

## Mike Gessner

In my earliest days, pre-school age, I lived on a sugar beet farm in an area that has now been absorbed by the city of Bellflower. The farm had no running water or electricity. Sanitary facilities consisted of an outhouse a little distance from the house. Horses were used for pulling plows and wagons. There was nothing modern about the place. Kerosene lamps were the source of light at night. One day my dad brought home a Coleman lantern which provided plenty of light. It scared the dickens out of me. It would sit there and hiss, I was sure it was going to explode. This type of farm was not uncommon in the early 1930's. The farm would have been quite typical in the 1890's.

In 1936 we moved to a large alfalfa ranch northwest of Barstow, near Harper dry lake. Where, marvelously, we had electricity, running water and indoor plumbing. It was as though we had moved from the 19th century to the 20th. There were three large irrigation reservoirs on the ranch where I learned to swim. Compared to some of our neighbors we were living in luxury. We even had a radio. At school the boys frequently brought their BB guns, but we had to put them in the cloakroom when we went inside. I used to hang out around the bunk house and listen to the tales of the ranch hands. It was always interesting to listen their experiences. I have always wondered about one recurring theme. When the hands got paid they would go in to San Bernardino, (Berdo) to celebrate. On their return to the ranch they would have long discussions among themselves about a lady they referred to as "Thermometer". I still wonder, was it because she was a bit thin or perhaps hot stuff? Rather puzzling. Hanging around the bunk house was good preparation for later, when I was in the army. I was prepared for barracks living.

My hiking experience began around 1938 when I was eight years old; only then it was just called roaming around. The ranch foreman had a son the same age as me. We would take a couple of water bags and head out into the desert. We would roam around the local area and out on to the dry lake. It seems odd now that a couple of 8-year olds were allowed that much freedom. We would only drink from one bag going out so that when that bag went dry, we would have water for our return. Among some of the things that I learned was never to put my hands or feet where I couldn't see. There were rattle snakes around, but I

learned that the snake you can see is not a big problem, it's the one you can't see that is the most dangerous. This is also largely true in human affairs.

I observed the adults were always ready to help someone who seemed to be in trouble along the road. People could die on the desert, then, and occasionally, even now. It was considered unthinkable to abandon anyone in trouble.

You can take the boy out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the boy.

Later, when I was nine I was living in Seattle at the north end of town. I used to hike out to Piper's Canyon, down to Carkeek Park on Puget Sound. At that time, it was a primitive trail. I would usually take a couple of my school friends with me. We would frequently build a fire on the beach and roast wieners for lunch. I had a number of interesting experiences there, including once when my sister and I had to push a drunk, somewhat incapacitated older cousin up the hill and out of the canyon, to a waiting police car. My sister and I got a ride home while my cousin got a ride to the police station.

When I got into my early teens I was living in Anacortes, Washington on Fidalgo Island with an elderly aunt.

In the ninth grade I worked after school helping dig graves in the local cemetery. I was the last person to let my friends down. I spent a lot of time hiking in the woods on the island and fishing in Puget Sound, the saltchuck, as the old timers called it, and in the lakes on the island. Tom Sawyer would have envied me. In the old Chinook Jargon, it was mighty skookum.

I spent most of the summer of 1945 working on a dairy farm on the Stilaguamish River between Oso and Darington. That wasn't so skookum. After that, I spent a couple of months working at a riding academy north of Seattle. I did not become a horse lover. I found them to be neurotic animals with a short-circuited nervous system. They're fine for pulling plows and beer wagons and when it becomes necessary they are useful, but uncomfortable to ride. Horse steak, though is quite tasty, but some people are a bit squeamish about it.

At sixteen I joined the army and again found myself enjoying the healthy outdoor life; though I found the camp counselors to be a bit demanding. I completed high school in the army. On my first morning in the Army, we were all

called out from the barracks and into formation. The First Sergeant came out to address us. First, he welcomed us to the Army and then he gave his primary advice. "If you want to get along in the Army, don't ---- up". He then proceeded to tell us what he meant. He also said "Keep your eyes and ears open, and your mouth shut, try to learn something" I spent a few years in the Army and then a couple of years in the Air Force. Over that time, I came to understand what Old Sarge meant. In the normal course of events it is to be expected to make a few mistakes. Occasionally, we do something contrary to what we know is correct. Thus, Old Sarge's comment. General Schwarzkopf said something similar in a more socially acceptable manner. He said, "We all know the right thing to do; the hard part is doing it". When I left the service, I was a sergeant and I have always remembered Old Sarge's advice.

