

# Adventure at 10,000 feet

by Frank Peters



In August 2005, during a summer of tragic accidents involving boy scouts, Lido Island's Troop 37, while on its annual long-term backpacking trip in the high Sierras, has its own unexpected adventure.

“It’s an amazing story, no matter how you look at it,” Rick Selby blurted into the phone. I called his cellphone; he answered from the hospital room where his son, Colfax, a boy scout in Lido Island’s Troop 37, had just undergone an emergency appendectomy. I would be speechless as I learned what transpired after they left our backpacking trip during an illness emergency of a different sort.

In a month of stories about boy scouts and tragic occurrences this one would have a happy if surprising ending. As we prepared for our annual week-long trip into the wilderness, two were struck by lightning and killed in a meadow near Mt. Whitney; the story was reported just a day before we left. While we were away a boy scout was killed by lightning in Utah. These tragedies followed the widely reported deaths



Colfax Selby, on the trail

of four adult leaders at the Boy Scout Jamboree in Virginia; they were killed when the tent pole they were raising touched an electrical line. I had promised the parents of our group that there would be no headlines as a result of our expedition.

Each summer the boys of Troop 37 plan a long term wilderness outing. Only senior scouts can participate because the expedition requires skill in mastering the outdoors that younger scouts haven’t acquired. It’s always a popular trip; I spend months in advance arranging the logistics, working with outfitters, establishing a budget and completing all the details while the boys plan their menus and the equipment they’ll need for the trip.

Last summer we spent six days canoeing on the Green River in Utah, cruising through Canyonlands National Park. What sounded like easy drifting along 52 miles of gorgeous river scenery turned out to be an arduous paddle into strong headwinds. This year it was time for a trip into the wilderness on foot. We settled on a 23-mile hike starting in Horseshoe Meadows, looping through Cottonwood Lakes near Mt. Whitney, just above Lone Pine, CA. The trip could be done in four days but we thought the scenery and fishing would be worth adding a couple of leisurely layover days. Little did we know that we’d be using one of our layover days right away to deal with the health emergencies of two hikers.

As we prepared for the trip several threats loomed large in our mind; bears were active in the area and we were required by the National Park Service to pack all our food in bear-proof containers. If a bear were to gain access to even one boy’s food supply, the entire group would feel the pinch. We read books on bear safety and drilled on the key points of arranging the campsite to minimize an intrusion. The biggest killer in the wilderness is hypothermia, even in the summer season. In August few of us think of the threat of exposure, but nighttime temperatures were reported below freezing and the lakes that the boys had imagined as swimmable were formed by snow melt from the prior record winter. Rain coats and rain pants with winter-weight sleeping bags were essential items added to the equipment list. Lightning was also a concern, but there are just a handful of issues to discuss: keep off high ridges, avoid lone trees and stay grounded.

Interestingly, it was only after our first planning meeting that I discovered the website with the references to altitude sickness or Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS). I e-mailed the article to the other adults in the group. AMS was a concern because our trip would start at 10,400 feet elevation and, by day three, we’d be crossing New Army Pass at 12,300 ft.



Monday, at the trailhead. All eight in clean clothes: Colfax Selby, Ryan Akiba, Ben Nesbit, Dan DiChiro, Jay Wilson, Max Muehlhauser, Mason Sayer and Mark Peters.

