

**A NIGHT ON SWALES MOUNTAIN**  
OR  
**Stranded on a Mountain Top at Zero Temperature.**

[An excerpt from the *Autobiography of a Yankee-Nevadan*  
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Webster defines an adventure as: "A remarkable occurrence; a noteworthy event; a hazardous enterprise...activity of a hazardous or exciting nature." While I look back on many of my fishing, hunting and camping experiences, and many job-related events, as adventures, one exploit stands out from the rest. It was not only remarkable, noteworthy, hazardous and exciting, but also harrowing and, literally, chilling.

In the early 1950s, when the mule-deer population was too high for the habitat in northeastern Nevada, special late-season hunts were put into effect in certain areas to reduce their numbers. I liked those late season hunts, when there was snow on the ground and cold in the air, both helpful factors when hunting and caring for deer.

Near the end of December, 1952, Vernal and Mary Jones came up to Elko from Battle Mountain to visit Rita and me, and to help celebrate our second wedding anniversary. When they arrived, the day being only half gone, Vernal and I made a spur-of-the-moment decision (as young folks are apt to do) to go deer hunting. The outing would give us a chance to visit. We might see a deer or two, maybe even shoot one. We should be back by dark, when we'd take our wives out to dinner as promised.

Neither of us owned a four-wheel-drive vehicle, so we borrowed Rita's father's Jeep, a gray pickup which was still parked at the house even though Sam already had a new red one.

Sam and the boys had covered a lot of ground in the old Jeep. The fenders were dented, the sides were scraped and the seats were torn. The bed was stained with the blood of countless deer, ducks, geese, chukars, grouse, rabbits and trout, and was dimpled from loads of timber, rock and ore.

An old wooden box - containing a prospector's pick, extra cans of motor oil, a length of logging chain, a glass jug full of water, a jack, a lug wrench and so on, all protected by a soiled piece of canvas - usually occupied a space right behind

the cab. But that box of "necessaries" had recently been moved to the new truck, as my friend and I would come to regret.

In some haste, because of the time, we picked up the keys to the gray Jeep, grabbed our rifles and shells and headed north on the Mountain City highway. The weather was moderate under an overcast sky, and a warm wind blew from the southwest. (A wind whose warning we should have heeded.)

We chatted idly as I coaxed the old machine over Adobe Summit. I commented on the merits of that Jeep, that it had been through so much and was still going strong. Well, not too strong, I had to shift down to make it over the top and the front wheels shimmied "like my sister Kate." But those were minor drawbacks.

Twelve miles out we passed the Adobe Ranch, bleak and dismal, silent and cold in the low winter light. A wisp of smoke curled upward from its weathered chimney, the only sign of habitation. A mile beyond, where the highway curved over a sagebrush-covered rise, I turned to the west on a dirt road that led to Susie Creek, a small stream running north-to-south about five miles from and parallel to the highway.

Sam and I had hunted cottontails there in the fall, in the willows and natural grass meadows bordering the creek. But the place appeared totally deserted now, not a rabbit in sight.

With a loud clatter the Jeep bounced over the narrow plank bridge. I drove slowly north on a road that followed the course of the creek. We looked for deer in the brush and on the snow-patched hillsides. A cottontail scampered across the road. Except for a circling hawk it was the first wildlife we'd seen.

A couple of miles from the bridge I turned up a side road to the west, into a shallow canyon, and stopped beside a small spring. We sampled its cool clear water, and checked the recent dry-as-dust snow for deer tracks. Finding none, we got back in the Jeep and returned to the bridge over Susie Creek.

There was an hour of daylight left, so instead of heading for home I turned to the west on a road that led up the east side of Swales Mountain. There was just time, we agreed, for a foray to the ridge under the peak - whose 8,000' top was then hidden by clouds - before dark.

With all four wheels of the Jeep in "drive," I shifted into low range and crawled up the steep rutted trail. Four miles from the creek, at the 7,000' level, we passed the abandoned, weathered shell of a miner's cabin. Shortly afterward we passed the dark, gaping mouth of a mine tunnel. I drove on, up a switchback road bulldozed from a near-vertical hillside, to a shelf that leveled off then dropped slightly toward the rock-faced peak itself. There, I brought the rig to a grinding halt and switched off the ignition.

