

# WHEELER PEAK

## *Not for Beginners*

A Travelogue by Wil C. Fry

### Introduction

Expert mountain climbers probably laugh at Wheeler Peak, the highest point in New Mexico. Its top elevation is 13,161 feet, lower than most base camps on Everest or other tall mountains. But for the beginning climber, or anyone who spends most of their time in the “flat states,” Wheeler is quite a challenge.

Sitting high above the famed Taos Ski Valley, and right in the middle of the Sangre de Cristo range, Wheeler Peak is part of a ridge of sky-scraping mountains in northern New Mexico that provide majestic views, exciting ski slopes and the perfect getaway for those badly in need of a vacation in nature. To the west of the Sangre de Cristo range, water runs off into the Rio Grande, which rushes southward to provide the border between Texas and old Mexico. On the east side of the range, melting snow cascades into the Pecos River, which later joins the Rio Grande near Langtry, Texas, as well as feeding into the Canadian River, which is special to me personally, because it provides the southern border for Seminole County, Oklahoma, which is my home. The trip from Seminole, Okla., to Red River, N.M., and on up to Wheeler Peak, is quite a change of scenery and literally breathtaking.

For anyone considering this increasingly popular trip, I recommend researching it first. The reading we did before traveling was well worth it, and saved us a lot of trouble.

### The Characters

Besides myself (Wil Fry), those making the trip were Bill Fry (my dad) and Zane Fry (my brother). I currently live in Seminole, Okla., while Zane and our dad live east of Seminole.

- Bill Fry, 59, birthplace: north Texas
- Wil Fry, 31, birthplace: Hawaii
- Zane Fry, 18, birthplace: south Texas

Well, Dad decided early on that he wouldn't make the climb to Wheeler Peak, though I encouraged him to try. After getting there myself (barely), I realized he had probably made a wise decision. Zane didn't prepare much for the hike, but being a healthy 18-year-old who's regularly played basketball, football and other sports, he apparently didn't need to train.



### The Goal

At the top of Wheeler Peak, N.M., rests this plaque. Climbers know they've reached the top when they see it.

I, on the other hand, needed the training. I haven't played organized sports in about 12 years -- and that's even if you count intramural volleyball in college. I've also been smoking for about 10 years, though I've cut back recently. So, I knew I had to prepare myself. Living here in Oklahoma, at approximately 1,000 feet of elevation, there was no way I could train for the high atmosphere. But I could train for the long walk. Beginning in April of this year, I started going to a quarter-mile track a few blocks from my home, and walked around it a few times. At first, I walked a mile or two, about three times a week. By July, I had upped my walk to four miles, and still had energy left at the end to shoot hoops for about an hour each time. I also started jogging part of my distance, until I was running nearly half of my total mileage. By the end of July, on a 98-degree summer day here in sunny and humid Oklahoma, I walked/ran eight miles. I felt good afterward.

But I was soon to learn that eight miles on level ground at 1,000 feet elevation is child's play compared to 14 miles (half of it uphill, and the other half downhill) between 9,000 and 13,000 feet elevation. And I was practicing on a paved track, not the rough and rocky terrain of Wheeler's trails.

## The Trip

After reading extensively about our destination and studying several maps that held different opinions about where the trails would be, Dad, Zane and I gathered up our gear and headed west. Zane and I both drive relatively small sedans, so the three of us hit the highway in Dad's king-cab Chevrolet Silverado pickup, most of our luggage in the bed.

We left Seminole at about 6:45 a.m., traveling northwest on State Highway 3. Taking the recently re-paved "Earlsboro cutoff," we got on the nation-spanning Interstate 40, traveling ever westward. Dad drove the first stretch. Missing the worst of Oklahoma City's rush-hour traffic, we turned north on US 281 Spur, heading up to Geary, Okla., and then took US 281 further north, to Watonga. We stayed on 281 as it joined highways 270 and 3, traveling west and northwest through Oakwood to Seiling, Okla., where we stopped at 9:20 a.m. for a little R&R and to change drivers.

Zane took the wheel then, with me still riding in the back seat, taking US 270/SH 3 up to Woodward, where we should have gone straight west to May. Instead, we accidentally got on SH 15, which took us south to Gage, but we quickly corrected by taking 46 northward to May, getting on track again. Highways 412 and 3 took us west to Elmwood, where we finally had to refuel at 11:20 a.m.

