid of scaring them and getting myself into more trouble, I asked them how to find a telephone. They said to go all the way down to the bottom of the road and turn left. I asked them if I was near Conifer (where my cousin Carol lived). They said Conifer was to the right at the bottom of the road.

I finally reached the telephone at 12:30 a.m. I tried to find Carol's number in the phone book, but it wasn't listed. Not wanting to fool around any longer, I dialed 911 and told the operator I had been lost and could she send a sheriff's deputy. She asked if I was at the Brook Forest Inn. I said it sounded logical (I was on Brook Forest Drive and there was an inn across the street). She put me on hold. When she came back on the line she asked me if I needed medical aid. I said no, but I thought people were looking for me and could she call them off? She said she could and she would also send a sheriff's deputy.

While I waited I found Dan's telephone number in the book. Dan lives in Evergreen. I had no change in my pockets so I called collect. My Aunt Kim answered, but didn't immediately accept the call. That was because she thought it was Bonny, calling from California, and Kim didn't know what to tell her. I didn't recognize Kim's voice and told the operator I thought she had dialed the wrong number. She got huffy. Then my mother came on the line and accepted the call. She sounded relieved to hear from me. I told her I would call back with my location.

The deputy arrived and had his dispatcher call Dan's number again to get somebody to pick me up at the Brook Forest Inn. Aunt Freddie, who also lives in Evergreen, knew where the inn was. Of course, Dan was still out looking for me. The deputy gave me the orange from his lunch and said I had walked a long way. I already knew that.

Freddie, my mother and my Uncle Lou arrived a little after 1:30 a.m. The deputy asked Freddie her age so he could fill out his paperwork. Like most women, she was reluctant to give it

and asked him why he needed it. Lou chimed in and said, ingenuously, “Don’t you remember? You and Joyce (his wife) were born on the same day, bla-bla-bla.” I think Freddie wondered why she had bothered to rescue me.

Charley and the Alpine Rescue Team didn’t get credit for a “find” because I walked out of the woods before they caught me. Finds are what they live for since they don’t get paid. However, Charley found something better—a wife. He and Christiane started dating. Until they got to know each other better they sat on the camel saddles on either side of Freddie’s large fireplace, to avoid temptations of the flesh, and talked. After doing this for a while they realized that they were made for each other.

I don’t normally like to cause trouble for people. During this escapade I caused trouble for my relatives and the members of the Alpine Rescue Team. I certainly appreciate their concern and their help. Incidentally, if I had taken the Cub Creek Trail upward instead of downward at the time I first found it I would have intersected the correct trail shortly thereafter.