"Look!" I shouted. "Over there!" I pointed.

"Must be twenty of 'em," Vernal estimated. "Some bucks, too."

It was a small herd of deer moving up from our left and crossing about 250-yards in our front, apparently headed for protection in the rim rocks.

Without hesitating we jumped out, rifles in hand, and ran in a crouch toward the herd. If only they'd slow down, I thought, maybe we could get off a shot or two before they're out of range. But the wind, blowing full in our faces at 30-mph or more, was laced with stinging sand and snow; leaving the ridge bare and dry. Tears came to my eyes. My glasses fogged over.

Like a great black panther the storm leapt from the summit and landed on top of us. Both of the same mind, we stopped running and stood, braced against the tempest, to stare at the fast-disappearing herd. I saw at least six great-antlered bucks in the bunch, but they were now safe from the feel of hot lead from our rifles. Without a word (speech was useless in that gale) we turned our backs to the wind, and to the deer, and raced to the refuge of the Jeep.

"Let's get outta here," I volunteered, at the same time starting the engine. Vernal, rubbing his half-frozen hands, heartily agreed to "that" plan.

I backed the Jeep, turned it around, and then drove toward the brow of the ridge where we had come up. But before reaching the top the engine stalled. It restarted easily and I engaged the clutch to proceed. No good! It stalled again. I restarted the engine several times and tried to coax the Jeep over the ridge, but every time it gave up. It had enough power on the level but not enough to climb the gentle rise...even in the lowest gear.

"We're on the horns of a dilemma," I thought out loud. "And it's getting dark fast."

Vernal and I quickly diagnosed the trouble: Ice in the fuel line. No problem. With a wrench or pliers we'd disconnect the line and clear it. Only then we discovered there were no tools in the vehicle. Stan had removed them all, even the lug wrench, preparatory to trading it in.

But we wouldn't give up. Yet. All we'd have to do is hold a flaming torch under the gas line and melt the blockage. Right?

I tied a rag to a stick of sagebrush, shoved it into the fill-stem of the gas tank, to saturate it, removed and lit it with a match. But that plan went awry. When shoved beneath the chassis, under the gas line, the torch was immediately extinguished by the wind. So much for that idea.

After exhausting our list of remedies to the fuel line problem, and getting thoroughly chilled to boot, we turned our

thoughts in a new direction. We would abandon the Jeep, which had already accumulated a coat of frost, and walk down the road to shelter in an old mine or the cabin. We should reach the mine in ten minutes or so. It might take twenty to get to the cabin, by which time night would have fallen. Off we went at a quick pace.

At least the wind was not as bad now, in the lee of the ridge, and we were somewhat encouraged. And the walk did us good, stimulating the flow of blood and warming our bodies. At the mine tunnel we stopped, evaluated its possibilities, and abandoned it in favor of the cabin. The mine might well have been a better shelter but it appealed to neither of us at the time. Besides, we reasoned, there was likely to be more firewood around the shack and we must have a fire to survive. On we trudged, side by side, down the old mine road.

By the time our designated haven hove into view the fury of the storm had subsided. But the temperature was dropping. In the dim twilight, we saw that most of the north and west walls of the once-fine cabin were still in place; as was a part of the south wall, one corner of the roof, and a shed that leaned against the east end. The rest was a skeleton of studs and rafters.

After that brief evaluation we stepped through the frame of the doorway onto a fairly firm floor. Much to our delight, Vernal found a pile of old magazines in a corner and I spotted the shell of a round stove, lying on its side, in another. Not only did we have something to burn, but also something in which to burn it.

With mutual effort we got the stove to an upright position and over to the northwest corner, where the remaining walls should provide some protection. And even though there were no lids, doors, grates or stovepipes to be found, we started a fire in the bottom of it.

Then, utilizing the very last bit of natural light, we went outside and gathered sagebrush and old boards into a pile for a bonfire, to be lit should we see any sign of human beings around.

Up till now, our activities had kept us relatively warm. But when at last we drew up a pair of empty powder-kegs and sat before our crude heater, the cold really seeped into our veins, especially from behind. Prodded by discomfort we decided to refine our hovel.