I stayed in the back as Zane continued driving, staying on highway 270/412, westward, passing Bryan's Corner at 11:44 a.m. Contrary to popular opinion, most of Oklahoma is not "flat," at least not compared to Kansas, but in the "Panhandle" portion of the state, the rolling hills and lazy turns we're used to disappeared. As the hills flattened out, the land became almost completely flat (as much as the curve of the Earth's surface will allow) by Hardesty. Also, we're used to seeing trees. Those faded away too. For many miles through Oklahoma's westernmost tail, every clump of trees we saw indicated a house and yard, or a creek bed. In between, there were just fields -- miles and miles of fields. And the "cities" in the Panhandle are more correctly called "towns" or "villages," many of them having populations of only a few thousand or few hundred. (May, for instance, had a population of 33!)



## Owning the Road

In western Oklahoma, traffic is usually so light that farm equipment like this is a common sight on the "major" highway, taking up both lanes.

In Guymon, we stopped at McDonald's for a not-so-healthy but quick and filling meal, and continued on 412/3

westward to Four Corners and Boise City, Okla.

It wasn't until 1:40 p.m., in the tail end of the Panhandle, that we saw the first mountain, sitting all by itself in the plain, towering above still-flat fields and farms. The mountain was actually across the border, but we could see it for many miles before then. Dad actually spotted it first. At 1:50 p.m., we stopped and took pictures at the border, for about 10 minutes. I decided to keep my clock on Central Standard Time, for ease's sake.

The land continued to rise gradually, though it stayed basically flat. By 2:51 p.m., we drove through Des Moines, N.M. (elevation: 6,622 feet). The hills on both sides of the road increased in frequency, sometimes interspersed with mesas and "buttes" (which I'm still not sure how to pronounce correctly.).

At about 3 p.m., we saw the non-active volcano near Capulin, N.M., where there is a road up to the top for tourists to take.

Still in what I call the "foothills" of the Rockies, we approached Raton, N.M., at 3:09 p.m., getting the first view of "real" mountains in the distance. Raton's elevation is 6,800 feet above sea level -- we were continuing to rise above the lowly 1,000 feet of central Oklahoma. Just like riding in a climbing aircraft, our ears began to feel funny, as if they would pop, due to the decreasing air pressure of the higher altitudes. We had to keep swallowing to relieve the pressure.

With the Beatles "1" compact disc playing quietly in the truck, we finally pulled into Raton at 3:21 p.m., where we got on Interstate 25 for a few minutes, heading south to US 64, on which we traveled southwest for a while, to Cimarron, N.M. Before reaching Cimarron, we passed the well-known (to ultra-conservatives) NRA Whittington Center. We hit Cimarron at 4:01 p.m., having descended slightly, to 6,430 feet. There, we stopped for fuel, paying \$1.99 per gallon of regular unleaded gasoline. Leaving Cimarron at 4:15 p.m., I finally got my turn to drive, and we headed west, toward Eagle Nest Village. Before reaching that town, we stopped at 4:37 p.m., at a creek running near the curvy roadway, and took a few pictures. We reached Eagle Nest Village at 5:06 p.m. The name "Eagle Nest" sounds like the town is wedged up in the nooks and crannies of steep slopes, but actually, Eagle Nest is set in a wide, nearly flat plain in between several mountains, the town scattered along the shore of a wide lake in the plain. The valley is about 8,000 feet above sea level.



## Leaving the Flatness

At top, Zane is driving down the flatest, straightest road I've ever seen. In the middle, it's me, Dad and Zane at the N.M. sign. At bottom, Dad looks out at the first mountain sighting of the trip.



At 5:23 p.m., I drove the pickup through Bobcat Pass, which peaks at 9,820 feet elevation. We were really in the mountains then, as far as I was concerned. The road was never straight for more than a hundred yards or so, and then there would be a sharp curve requiring slow speeds of about 20 mph. The truck's engine, transmission and brakes really got worked out.

Just a few minutes after making it through the pass, we sighted Red River, our final destination. We actually pulled into town at 5:29 p.m., and stopped at our hotel, Best Western, at 5:30 p.m. (CST), making our total trip less than 12 hours.

