

CHAPTER 47

Magical Moments and Places: Part 2

Tasmania

Islands have always fascinated me, both biologically and esthetically. When I received an invitation in 1978 to present a one-week series of lectures for the Australian Water and Wastewater Summer School held in Hobart, Tasmania, I quickly accepted. All our children had "left the nest," so Jeannie accompanied me. We had planned to spend a day in Sidney to recover from the long flight from Blacksburg, VA, and had reservations at the Florida Hotel, which was just across the harbor from the famous Sydney Opera House. However, the travel agent had neglected to take into account the International Date Line, and our flight to Hobart was scheduled to leave Sydney's domestic airport within half an hour after we landed at the international airport. The customs agent said to us, "Not to worry, mate" and phoned the nearby domestic airport and a taxi to take us there. When Jeannie and I boarded the plane, we were met by broad grins and comments about the International Date Line. Many passengers on the domestic flight had enrolled in the Summer School for which I was one of three invited lecturers. We were in Oz!

We were met at the airport in Hobart by Dr. Roy English and Mr. Henry McFee McFee, both residents of Hobart and affiliated with the Summer School. Jeannie and I were escorted to lunch in the revolving restaurant atop the Wrest Point Hotel, which has a splendid view of Derwent River and Sandy Bay. Clearly, Hobart was not the bucolic village I had envisioned, although I was later to find it had both rural and wild natural places as well — Tasmania is a land of contrasts.

The University of Tasmania, just up a hill from the Wrest Point Hotel, where I was to lecture, was not just a state university in a remote location, but rather an international institution with students from a wide variety of locations, especially Asia. The close proximity of an intellectual place and a wild place is always magical because I feel both are essential components of a quality life.

Jeannie and I never were able to return to Tasmania. However, our only visit was memorable, not only because of the places but also due to the friendly Australians who attended the lectures.

Rocky Mountain Biological Laboratory (RMBL)

Each magical moment and place comes with a highly visible price tag, and RMBL illustrates this fact quite well. In 1961, Robert Enders, my Swarthmore College mentor, was also serving as Director of RMBL in Gothic, Colorado. I was invited to teach aquatic ecology that summer. I received no salary, but \$100 was included for travel expenses, housing for six, and three meals per day for two. The session was for six weeks, but, with five days of travel each way, the total was eight weeks of time. Even though I had two weeks of vacation time, I would lose 1½ months of salary since I was on a 12-month appointment. Since 100% of my salary at the Academy of Natural Sciences came from grants and contracts, a danger existed that the cash flow would diminish if research lessened because of fewer personnel.

After minimal discussion, Jeannie and I decided that life is never free of risks, so "let's go!" The decision turned out to be a sound one. RMBL was then in a remote area, and the scenery was spectacular. A superb trout stream was a short distance from our old log cabin (that was named "Oh be joyful"). None of the family had ever been in the Rocky Mountains.

Our blue, utility VW microbus, with a 35 horsepower engine, crawled in first gear up to Monarch Pass on Route 50 — we knew we were in the mountains! Behind the front seat of the bus was a large platform that extended to the rear seat (the middle seat was removed). On top of this platform were sleeping bags and four children. Underneath the platform were our large tent, duffle bags with clothing, sheets, towels, and my teaching equipment. On the roof was a small aluminum boat that I would use for sampling lakes. On a shelf behind the rear seat were insulated carriers for food and so on. We must have looked like refugees headed for the promised land, but, as we got farther west, I received many compliments at gas stations on "my rig."

A magic moment occurred when we embarked in front of the cabin at RMBL. I can still picture the entire Cairns family, plus Professor Enders and his granddaughter Abigail, standing in front of the cabin. Abigail, who was then about our son Duncan's age (about 6), demonstrated her practical side by showing us the location of our privy on a ridge behind the cabin and the community water pipe in the middle of a field. Majestic Gothic Mountain towered high above us across the East River, which became one of my favorite trout streams.

The family was about to begin its “Field Station Era” (see Chapter 8 in this volume), which lasted from 1961, when Jeannie and I were 38, to 1994, when we were 71 and the staff, students, and faculty celebrated our 50th wedding anniversary with us.

Karen and Heather received their undergraduate degrees in Colorado — Karen at Colorado College and Heather at Colorado State. Stefan got his first horse (rented) at RMBL, and, many years later, Heather and her husband Carl Chambers honeymooned at Mexican Cut in the mountains near RMBL. In summer of 2005, the entire family, except me, gathered to each sprinkle Jeannie’s ashes over a cairn (mound of stones) at Copper Lake. Her ashes rest in this magical place. A series of pictures (Photos, www.johncairns.net) of the memorial service for Jeannie include the trail to Copper Lake. RMBL is more modern now than it was a half century ago, but the views of Gothic Mountain are still spectacular.

Going Beyond Your Comfort Zone

Scientific research means going outside one’s comfort zone as a norm. By staying within one’s “home discipline,” one may feel more secure but will miss many superb opportunities. However, at present, scientific disciplines are so subdivided that doing research without going outside one’s comfort zone is extremely difficult. Yet many individuals stretch themselves in both science and “everyday” life — some flourish, some don’t.

