

Date: Sunday, July 5, 1998 12:22:49 PM  
From: HTHALLJR  
Subj: "Middle Mountain" -- Utah Valley's easiest climb?

Dear family and friends,

I hope you all had a wonderful Independence Day. Thanks, Mom, for the invitation to watch the fireworks from your place. I was out wandering the back roads.

Toward evening I drove up the Squaw Peak Trail from Provo Canyon, the full 25 miles of which I haven't driven in about three decades. The police and forest service were stopping people to check for fireworks -- they'd had two fires on the mountain already that day. Originally I was going to watch the Freedom Festival fireworks from the overlook above Rock Canyon, but I got there too early and didn't want to wait around.

I drove past the Rock Canyon campground and up the switchbacks toward the high point on the road, which is the trailhead for Provo Peak. There were a couple of avalanches along that portion of the road this winter, and there was one point where snow still blocked the road and people had made a detour through the aspens. I don't know whether an ordinary sedan could make it to the Provo Peak trailhead or not -- iffy.

From the Provo Peak trailhead I rediscovered Utah Valley's easiest mountain! It's not named on any of my USGS maps. I call it "Middle Mountain" because it lies between Y Mountain and Provo Peak and is intermediate in height. You seldom notice it from the valley, as it hides behind Y Mountain. As a teen I climbed the northern and lower of the twin peaks, which is at 8753 feet, and bounded in great foolish leaps down its gentle western slope to the saddle with Y Mountain. Yesterday evening I climbed "North Middle Mountain" for the first time. It's 9001 feet, Y Mountain is 8567, and Provo Peak is 11,068. (Timpanogos is 11,750).

"North Middle" is probably the easiest high mountain in Utah Valley to climb. You start only 430 feet below its summit. But "South Middle" is very easy, too. It's just 3/4 mile of trail, climbing 680 feet in elevation from the trailhead. There's a prominent trail that heads west from the

road on a gentle slope through aspens and wild flowers. The trail crosses south across a west-facing slope, then turns west, crossing a ridge of shale with a few Douglas firs to the left and aspens (and North Middle) to the right. The trail continues west toward Slide Canyon (the canyon between Heritage Mt/Maple Flats and Y Mountain) This trail is also the easiest approach to Y-Mountain. At the ridge crossing I turned left up the shale ridge, following an easy slope through scattered fir to the summit of South Middle.

The summit of South Middle Mountain is a ridge, perhaps 300 yards long, which runs approximatel east-west. It offers an incredible view of Utah Valley, and you can even see over Point of the Mountain into Salt Lake Valley. All the two- and three-fold series of ridges and valleys of the Wasatch Front stand in stark vertical relief. The west-facing slopes of Timp and Cascade are completely exposed -- the view is awe inspiring. The ridge slopes steeply away to the south toward Slate Canyon -- I don't know if one could scramble up or down it or not. The view simply took my breath away. I reached the summit just 10 minutes before sundown and watched a beautiful sunset. Unless there were people on top of Timp, Cascade, or Provo, I was the last one in the valley to see the sun set!

This inspires an original song, set to the tune of "We're going hiking on the Fourth of July."

I was last to see the sun set on the Fourth of July,  
I was last to see the sun set on the Fourth of July,  
I was last to see the sun set on the Fourth of July,  
Oh, I was last to see the sun set on the Fouth of July!

The ridge at the mountain top was a riot of wildflowers. Paintbrush was the dominant flower, but there must have been a dozen other varieties. It was just a heavenly sight. There was even a patch of snow on the north face, just below the summit, with flowers emerging right behind the melt. I hiked back down by the light of a three-quarter moon. Part way down there was small a grove of Douglas fir where I stopped to rest. There was a gnarled horizontal branch just at bench height with an inviting enclosing canopy.

I've often hiked by moonlight, but seldom in dense forest, and in the heavy

shade of a grove of aspens I didn't see a stump and tripped -- scratched my wrist and skinned and bruised my shin. No real harm, but it was a warning not to take chances -- what if I'd broken my leg? Not a soul in the world knew where I'd gone. I never take risks like scrambling up cliffs, but from now on I'll take a flashlight when I hike after dark. Also,

it dawned on me that not a soul in the world knew where I'd gone. So until I'm able to get my ham radio "walkie talkie" I'll send my kids an e-mail message telling where I've gone and when I expect to return. I hate to lose the spontaneity I've enjoyed so much (sometimes I even toss coins to see where they lead me), but this experience made me realize how cruel it would be to my loved ones and to the community if I turned up missing with no clue where to search.

I think the last time I drove this road was in 1967, in Dad's Plymouth Valiant. It managed the road fine. It hasn't been maintained, and it's really been torn up by the weather and 4-wheel drive traffic. The section between the summit and Left Fork of Hobble Creek was barely passable in my high-clearance Blazer. I wish they'd improve it and pave it -- it goes through country just as pretty as the Alpine Loop, but it has incredible vistas of the valley as well. There was one spot where the downhill side of the road had sloughed off in a mudslide and cars had "widened" the road on the uphill side by driving at a steep tilt. I stopped and checked the width, lined up my car, and held my breath while crossing. I finally reached the paved road at 11:30 p.m. I'd estimate my average speed was 7-10 mph.

By the way, Provo Peak is definitely the easiest of all the valley's highest mountains., because of the high jumping-off point. You just follow the trail north and west from the trailhead through aspens, then head right up the western-most ridge. It's a bit of a scramble below the summit -- no cliffs, but steep shale, and at one point, because of the changing slope you can't see where you've been or where you're going. But it's a very rewarding climb. From its summit you can see not only Utah Valley, but Wasatch and Strawberry valleys and the Uintah Mountains. I climbed it during college, and I'm working up my strength and my nerve to try it again this summer.

Next Saturday morning I'm going to climb South Middle Mountain again, then continue on to Maple Flats and drink from my favorite spring.

Depending on the time available, the wishes of anyone whose with me, and my own energy level, I might attempt Y Mountain, too. It's a fairly easy climb up the valley between the two peaks. (Y Mountain is also a twin peak: the west peak, which we see from the valley, is 3520 feet, but the east peak is 48 feet higher).

If you'd like to join me, RSVP for breakfast (I'll provide) at Canyon Glen Park in Provo Canyon, 6:00 a.m. Saturday, July 11. Bring water and a trail snack. We should be back to Provo Canyon by 2:00 p.m. Regular sedans can make it ok to Rock Canyon campground, but we may have to shuttle people in 4WD from there to the trail head.

Tracy

PS. Yesterday afternoon the North Fork Stream that runs by my place turned muddy for the first time this spring (most of its water comes from springs, which flow fairly constantly year round), and this morning it's running about 8 inches higher than yesterday and 4 inches higher than I've ever seen it. It's carrying big rocks along the streambed -- you can hear and feel them thumping along. This morning I drove up the Alpine Loop to try to learn the cause. The waterfalls along the switchbacks toward Emerald Lake were all muddy and roaring. I wonder if an ice dam at Emerald Lake suddenly broke through. Hope there were no hikers on the trail (it's still blocked by snow and ice at the switchbacks).