## **RED RIVER: The Town**

Red River is a pretty mountain town nestled between some good climbing hills and a well-kept ski slope mountain. The municipality actually sits at an altitude (elevation) of 8,650 feet, its main street running roughly from southeast to northwest. One other street sits parallel to that one, and less than a dozen other streets connect the two. Some of these connecting roads also lead off into valleys between the nearby mountains, running along creeks and through park-like areas. Walking trails permeate the area.

About half of the business establishments in the city are gift shops for tourists, and most of the other half are restaurants. There are a couple of gas stations and a few places offering guided tours of something-or-other. There is one grocery store. Though 90 percent of the businesses are well-decorated and fit in with a mountain town motif, almost none of them are open past 7 p.m. This was perhaps the biggest disappointment I had with the town. Even in rural Seminole, there are convenience stores open around the clock and restaurants open until midnight or later. I couldn't understand the mentality of a tourist town that locks all the doors before it gets dark. Maybe it's because of the lack of police -- I didn't see a single officer during my stay in the town.

## **Acclimation**

Much advice had been given to Zane and I about climbing Wheeler Peak. One of the most valuable pieces of advice was "acclimate yourselves." At such an elevation, the air is understandably thinner -- it's closer to the edge of the Earth's atmosphere. The lungs accustomed to breathing the thick and humid air of the lower regions cannot function at full capacity at such a height. In fact, Seminole is one of the highest places I've lived. Compare it to the lower elevations of San Antonio, Texas, or Honolulu, Hawaii. We had been advised to walk around for a day or two before attempting the hike to Wheeler's summit, and so we did.

The very evening we arrived, once we learned that most of the businesses were closing, Dad, Zane and I went walking around the town. Dad wasn't feeling well, but came with us heartily, putting a good face on things.

Zane and Dad then drove me to a small park they'd visited on the edge of town during their visit in 2003. In fact, we visited several such places. Zane and I climbed a steep and slippery hill before it got dark. Not only was the hill



## **Red River**

At 5:27 p.m., we first sighted the city of Red River, N.M. Here, it is pictured from a little bit closer, during the final approach to the town. Note the main road through the center of the town. There is one other road, paralleling this one, to the right, and a few connecting streets. That's it.

steep, but its surface wasn't dirt and foliage like I'm used to. It also wasn't a solid piece of jutting rock, which I could easily handle. The hillside was composed -- largely -- of millions of loose pieces of shale, which slipped and slid over each other as we stepped on them. We had fun, though, and reached the peak. I'll admit that I had to stop several times before reaching the top, just to catch my breath.

Once on the top, in the rocky crags, we could look down the other side of the hill onto the roofs of Red River buildings, and got a full layout view of the little town, with the sun heading down in the west.

Zane, Dad, and I had each brought a Motorola 2-way radio on the trip, and we were wearing them during this exercise. Zane and I called down to Dad

-- who was by this time out of earshot -- and told him we'd be going down the other side -- just to see some new scenery. So, he drove the pickup back into town, and to the next street, so he could see into the next valley, where we would come down. By that time, I had forgotten how high the "little hill" had been, and estimated it would take

five minutes to get down. Well, it actually required more like 15 minutes. That side was just as steep as where we'd come up.

On the way down, rocks were sliding out from under us, and both Zane and I got a little scratched up from falls (nothing more than we'd get while walking through the canyons east of Seminole). Once, when reaching out for a handhold, I grasped the pointy end of a stump, and it pierced the palm of my hand. I jokingly called it my "stigmata."

Once down, we rejoined Dad, and headed back for the hotel, tired from the long drive and the little exertion in the thin air.



## Getting Used to the Air

The white arrow in the picture indicates me, while Zane is the lighter colored dot to my right. We're about halfway up the rocky hill in a Red River park.



## Resting After a Climb

Zane is pictured here, sitting on a rock near the peak of a small hill next to Red River, which can be seen in the background. From the camera angle, it's obvious how steep the hill is -- we're looking down on the roofs of the houses.



After some sandwiches and microwave meals in the hotel room -- most, if not all of the restaurants had closed by this time -- the three of us sat in the hotel's hot tub for a few minutes, enjoying the contrast between the steamy water and the quickly chilling night air.