My first exposure to leaving my comfort zone in science came in 1948. Ruth Patrick invited me to be the protozoologist on one of her two river survey teams just being assembled. I had just one semester of protozoan identification, which included both free-living and parasitic protozoans. The two primary keys for identification of freshwater species were Kahl’s *Die Tierwelt Deutschlands* and Pascher’s *Süsswasserflora* (both in German). My samples were highly perishable, and I had to keep up with the team, making very long hours of work on both week days and weekends. Professor Mary Gojdics, the protozoologist on the other team, also worked very hard, but her long experience made her much more efficient. We rented a furnished house for one month so that Jeannie and Karen, then 2½ years old, could accompany me. After this time, we lived in Franklin and Marshall College’s dormitories for over a month. One other team member had a wife and two children with him, and another had a wife so that Jeannie had people to visit while the teams were in the field.

I was definitely outside my comfort zone, and so were Jeannie and Karen, but we endured. The hardest part was probably eating every meal in a restaurant, which used a substantial part of my monthly salary. On the other hand, the dormitory room was not nearly as expensive as the rented house. Jeannie and I learned a valuable lesson on the demands of scientific research. Chapter 5 (in this volume) describes these experiences more fully. Working on a team does not lead to a dramatic loss of individuality as the stereotype suggests.

All too soon, our summer at Franklin and Marshall College was over — our dormitory rooms were needed for students and the data we had gathered on the effects of pollution on aquatic life in the Conestoga Creek Basin needed to be analyzed. I was offered, and accepted, a permanent position at the Academy of Natural Sciences. I was convinced that research on environmental pollution was attractive and that Jeannie and I could maintain our good relationship during temporarily stressful conditions.

I was to leave my comfort zones throughout my career — scientific research cannot be carried out without doing so. One should always be cautious when leaving one’s comfort zone, but not fearful. One may be traveling on a dead end road — which happens in scientific research and explorations in general. However, often, with luck, hard work, and persistence, something very, very special results that is forever memorable and can be shared with others. No matter how old one gets, the pure joy of discovery that one felt the first time can occur over and over again.

Crystal River

Each year we were at RMBL, we traveled to Schofield Pass and down into the Crystal River drainage basin. Crystal River is a transparent, splendid trout stream, and it cascades over rocks in a steep descent. All the waterfalls are superb. In 1961, we drove past Crystal hamlet and down to Marble, named after the marble quarry where chunks and slabs of marble remain. This first trip was Colorado at its best — we saw no people, except at Crystal and Marble, until we hit the paved road that led to Route 50, our round-about to RMBL.

Schofield Pass (elevation 10,707 feet: Gothic, 8 miles, Marble, 10 miles) is followed by a long, alpine meadow with “magic” (as described in http://www.coloradofishing.net/ft_crystal.htm). Crystal River runs through the an alpine meadow. At the end of the meadow is a steep gorge with a usually passable ford at the top. Since driving through this area could wet the brakes, I asked the entire family to walk while I drove cautiously down in low gear, braking frequently. I missed fully appreciating the scenery, but took a good look when I arrived at the bridge across the Crystal River. Heather, then about 3, remembers getting a splinter in her toe from the wooden bridge (she was barefoot on the bridge). Jeannie removed the splinter with a fishhook from my hat. A hail storm and a rock slide across the road during the next two years kept us from going very far. One year, Schofield pass was blocked by snow.

Only once more in the 15 years we spent summers at RMBL did we make the trip to both Crystal and Marble. In 1970 and 1984 through 1994, I parked the 4-wheel drive about a mile from Schofield Pass and we hiked from there

to Crystal and back. The trips were always memorable, even magical, and I have fond memories of this annual trip through a magical pass.

Our Post World War II Second Honeymoon

When I received my honorable discharge from the US Navy early in 1946, I barely had time to be admitted to Swarthmore College before the first semester of 1946 began. I was able to complete all the registration only because of the helpful faculty at Swarthmore. This era was not the blissful time I had dreams of while I was in the Pacific. However, I found joy in returning to the academic life, and Jeannie's support was inspiring.

When the first semester ended and I had successfully readjusted to college life, the summer of two free months was available. I had been so focused on course work that I had no plans for summer. Actually, my memory of that summer consists primarily of one "magical moment."

My father decided that Jeannie and I should be taken to Niagara Falls, and grandmother Cairns, who longed to see the falls, would accompany us. We were an unusual wedding party — a grandmother, a father, a young couple, and a baby. Naturally, the trip was by automobile since gas was no longer being rationed.

I have some pictures of the trip that help refresh my memory. In one picture, I am holding tiny Karen with Jeannie on my left at Niagara Falls. However, the really magical place was Watkin's Glen State Park in Schuylar County in New York state, about 156 miles from Niagara Falls.. The glen had a tiny stream and at least two spectacular waterfalls and many small ones. Steep stone steps are built in places and a well built stone wall lies between the path and the stream. The water was clear and the rock formations were impressive. Jeannie and I always loved this kind of ecosystem — intimate and ever changing as we walked up the path. Vegetation was abundant.

In one photograph I still have, my grandmother, my father, and Jeannie (holding Karen) are at the entrance to the park. The other picture is of me, my father, and Jeannie sitting on the stone wall with Karen on Jeannie's lap. We never returned to Watkin's Glen. I was 23 when we made the trip and Jeannie was only a month from 23. We both looked so young!