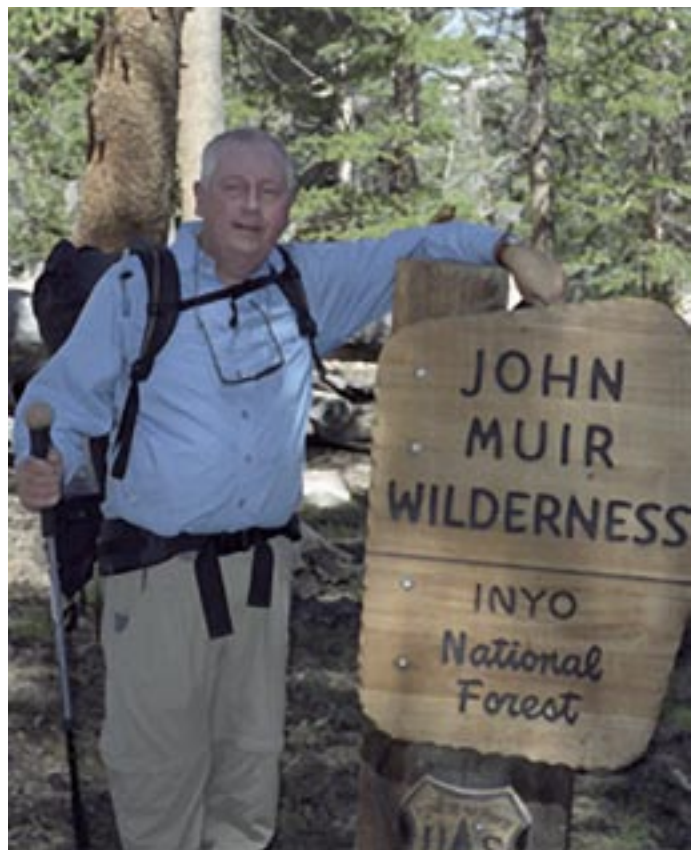
I had suffered altitude sickness myself on more than one ski trip over the years; even trips to Park City, UT and Santa Fe, NM could get me wheezing and here we were planning six nights on the ground and all of them would be above 10,000 feet. I decided to keep the information on symptoms and what to do about it a subject for myself and the two other adults that were leading the trip. We discussed the symptoms of AMS:

- Loss of appetite, nausea, or vomiting
- Fatigue or weakness
- Dizziness, light-headedness
- Difficulty sleeping
- Confusion, loss of coordination
- Staggering gait, walking as if intoxicated
- Irregular breathing, coughing

The key rule-of-thumb we learned online is: “any illness at altitude is altitude illness until proven otherwise.” Combine that rule with the fact that anyone can get AMS, there is no predictor “based on age, gender, physical condition or prior altitude experience. AMS does not discriminate.”

We learned that the sooner we arrived at altitude and that if we slept at altitude the first night, it would give our bodies a chance to acclimatize. So we picked up our wilderness permit at the ranger station in Lone Pine and headed up the long winding road. We would spend the first night camping at the trailhead at 10,400 feet. We’d have the luxury of changing a few clothing items in the morning and packing other non-essential items into the trunk of the car before heading out in the morning. At 9:15am on Monday August 1<sup>st</sup> we began our hike into the John Muir Wilderness; eight boys and three adults, a number that would soon be changing.

As the adult leader I attempted to anticipate anything that could happen to cause problems. As I concentrated on the big picture, little things like keeping the group together on the trail never occurred to me. So in just an hour the youthful and fleet of foot were well ahead of the rest of the group. It's a delicate balance; I don't want to penalize



The border into the wilderness surprised us; it came quickly that first morning. Frank Peters poses.

the athletically gifted and yet for safety reasons it's important to stick together. After a mid-morning regrouping we studied the map and planned points to regroup as we continued. Our map of course was accurate, but the trail guide we read from had some minor discrepancies; it turned out we were ahead of schedule, making good progress. Still, it was unsettling to find ourselves further up the trail; we had been looking for stream crossings that were described in the trail guide. I didn't realize it at the time, but a flicker of doubt crept into my mind regarding the directions we were following.

At lunch the lead hikers selected a beautiful spot with a raging waterfall directly opposite the trail. We regrouped and again we studied the map. There were just a couple of junctions ahead, take a left at the next intersection and right at the second. In just a few more

miles we'd be at our first campsite in the wilderness: South Fork Lakes at 11,000 feet.