On my first assignment at Fort Sill, Oklahoma I was an airplane mechanic in the Field Artillery. The Army was using Piper Cubs and other light airplanes for observation and liaison. In 1947 while I was stationed at Fort Sill, I met a fellow there who had known Geronimo. He was an older civilian employee who had been in the Cavalry when he was young and stationed at Fort Sill. Geronimo had been kept in prison at Fort Sill. My friend, when he was young, knew Geronimo who was an old man, and had several stories about him. While I was there I visited Geronimo's grave and photographed it. After that, between assignments I was stationed at Fort Ord, California. I was assigned to a casual company awaiting orders. During that time, I spent some time as a prison guard. I was assigned to the stockade as a tower guard. Some of the prisoners were quite amused to have a wet behind the ears 18-year old guarding them. A couple of them were laughing and offered to hold my shotgun for me. At another time, several of us were loaded into 6x6'es and sent to Hunter-Liggitt Military Reservation to help fight a wild fire. I had a very minor role, but I was highly impressed.

Later, when I was stationed at Camp Hood, Texas I was a Signal Corps photographer in the 2nd Armored Division.

A couple of months after I was discharged, the Korean War started. I didn't think it was proper for the country to go to war without me, so I joined the Air Force reserve. I was activated and assigned to the 106th Bomb Wing, a B-29 outfit, at March AFB. They sent me to school at Keesler AFB, Mississippi to become a radar technician. I studied the AN/APQ-13, bombardment radar. While I was in that

class I “bombed” New Orleans on Mardi Gras Day. Our class was flown over New Orleans to make simulated bomb runs on the city so that we could operate the equipment that we would maintain. Little did those happy revelers below know that I was a few thousand feet above them dropping virtual bombs on their parade.

During my service career I managed to get chewed out by every rank from buck private to two-star skipping one-star. We had a one star at Camp Hood who was just too nice of a guy. I feel that my military career is thus nearly complete.

When I was released from active duty I found a job at Hughes Aircraft Company, where I retired after 34 years. I started as an electronics technician B, and retired working in an environmental test laboratory on salary exempt. I was mostly involved in mechanical vibration and shock testing. When I was on hourly status I was lead man of the vibration test crew for a while. In my Hughes years I was mostly concerned with failure. It was my job to create failures, my challenge to the design engineers was, “You make ‘em, I’ll break ‘em.” Any unit that got past Mike Gessner was a good one. At first, I worked on aircraft fire control systems. Later I was assigned to Space and Communication Department. I was involved with testing components and systems of several space craft. Among them was the Surveyor, the first lunar soft lander. In testing this space craft, I handled several of its components. I now have fingerprints on the moon. I also tested components of the first Syncom satellite and the first GPS satellite among others. I spent some time in failure analysis and reliability, which is really a study of unreliability. While I was with Hughes I took several college extension courses related to my work.

In 1948 my then father-in-law took me up to Placerita Canyon to pan for gold. At that time Placerita Canyon was not a state park; it was a part of the Walker Ranch. We had barely begun when we got chased out. Later in about 1965 I was on the north fork of the Salmon River and actually got to do some panning. Of course, it didn’t make me rich. The locals, although being basically friendly people, were not welcoming to outsiders panning in their river.

In 1957, like a lot other of gullible people, I got involved in uranium prospecting. The government had offered a significant bonus to anyone who might discover a producing uranium mine. Three other fellows and I formed a partnership, we hoped would make us rich. We actually thought that we had made a strike at the

north end of San Franciscito Canyon. We filed a claim and started digging. It didn't take too long to discover that pick and shovel work in rock is not a picnic, so we decided that we needed to blast. We went up to Rosamond to the Tropico Mine to buy dynamite. The guy running the powder house looked like he might have been an old timer from the 19th century mines. He recognized us as inexperienced, so he gave us his fifteen-minute lecture on how to set a charge and then he advised us that "we should never carry less than enough to kill us". We bought a case of dynamite and some electrical caps. When we went back to our claim it was decided that I would set the first charge. So, I went down in the hole we had dug, about ten feet deep, to set the charge. I assure you, when you're down in a hole in the ground setting a blasting charge, it does focus your attention most wonderfully. When it came time for the next blast it was decided that I now had the experience to do the blasting. That continued to be my job. After a while it became evident that we didn't really have a productive claim. Our mining partnership broke up and we each started pursuing other interests.