We wrested boards from the lean-to, propped them up as best we could and covered them with bits of cardboard boxes, to form a wall around the hitherto open side of the stove. The result was a sight to behold, such as one might expect to see on skid-row in Chicago. It was a definite improvement but we still had

an ongoing problem. The fire in our stove had to be carefully controlled, at a level to provide heat and yet not burn down our temporary home (which we nearly did a couple of times).

Vernal suffered the most from the cold. Not because he was "older" than me, but because he was even less well-dressed for the weather. He wore slacks and street shoes, and over his shirt a leather jacket with a broken zipper. I was lucky. In addition to woolen pants, a warm shirt and my old navy field boots, I was wearing a leather jacket with a zipper that worked.

Of course we both did a lot of griping; about the terrible freezing cold at first, and then about being hungry. But we never lost sight of the humor of the situation, and joked and quipped to while away the time.

The old magazines, some of which we had used to kindle the fire, included such publications as the "Saturday Evening Post," "American," "Look," "Life" and "Good Housekeeping," and provided considerable entertainment in spite of their having been edited by packrats. The words were hard to read in the low firelight but the pictures were graphic enough, particularly those portraying delicious foods and beverages, which contributed to our gnawing hunger.

Vernal discovered another, practical use for the periodicals. He held one against the hot stove until it was almost ready to ignite, then slipped it inside his jacket, in the back, to warm that side of his anatomy. It worked well, alleviating the need to stand and turn in front of the stove as we had done before.

It would be a lie to pretend that we ever achieved a state of comfort, but considering the number of worse alternatives we were quite well off.

The moonless night was well begun by six o'clock. Crisp, clear stars twinkled overhead between the rafters and the few residual clouds, but nothing else was identifiable beyond our immediate circle of firelight. We began to speculate about things back home; for one, that Rita and Mary were angry because we were not yet home to take them out to dinner.

Another two hours passed by, and the last of the clouds disappeared from view. Without Mother Nature's blanket to hold the heat the temperature dropped to an alarming degree, well below freezing. The girls must now have made the transition from anger to worry, and would doubtless call on someone to look for us. With good luck we might be found by midnight. If no one showed up by morning we'd go to our contingency plan. At dawn we would stuff our clothing with magazines, for body insulation and for building fires along the way, and simply walk to the highway.

The only sound now, aside from the crackling fire and our own voices, was that of an occasional high-flying aircraft. We considered lighting the bonfire in the hope that a pilot might see it and report our location, but I was opposed to doing anything that might trigger a full scale search-and-rescue operation. After all, we were in no immediate peril.

I couldn't speak for Vernal, but my greatest concern was not that we mightn't survive but that our families, lacking knowledge of our whereabouts or condition, might contact the sheriff or the Civil Air Patrol.

I have always thought it terribly wasteful - of manpower and material resources - for large groups of people to go out in search of those who, invariably through carelessness or improper planning, have gotten themselves in trouble in the back country. If I were the subject of such a search I'd be terribly embarrassed.

It must have been just after midnight when I spotted a far-off light, down low in the east. It was only a momentary glimmer. Perhaps I was mistaken. But then it reappeared and we both saw that it was real, apparently the headlights of an automobile moving slowly in our direction.

"D'you suppose they're looking for us?" I ventured.

"Why else would anyone be out on a night like this?" Vernal replied, "It ain't fit fer man nor beast!"

The light grew brighter at times, then dim, even disappeared occasionally when, we assumed, the vehicle dropped behind a hill.

"Maybe we should light the bonfire," I suggested.

But Vernal allowed that we ought to wait until we were sure it could be seen. "When they cross Susie Creek maybe.... They're sure to see it from there."

So we waited, impatiently, until we reckoned the car was at the creek, about four line-of-sight miles distant. Eagerly then, we left our heated cubicle and, with great difficulty due to the zero temperature and a layer of thick frost on the kindling, got our bonfire going. We hovered over it, encouraged the flames to greater heights, warmed ourselves in its comforting rays, and harbored the thought of soon being homeward bound.