After lunch the swifter members of the group soon left three of us hiking alone. After successfully managing the first fork in the trail we came upon the second. This intersection had a trail sign; pointing left it directed us to South Fork Lakes. Off we go, without the benefit of knowing that everyone else remembered correctly to turn right. We set off to the south of South Fork Lakes instead of to the north side; a wrong turn that would have exhausting consequences for the three of us.

There'd be no telltale indications that we were on the wrong trail. Everything looked just as it should; the lake appeared just as we expected. We were marching along, tired from the long first day hiking at altitude; this would be our heaviest day because our bear canisters held a full six days of food. It wasn't until we reached the lake and realized the figures we spotted from a distance weren't our compatriots but a couple of fisherman. We kept pushing forward thinking they'd magically appear over the next ridge, but the trail degraded quickly and each of us noticed that we couldn't see any footprints on the trail, certainly not the footprints of eight other hikers. We were on the wrong trail. How could this happen? I was the leader of the trip and I had decided to take this trail and now it was becoming quite evident that I had made a decision in error. It was getting late in the day; we were ready to drop our packs and settle in for the evening; instead we had to determine what had gone wrong and how to get back with the rest of the group. For me the situation stung; was this a taste of the confusion that accompanies AMS? Or was it more simply but equally alarming, another poor decision, a mistake that increasingly happens as I settle into the second half of my life, a taste of senility?

Max howled when he realized we were off course. My reaction would come later. There were no recriminations; maybe Max and his dad felt sorry for me. "Could we hike around the lake and join our friends on the other side?" A fisherman suggested it was possible so we looked at the trail guide 'as the crow flies' and decided to bushwhack our way around the lake, actually 3 lakes, as the easiest way to rejoin our friends. The lake was surrounded by a thin shoreline then a mass of jumbled boulders, many the size of a car. It stretched as far as I could see with no obvious path and nothing but the promise of a twisted ankle

ahead if we kept going this way. Reluctantly, we realized we could not take this approach, precisely why all trail guides discourage such shortcuts. Instead we must return the way we came, taking the path back to the wrong turn and selecting the other path. It was the sure bet, but the longest route to our destination. We dragged our tired bodies under our heavy packs along the discouraging path we had just taken, then the long last mile and a half to where we were greeted some two hours after the others had arrived at camp. Rick and Colfax met us outside of camp. Rick shouldered my backpack for the last 100 yards into camp where I slumped to the ground using my backpack as a pillow and sucked on my water bottle, sobbing and completely exhausted.

Mark setup my sleeping bag and bivy. I wanted to avoid the weight of a tent and the bivy acts like a waterproof envelope that protects the sleeping bag. The temperature was already cooling and a light breeze brought a chill; I settled in for an hour long nap. This was an ominous beginning to the trip. My leadership skills had been immediately called into question. Would other symptoms of AMS show themselves? I kept drinking water to offset any further advance of the illness.

**T**he Forest Service limits campfires in the back-country. We knew there'd be no campfire tonight at this site so, shortly after sunset it was an early bedtime for everyone. Even the boys who can chatter for hours in their tents drifted quietly off to sleep. For several of us it would be a long night.

This was the familiar part of altitude for me. I'd recently traveled to Park City for business; I knew that my sleep would be disrupted. What I didn't realize was to what extent. I awoke at one point, not too late in the night, with a chill. The temperature starts dropping at sunset and continues dropping until sunrise. If you have an arm that isn't tucked into the sleeping bag as you drift off you'll get a chill that will wake you later. What I felt was no little chill.

Hypothermia advances in stages. When a victim starts shivering he basically is losing his fight to keep himself warm. As I awoke at 2am on Tuesday morning I could feel a chill turn to shivering, like an earthquake that starts rumbling and spreads across the landscape, I could feel this shiver start across my chest and spread like a wave across my upper torso. Was I really that cold? Was this shiver a symptom

of hypothermia? I kept telling myself I wasn't that cold. What was this uncontrollable spasm of shivering that had gripped me? It must be another symptom of AMS, one I hadn't felt before. This condition would wrack my nerves and sap my strength, all while I needed a good night's sleep for tomorrow's hike; we would ascend New Army Pass at an elevation of 12,300 feet, the biggest physical challenge of the trip was just hours away. What kind of shape was I in?