During my civilian time I did a lot of hiking and backpacking, locally and in Washington and Alaska. On one of my trips I backpacked six days over the Chilkoot Trail from Skagway to Lake Bennett in British Columbia. The Chilkoot was a very easy trip. Each day's hike was easier than many of the hikes taken by the OTP now; the elevation of Chilkoot pass is only 3500 feet. Our guide kept saying that "California doesn't have mountains like that". I invited him to come down here and I would hike his socks off within LA County.

Later I did a five-day backpack to the bottom of the Grand Canyon, across the Hualapai Indian reservation, not in the National Park, mostly following game trails down to the bottom of the canyon. The Grand Canyon trip was, at the same time, one of my best hikes and one of my worst. I apparently got food poisoning the first night out and for most of the hike I was as sick as a poisoned pup. By the end of the trip most of the other hikers and some of our leaders were sick also. Yet the canyon experience was incredibly magnificent.

A few years ago, I was hiking on the Northern Ute reservation in Colorado. I guess that because I always kept my water bottles near me our Ute guide gave me a Ute name. I never could pronounce it, but in English he said it means "Mike Two Bottles". At least, I hope that's what it meant.

I hiked with the Sierra Club and attended their BMTC, Basic Mountaineering Training Class. I know that some others of our OTP hikers have also taken that class. That class has been superseded by the WTC, Wilderness Training Class. I wish that more of our hikers had taken the class. I think that there are quite a few in our group that could use the training. "They who know naught, know not that they know naught."

I was for a while a hike leader with the Sierra Club evening hikes in Griffith Park. I have also done several backpack trips with the Sierra Club. In 1978 I rafted the Colorado River through Cataract Canyon from Moab, Utah to Lake Powell in Arizona. The rapids were exciting, the scenery magnificent and the trip, as a whole, was a superb experience. I often think of doing it again but I most likely will not; I will review my photos with nostalgia.

For a several years I was in a four-wheel drive club, rambling around the local mountains and desert. My CB handle was "Rough and Ready". I held several offices in the club including president. On those trips I discovered many great places to go in the desert and in the local mountains. I will probably return to some of them because they were outstanding examples of our local wilderness. I particularly liked Monache Meadow, but the road in there is a bit demanding. While I was with that group I rewrote their bylaws to make them more consistent.

During this period, I also did a lot of scuba diving and snorkeling. I used to do a lot of abalone and lobster diving. Some time I'll tell you about the time my buddy left me at 120 feet with no air. Don't be concerned, I survived. I also took a yearlong class in hard hat diving, I thought that I would become Diver Dan and make a lot of money. On one of those dives I literally walked on the bottom of LA Harbor for about a hundred yards following a dragging anchor that was plowing a furrow on the bottom. I doubt if any of our hikers have ever, or will ever, take a similar hike. The deepest that I have ever dived was about 150 feet on mixed gas, helium and oxygen. After I graduated from the class I decided that, all things considered, my job at Hughes was better.

In 1989 I became involved with the OTP. I have participated a nearly all OTP hikes.

In September 2014 I was on the Orford River in British Columbia shooting bears; photographically, of course. The chum salmon were running, and the bears were

looking for an easy meal. The bears were a lot more interested in the fish than they were in me.

In the spring of 2015 I was in Arizona and New Mexico pursuing the Anasazi in Canyon de Chelly, Walnut Canyon and Chaco Canyon. The high point of that trip was Pueblo Bonito in Chaco Canyon. It is at end of an 18-mile dirt road. It is a large ruin shaped somewhat like a "D". This is the most impressive ruin that I have visited. I visited several other ruins, but they were not as impressive. I also visited Oraibi, a Hopi village on a Mesa. It was interesting, but it wasn't quite what I expected.

In the summer of 2018 I visited South West Oregon Community College with Road Scholars. We stayed in a pleasant dorm. We jet boated on the Rogue River and rode dune buggies in the Oregon Dunes. We also hiked in the local woods and along the southern Oregon coast. This is a trip that I would highly recommend to anyone interested in the outdoors.

I expect to continue exploring interesting places for a long time to come.