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WORDS UNCAGED  
(MEMOIR)

ELEVATION  
BY  
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After a stressful month of non-stop work, I finally got a week off. I wanted to get away from everyone and have some quiet time by myself. I'd hiked part of the John Muir Trail before in the Sierras and decided to do it again.

It was May of 1982. Snow was everywhere as I passed Huntington Lake. I descended Tamarack Pass (7,500 foot elevation) and pulled into the Florence Lake Ranger Station about noon. I told them of my hiking plans. They laughed! No one, this spring, had hiked as far or as high as I had planned.

"Come back in a couple of months," the rangers said, "It would be foolish and impossible to scale Hell For Sure now," they told me. They would not come looking for me and refused to issue me a permit! I left bewildered.

I continued driving to Florence Lake. I parked and headed for the country store at the lake's edge. There were only three cars in the huge parking area. Last time I was there it had over fifty vehicles. The small store's door was open, but no one was inside! I went back outside and saw a man down by the docks, he owned the store so we talked and I purchased a few snacks. It was cloudy and cold. He said if I wanted to get a good start the following morning, I could rent a motorboat for only three dollars and shave four miles off my trek by operating it across the lake. I'd pull it ashore on the far side and bring it back after my adventure.

I agreed and paid him. I went back to my car and began filling and organizing my orange backpack. I had a trunk full of stuff. I made piles of necessary, optional and luxury items. I hated heavy loads! Binoculars, a bulky Instamatic Kodak camera, a sleeping bag, a tube tent, matches and delicious carbohydrates were needed. Even though they were not weight efficient, I enjoyed small "pull top" cans of refried beans and chili beans, they filled me up!

The most important item was my boots. They were hand made in Alabama. They came up to just below the knee. Waterproof "swamp boots! In between the thick layers of leather was a thin sheet of metal. They were designed to stop snake bites. I originally purchased them for my desert hikes.

My backpack started to get full and heavy. So much for "extras." It would be at least a forty mile round trip hike, excluding the eight mile motorboat ride. I walked around the parking lot with the backpack on. It was beginning to get dark. I listened to the radio for awhile before falling a sleep. The 1969 Buick Wildcat had plenty of space to stretch out.

At first light, off I went. It was foggy, windy, cold, and misty. I started the engine of the motorboat. The waves were choppy. I began slow. I saw no one. I picked up speed as I got used to the boat's engine. I saw the far side of the lake and drove it up onto the sandy beach. I pulled it up between two bushes. The trail follows the San Joaquin River to its source (Martha Lake below Mount Goddard) the entire way. Unfortunately, most of the trail was covered by snow. I zigzagged up the river. The first night I slept under some trees. I had no energy to make a fire. I ate cold chili beans and they tasted fantastic!

Again, at first light I was on my way. I wanted to get to the Martha Lake/Hell for sure trail split before dark. I continued to gain elevation. I stopped only for short breaks to eat snacks. I rounded a corner and couldn't believe my eyes. On the other side of the river was a lone person heading downstream. I really wanted to ask him about the conditions ahead. There wasn't anywhere to cross. We waved at each other and kept walking. The snow was getting deeper every mile. The skies were clear. I managed to keep my feet dry.

I arrived at the trail-head before dark. Thank goodness I'd been there previously. The sign was no where to be found. I set up camp. I planned on two nights. The next day, I'd hike up to the top of "hell for sure" pass with no pack and return to base camp before dusk. To get to the top was three miles mostly straight up! I attached my tube tent between two small trees. I made a small fire. I warmed my dinner. Before dark, I wandered around a bit. I found the trail sign half buried in the snow. It was badly damaged. I did a temporary fix-it job with some rope I had. I dug a hole and placed it in the hard frozen ground.

I was up at the crack of dawn. It was clear, but cold. I grabbed my binoculars, the bulky instant picture camera, snacks and my ax/knife combo pack that attached to my belt and off I went. After a short distance, footsteps appeared in the meadow. I knew the way even though the trail was completely hidden by deep snow. They must have belonged to the guy I saw the day before.

I followed in his tracks. All of a sudden his tracks stopped! I looked more closely. He had retreated the same way he came. Now, I had to make my own trail. The snow drifts were thigh deep. Snow begun to get inside my boots. I was determined to make it! The scariest part was hearing running water flowing under my snow trail as I walked over it. Falling through would be disastrous. I proceeded with caution, the trees started to vanish as I topped 10,000 feet.

Finally, I could see the pass. The sun rays bounding off the white snow hurt my eyes. The trail was non-existent. I climbed straight up towards the top. I knew where it was. I was exhausted by the time I reached "hell for sure" pass at 11,300 feet elevation! Looking over the other side (and down), I could see "hell for sure" lake. It was frozen over with ice. The binoculars came in handy. I panned the entire area. The Kodak instamatic camera had ten photos in it. I took pictures in all directions. They exit the camera

immediately and slowly develop in sixty seconds. The deluxe color shots turned out nice! After a few hours of peaceful contentment and a feeling of accomplishment, I descended back to my base camp by the San Joaquin river. I warmed my meal over a small fire. The hot cocoa was delicious. I went to bed with a smile on my face!

I got up at first light and retraced my route downstream. It was an easy twenty mile walk. I saw no one all day! The motorboat was still hidden between the bushes where I left it three days before. I navigated it across the lake back to the dock by the country store. The owner was outside by the woodpile. He asked about my trip and I thanked him for the use of his boat. It was close to sunset, so I decided to sleep in my cozy car again.

As I woke the next morning and took the paved road back to civilization, I stopped by the ranger station. They had a huge fire going. The warmth felt good. I told them about my hike and how beautiful the pass looked. It was the same two men who told me four days earlier not to attempt it. If not for the photos, they would never have believed I made it. They examined them closely. I scooped up the pictures and strolled back to my car feeling vindicated. I cruised homeward bound—sore, but happy!