With age come mistakes in judgment, but also increasing amounts of wisdom and experience. I lay in my sleeping bag claustrophobically constrained in a waterproof, bug-proof bivy while calmly observing these spasms of shivering sweep across my body. It had to be AMS; it would pass. I stayed calm.

My symptoms did pass, but I fitfully tossed and turned during the early morning hours passing the time until dawn when I could justify getting up. Two factors kept us in our bags till 7am. Rick Selby had complained the night before that some boys were up too early; not that they were up too early of course, but that they were making too much noise at too early an hour. The other factor related to bear behavior; our bear guide recommended sleeping in to avoid any early morning encounters. The sun would be rising over the mountains around 7am. You'd only suffer additional chills before sunlight could warm you, so we all learned to stay sacked out till then.

A little while after a light breakfast and it was time to pack up. What a surprise, the exertion and altitude were acting to suppress my appetite, it looked like I had more than enough food for this trip!

Rick Selby approached with a signal to step away from the boys for a private discussion: he was suffering from altitude sickness. He'd spent the night in agony with virtually no sleep. He had studied the literature and knew the symptoms; he was ill. It was time to review what we could remember of the guidelines; one thing jumped out, we could not go forward. Rick would take some Tylenol and increase hydration while the rest of us considered our options. During a group meeting we quickly came to the resolution to stay together. Rick was sensitive that his illness was causing disappointment with the boys; the trip was stalled and we didn't know for how long.



Rick Selby checking the trail guide, still feeling ok on the first day.

To keep up morale, we decided to split into small groups and spend the morning exploring the immediate area. There were several lakes to visit and snow fields along the hillsides promised rare snowball fights in August. The plan was to reconvene at 1pm and see how Rick was doing. That's when Ben Nesbit, our boy leader piped up. Later I thought that if Rick hadn't announced his illness so publicly, Ben might not have come forward. Ben had a headache. He was nauseous and he'd slept poorly. Instantly this made sense, he'd seemed out of it for some time. He'd stay in camp with Rick and Colfax to relax, drink lots of water and at 1pm we'd re-evaluate his symptoms, too. With our first-aid plan in place I elected to travel with the other dad, Doug Muehlhauser and his son, Max, as we explored Cottonwood Lakes 2 and 3, as they're named; the lakes we'd passed yesterday as we straggled into camp after taking the wrong trail. Max had plans for fishing in Lake #3. This idyllic trip to the lakes would be my last piece of mind that day.

When we returned to camp at 1pm we were greeted

with an improvised golf tournament. The boys had modified their hiking sticks, adding make-shift club heads. Mark contributed a nerf-ball and, with a few holes dug in the various corners of the campsite, they were playing golf. It was a jovial scene of creativity and fun; just why we bring boys into the wilderness.

After observing the festivities and critiquing errant tee shots it was time to re-evaluate Rick and Ben. I was surprised to hear from Ben that he felt worse, not better. He seemed to be someone's caddie in the tournament, but he was quick to confess that the time spent in camp offered no relief of his symptoms. It wasn't hard to gauge Rick's symptoms; he was sprawled out in the shade, looking haggard. A morning's rest had done nothing to alleviate his symptoms either. Stalling for more time, I encouraged a few boys to scout up the trail; there was another campsite just a half mile away at Long Lake. Our present campsite was hot with little shade. No one had planned to spend a layover day here.