But wait. As we stood and watched the lights moved toward the north and totally vanished from sight. Well, we were reasonably assured that someone was looking for us. They (whomever) must have seen the Jeep tracks from our early afternoon hunt and decided to follow them. It was only a matter of time until they should work their way back to the Swales Mountain road.

Sure enough, a half-hour later the lights reappeared. Southbound. However, much to our chagrin they turned not toward

us but toward the distant highway. And in a short time the little red taillight disappeared altogether.

Ah well, so much for that plan. Neither Vernal nor I was sufficiently motivated to scavenge wood and prepare a new bonfire. We let our one-shot rescue beacon burn out and die, returned to the cabin, and resigned ourselves to the fact that we were destined to spend the rest of the night right there.

It was, to say the least, a discouraging turn of events!

Commiserating, we reviewed our actions. Was not the bonfire big enough? Perhaps we should have set fire to the cabin itself. Still, we agreed, it seemed illogical to burn our only shelter. As it was I felt guilty every time I tore loose a board to burn in our stove. What else should, or could, we do? I, for one, could think of nothing.

For the next several hours our efforts were totally directed toward keeping warm. Or, to put it more succinctly, to avoid freezing to death. Our actions became routine; warm a magazine, stuff it under the jacket, warm another and replace the first, occasionally stand up, stomp the feet and flex the arms, break up another board and feed the tiny fire.

Our lower extremities were the hardest to keep warm. There was just no way, while seated on a flimsy box, to elevate the feet to "heat height." Once, in a futile attempt to do so, I fell backward and almost wiped-out a cardboard wall.

So we suffered the cold, chatted about things of inconsequence or subjects profound, speculated as to what was happening back in Elko, joked about food and eating, concentrated on staying awake, and all the while shivered uncontrollably. (It is said that shivering helps to keep you warm. Maybe so, but I didn't feel warm.)

Inevitably, in accordance with the scheme of things, the earth turned under its grand canopy of stars and time marched on. And it followed, we knew, that dawn would come and we could move out. It would feel good to be walking, to get the blood back in circulation and the feet warm. We must leave at first light, though, and make it to the highway before a search party had time to get underway.

"Is that a light?" I was startled by my own voice. Had I been dreaming?

I looked over at Vernal, who was just straightening up with a jerk. Both of us must have been resting chin-on-chest. "There it is again. Two of 'em."

Bouncing, turning, they were indeed lights, the headlights of two vehicles not over a half-mile below. Fully awake now I looked at my watch. It was four-thirty.

"Damn! But it's cold!" I said, describing the obvious. Stiffly, like a crooked old man, Vernal got up and fetched another piece of wood for the dying fire.

I have always loved the sound of a Jeep grinding its way up a hill in low-range. But that morning it was literally music to my ears; a symphony of combustions and whining gears, of rubber tires squeaking on super-cooled snow.

We stayed by the fire until the first Jeep rolled to a stop beside the cabin and some shadowy figures emerged. A second Jeep pulled up and dispensed still more "rescuers."

I was relieved to see that it was not an official search party. They were all in-laws of mine. Rita's father, her brothers Ben, Stan and John, and brother-in-law Charlie Avery. Stan had driven Sam's new Jeep pickup, Charlie his own Jeep station wagon. They stomped through the open doorway and across the snow-packed floor, greeted us with hearty back-slaps and joked about the predicament we'd gotten ourselves into. Ben proffered a thermos of coffee and a brown bag of sandwiches, and asked rhetorically, "You guys wouldn't happen to be hungry would you?"

I was just reaching for the brown bag when Sam stayed my hand, pulled a large brown bottle from a deep pocket of his heavy plaid Mackinaw, and said with a knowing chuckle, "Here's what you fellas need."

It was a fifth of Christian Brothers brandy, which he deftly uncorked and pressed into my hand. "You take a good drink...you get warm fast."

I was never fond of alcoholic beverages (as related above) but somehow, at that particular moment in my life, the idea of downing a draft of that fine elixir seemed about the most logical and best thing in the world to do. I abandoned any thought of food, even of coffee. I clasped the bottle, tilted it to my chapped lips and drank freely of its contents. At once, as if by magic, I was warm all over. Even my toes seemed to benefit from the induction. I was restored. Pop sure knew what was good for a guy who'd been too long in the cold. Now I understood why that Saint Bernard carried a cask of brandy on his collar, when seeking lost wayfarers in the Alps, rather than a bundle of sandwiches.