In the next two hours some boys would do chores and a few would do reconnaissance up the trail. These activities were a diversion for the boys. They were getting itchy just sitting around and the promise of a nicer campsite definitely had its appeal. Too quickly the boys returned, the new campsite offered lake-shore camping with shade, fishing and easy access to drinking water. Even better, we'd be a half mile closer to New Army Pass which we hoped to ascend the next day. For me this plan had backfired. Now I was getting pressure from the boys, Mark especially, to pack up and move to Long Lake. Mark pleaded; he would carry Mr. Selby's pack to the new campsite. I argued that what he was proposing was good for many of us but inconsiderate of the ill among us.

I had confided with Doug Muehlhauser that I expected there was a better than 50-50 chance that Ben and Rick would feel no better the next day and we'd be faced with a serious decision in the morning. That's when Mark's idea came to mind. Instead of carrying Rick's pack to the new campsite we could carry it halfway down the mountain. We could evacuate them with the support of the strongest boys to help them down the mountain. It would avoid another night of agony for Rick and Ben. It was 3pm, if we were going to do this it had to be done right away. Doug and I met with Rick. I think any well thought out plan would've appealed to him. He immediately agreed.

Mark, Doug and I would pack water and rain gear for ourselves. Rick and Colfax quietly started to pack their gear. Colfax had no symptoms but would return with his dad.

Next we approached Ben. The last time we spoke he said he was worse; this time there would be no discussion. He was evacuating, “get your gear together, you’re heading down the mountain.” Ben offered no objection; he turned and started packing up. It was time for a meeting. The boys could see the bustle in the campground. We called them together to describe our plan: Dan, Mark, Doug and I would lead them down the mountain. We set a destination: where I had made the wrong turn yesterday. It had psychological significance to me and it seemed like a good way out of the wilderness to escort them without unduly tiring the team that would turn around and return to camp. Then it was time to delegate, a pair of boys assembled the water bottles of everyone involved; it would take 20 minutes to top everyone off. Ryan Akiba was put in charge of the boys left behind. Then we adjourned to prepare. That’s when Dan DiChiro stepped forward to complain of his own symptoms.

Our situation was tense; we had an adult and our boy leader being evacuated off the mountain. Now another boy had stepped forward to say that he couldn’t participate in the evacuation because of his own symptoms.

Doug and I listened to Dan’s symptoms. I was only half listening; if I heard the right words Dan was going to be heading down, too. But I didn’t hear the keywords I expected. Don’t ask me now what he reported but it wasn’t headache and nausea. Partly it was an elevated heart rate. I was distracted, but I remembered Doug’s wife was an anesthesiologist, ‘did Doug know how to take Dan’s pulse?’ In just a minute we confirmed that whatever Dan was feeling, his heart rate was lower than Doug’s. Dan avoided a trip down the mountain by the slimmest of margins. He was excused from the evacuation party and told to relax in camp.

I’m the least strong hiker in the group, not the weakest. I trail the rest of the group, sometimes by a wide margin. I would carry the essentials the evacuation team would need to take the ill down the mountain and return to camp: water, first-aid supplies and raingear were all I could think of.

It was time to go. It was no easy time getting ready for Rick and Colfax. They had packed three bear canisters; they were traveling heavy. I didn’t think I could carry Rick’s pack, that’s when Mark stepped forward. He would carry Rick’s heavy pack and Doug would carry Ben’s. I shouldered the pack with our supplies and with a final warning to those remaining in camp of no monkey business while we were gone, we departed swiftly. The trail for Doug and I had already been twice traveled, it led us past the Cottonwood Lakes we’d visited earlier that morning.

The original plan was to carry the packs down to where we had taken the wrong turn the day before. As we zoomed down the mountain we decided to keep going. We continued down to where we had lunch the day before, at the waterfall. From here the three evacuees would have a straight shot down the mountain. For the three of us returning to camp, we’d have a not too long a hike with only one pack to carry. We said a quick goodbye with hearty handshakes to the departing; it was after 4pm, they’d have to get moving. We turned and went our separate ways. I hoped we’d given them a head start, a helping hand down the mountain. They were capable of shouldering their hefty packs still loaded with the better part of a week’s worth of food. They carried a water pump to refill their water bottles when they came to the streams that would mark the end of the trail. If I had thought more about that water pump, I would have asked to keep it...

We wouldn’t know when they’d reach the cars in the parking lot. I gave Rick one of the two keys I carried to my car so he could drive to his car which we’d parked at the exit point of the loop trail, just a mile and a half further away, but miles we knew we wouldn’t want to walk at the end of the week. It was part of the altitude fog; I didn’t understand why he wanted one of my keys. It didn’t click with me until after we departed. Maybe we were all a little fogged.

We made a dramatic return to an abandoned campsite. Maybe we returned before anyone thought we would, but it was spooky after the evacuation to return to such quiet. As a perk and to benefit from a change of scene, I had promised the boys we would switch campsites and hike the half mile to Long Lake. Just as the boys said, it was a beautiful spot with a view of New Army Pass, lots of trees and a lake for fishing.



On top of New Army Pass, the high point of the trip at 12,300 feet. This was our first day as a smaller group and the ascent of the pass had loomed large in everyone's mind. Accordingly, the celebration at the summit was enthusiastic.

**I**t was the second beginning of our adventure, now that we knew we could press on in the morning and tackle the biggest, most difficult part of our hike, nearly back on schedule.

Still no campfires at this location either. After dinner we were all relieved to settle in for the night. It wouldn't be until morning that we'd see the signs of the bear that entered our camp that night...

As for the evacuees, we wouldn't learn of their continuing adventures until four days later.

The rest of the hike passed mostly uneventfully. We lost our topo maps on Wednesday; that was exciting. At the last minute, before leaving town, I made a copy

of the map in the trail guide for everyone. Now I was glad I had. The ziplock bag with the three topo maps, trail guide and compass were missing. I'd handed the map to Mason while climbing New Army Pass; I'd been eager to shed any weight. After the ascent, while we were taking a ten minute break at the trailhead to Rock Creek, Mark took the map from Mason and placed it loosely in his outer pack pocket. After Mark and Mason fooled on a boulder nearly upside down, well, let's say, they thought they knew where they lost the map. We didn't discover the loss for another mile and a half, not until we were entering the campsite at Rock Creek Lake, where we'd spend the next two days.

**M**ark loudly protested the lost map. He and Mason were ready to shed their packs and race back up the trail to its last known whereabouts, but I was not so upset. We would retrace our steps in two days, if we didn't mount a search party the next day for the map. Either way, we were just minutes from settling in to a lovely campsite for the main layover. It was late in the day after the climb through New Army Pass, I didn't want anyone taking off in search of a map we wouldn't need anytime soon. It turned out to have an surprising ending, this lost map.

As planned, the next day was a layover day in camp. I encouraged the boys to do laundry. The warm sun and mild breeze combined with the thin air of altitude to make for a quick dry-cycle. Since I packed no extra clothes, just one extra t-shirt, laundry was a more critical exercise for me. The nights had been cold and I was sleeping in my clothes at night and the condensation in the bivy added to the body odor that a round the clock wardrobe is susceptible. The boys turned their laundry chores into a chilly dip in the lake; the day idled along. I was napping in camp while the boys prattled their stories when a ranger entered our camp, Alison Steiner.

At this point in the trip I was eager for adult conversation; I asked her to rest her pack and stay for a few minutes. As she slipped out of the pack I saw her topo maps, also stored in an outside pack pocket. After delicately explaining that we had lost ours, (I'm sure she suspected that we might become a problem for the Forest Service without proper direction), she unfolded her map to review our route for the next day. After more friendly chit chat, she asked to see our Wilderness Permit. Whatever caused me to separate the Wilderness Permit from the map? I had removed it from the ziplock bag with the map, just the morning before losing the map. Now I was glad I had placed the permit deep in my pack. She wrote down the details of where we were headed, quite thoroughly, as if she might have to come find us. It all ended quite cordially, "good luck and have fun." She disappeared up the trail we had come down the day before.