We quickly doused the fire and climbed into the Jeeps, where Vernal and I finally took on some solid food.

I remember little of our trip to Elko. I suppose we talked about our "hunt" and subsequent demise, but I rather suspect I spent the time asleep in the bosom of that wonderfully warm, but crowded, station wagon.

It was breakfast time when we arrived in Elko (though the sun was not yet up) and I never tasted better food than that which Rita and her mother cooked up that morning.

Over spuds and eggs, bacon and toast, we agreed that the old, broken-down Jeep should be brought off the mountain as soon as possible, lest it be snowed-in for the winter. John volunteered to drive out, with me, to get it. Vernal, who had suffered badly as a consequence of his light clothing, elected to stay in town and rest. Anyway, I was now wide awake and refreshed. Only later in the day would I feel the effects of so many hours without sleep.

John put his set of hand-tools in the Red Jeep, along with a length of hose, some clamps, and a GI-can full of gasoline. I picked up a heavy coat from the trailer and away we went.

It was less than twenty hours since Vernal and I, on a mild but overcast day, had begun our leisurely afternoon hunt. Today was different in many ways. The sky was cloudless and blue, the air was clear and still, the hills were blanketed with new snow, and it was cold. Two hours after sunup and the mercury was still below zero, up from minus-fifteen. But with a good heater inside and sunshine out, we were very comfortable in the cab of the Jeep.

At the fork in the road just beyond Susie Creek, we found the tracks made by the first rescue vehicle the night before, where it turned north and disappeared.

Stan had been at the wheel of that vehicle (I now knew) with my distraught wife at his side. They were both searching for signs of our earlier presence, but their visibility was seriously impaired by frost in the cab. The ceiling and windows were layered with frost and, except for two saucer-sized peep holes that Rita kept clear with a scraper, so was the windshield. Of course they weren't looking up; they were concentrating on the road ahead.

On seeing our tracks they had followed them to the spring, found no further sign of our whereabouts and turned around. They never did see our tracks going up the mine road, which may have been obliterated by the same fast-moving snowstorm that caught us unawares at dusk. So they returned to Elko for more help.

It was Sam, when he and the others arrived at the bridge in the wee hours of the morning, who suggested taking the mine road. "Those fellas are holed up in the cabin," he said.

They drove directly to it and there we were, just like he said we'd be.

Now John and I were going up the same road, up past the cabin (that appeared really insubstantial in the daylight), up past the mine tunnel (that looked even less inviting), up the steep switchbacks and over the ridge. There we found the

abandoned Jeep; or at least its frost-sculpted form. It was totally encased in rime-ice, a testimonial to the storm and a reminder that Vernal and I could have wound up under a similar deathly shroud had we not made good our descent before dark.

It was soon apparent that the pickup's gas line was hopelessly plugged with ice. (We later learned that the Jeep had sat out in a snowstorm "without a cap on the gas-tank," which explained the water, then ice, in the line.) John disconnected the copper line and ran a hose from the carburetor to the propped-up GI-can in the cab. With this ice-free source of fuel in place, and after a few minutes of purging, the engine once more came to life. What a wonderful sound. And how easy the job seemed, performed by a mechanic with the proper tools and materials, and in the light of day. We scraped the frost from the windows and made for Elko. John drove the recently revived machine, I the new Red Jeep.

I think we arrived shortly after noon. I know it was only a matter of minutes till I was in my own bed, warm and fast asleep.

While I had always carried a few basic items of necessity in my vehicle, from that time on the list was expanded to include - in addition to the usual shovel, jack, lug wrench, screwdriver and pliers - some blankets, ropes, flares, a first-aid kit, and other items to enhance one's comfort and chance of survival if the need should arise.

Our night on Swales Mountain, the result of spontaneity and lack of planning, was a real adventure. Improperly dressed for winter weather, we had taken an ill-equipped vehicle into a remote area and were "caught in the act." But we were lucky. Shelter and heat were available to us on the mountain. And though we were most uncomfortable at times we were never close to Death's door.