It would be hours later during dinner, when the boys shouted, "Mr. Peters, there's the Ranger!" And there she was, briskly walking through our campsite headed to our outdoor dining room. My first thought was "are we breaching some wilderness etiquette, breaking some food-handling rule in bear country?"



Mark Peters on the way out, with the map.

But no, that raised arm was waving something in a ziplock bag: our map. "Thank you, thank you, thank you," but she wasn't the one who found the map; she pointed to the trail where four hikers appeared, "they found it." Now all eight of us began shouting our appreciation. The hikers waved while quickly moving out of sight.

I was feeling better than good; our map was restored, just before we'd need it the next morning. I couldn't get over the serendipity, if the ranger hadn't dropped by and if I hadn't noticed her map... too many coincidences to consider. It was very good fortune.

The next day's hike sounded like a walk in the park. Our destination would be Chicken Spring Lake; it would be our last night on the ground. It turned out to be another discrepancy in the trail guide. The easy-sounding route along the Pacific Crest Trail was instead a miserable six hour slog in sand soft as talcum powder while thunderstorms threatened in every direction. We stopped to put on rain gear only to stop again in ten minutes because we were too warm. We were dangerously exposed on a ridge just below the tree line, not where we wanted to be, but the rain never came, not to us. We stayed dry all evening, too. The threat of lightning appeared again the next morning as we packed up for the final hike out, but on the entire trip I only felt two rain drops.

On that final five miles the boys spoke of food, their imaginations rummaging through all their fast food favorites. They begged to return to the Pizza Connection in Lone Pine. Good pizza, well kind of, but a room full of arcade games was the true appeal.

I enjoyed taunting them that their speedy exit from the wilderness would put them back in town before the restaurant opened for the day. Besides, Mexican food had been spotted on our prior visit to town and the adults weren't eager to sit in the pizza parlor again this soon.

Back in Lone Pine while we waited to order, I slipped out to call home. Many of the boys had already checked in to announce our safe return. It took a few tries to connect with Barbara; I was standing on Main Street outside the restaurant when she told me what had happened after our evacuees left us.

Colfax, Rick and Ben made it out of the woods in only three hours. That night they followed the plan we'd made for the end of the week: dinner at the Merry-Go-Round restaurant and an overnight stay at the Best Western. After dinner, Colfax complained of stomach pains. They didn't diminish, but the three of them departed in the morning to return to Newport Beach.



At the end of the trail near Horseshoe Meadow.

The next day Colfax would be visiting the Emergency Room at Children's Hospital in Orange. Although appendicitis is often quickly and accurately diagnosed, in his case the doctors' couldn't pin it down. Was it a parasite in the water he'd been drinking in the mountains? It could be, but that meant that other hikers, still in the mountains could be falling ill. Rick called Barbara from the hospital. Something was wrong with Colfax and the doctors weren't sure what; they were about to do a MRI scan. It could be the water. Of course it wasn't the water, but no one knew. Not knowing set off a mild panic; if other boys were affected how could she find out? What would it take to rescue other boys if they too were infected? She would have a sleepless night as she considered these questions. The next day Rick called to tell her of Colfax's appendectomy; it was successful, he would recover in just a couple of weeks. The mystery was solved; there was no illness to spread among the other boys. All she had to do was wait three more days for us to return to civilization as planned.

Back in Lone Pine it was too early to check in, so after chips and salsa and everyone's favorite burrito was consumed we split up to collect souvenirs. We'd struck a compromise; pizza would be served later during a pool party at the hotel. I'd still end up sitting in the Pizza Connection waiting for the to-go order, but it was a quiet time to savor the final moments of the trip. We were all tired. The boys spent most of the day clustered in one hotel room, watching *The Shining*. To me the movie looked tame; we'd all had a good scare during our week in the woods.



Jay Wilson at Rock Creek Lake.