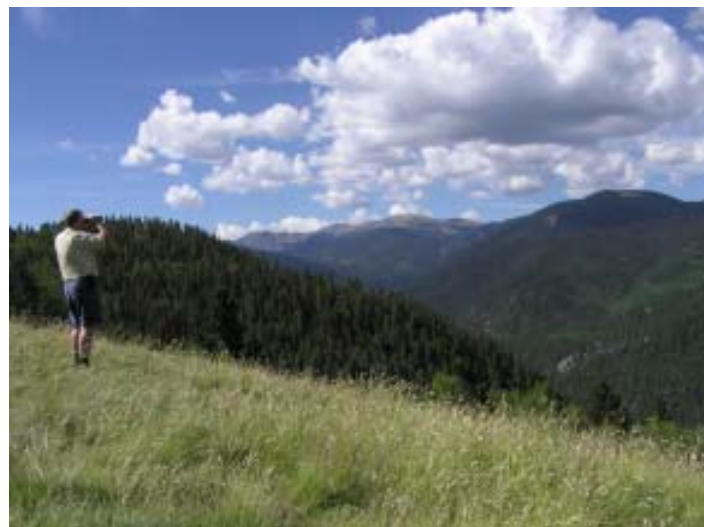
Back in the hotel, all three of us had trouble sleeping, whether it was due to the new location, the disruption of normal bedtime habits, or the uncomfortable lodging (no bed is as comfortable as your own bed). None of us could agree on the correct temperature, and even when we resigned to that, the room's air conditioner wouldn't cooperate. While we knew it was approaching 100 degrees in our hometown, Red River's night air dropped into the upper 40s. But sleep we finally did, and woke up halfway refreshed.

Now with our watches set to Rocky Mountain Time, we ate waffles in the hotel's lobby at 8 a.m., and picked up our rented Jeep Wrangler at 9 a.m. The reason for the Jeep? Last year, when Zane and my parents made the trip to Red River, they found a few mountain roads that weren't really cut for a modern, full-size American pickup truck. (In my opinion, most of them weren't fit for a Jeep.)



Driving the open-air vehicle, Dad took us up a dirt and gravel road to Red River Pass, elevation: 9,854 feet, which reportedly was once the main

highway into the town of Red River, before Bobcat Pass became the most-used thoroughfare. At the top of the hill next to the pass, there were several criss-crossing roads used by four-wheelers for a little bit of steep fun. While we



## What a View!

Here's Dad, using my binoculars to look at what turned out to be spots of snow on the faraway hills. This view is from Red River Pass.

## Trying out the Thinner Air

That's Zane and I near the highest point of Red River Pass (9,854 feet) on Wednesday. Behind us, deep in the valley, is Red River. The pass was, I believe, once used as the original main road into the town.

stepped out to take some pictures, we saw a four-wheeler ATV tip over, rolling over the driver. There weren't any serious injuries. Within minutes, a different man lost control of the two-wheeled motorcycle he was driving. That was enough fun for us, and we decided to move on.

As part of our plan to "acclimate" to the elevation of the mountains, nothing could really prepare us for Wheeler Peak, but we could go a little higher than the two passes we'd been through. We turned our eyes to Greenie Peak, about three and a half miles northeast of Red River. Greenie's elevation is 11,249 feet above sea level.

The road to Greenie started along Mallette Creek, though there are other ways to get there, too. But, on the map, Mallette looked like the shortest route. It may have been "short," but it continued to wind

and climb up through a long, snaky valley. When we saw the first sign telling us to turn right for Greenie Peak, it was a mistake. We drove up a steep and heavily-rutted dirt road to an even steeper hill, where the ruts in the road were even deeper. Well, by that point, I was driving, and I headed up the steepness, with the Jeep in low gear, and the transmission in four-wheel drive. It didn't make it, even though I had the accelerator all the way to the floor. There we were, stuck, halfway up the slope. Dad and Zane exited the Jeep, and I backed down carefully.

As we were pondering what to do, a man in a bright yellow pickup drove up, and parked beside us. We related to him that we'd tried out the slope and failed. "Let me give it a try," he said, revving the powerful V8 engine in his truck. He switched into four-wheel drive and sped up the slope, throwing gravel every which way. After about 30 seconds, he was gone, far above and beyond us.

We gave it another go in the Jeep, with the pedal to the floor, and all wheels spinning, but the tiny four-cylinder engine just wasn't enough for the hill. Growing frustrated, we checked the maps and Dad's compass, trying to find an alternate route up to Greenie Peak. After a few minutes, we decided to try a narrower trail to the right.

At first, this second road descended. In fact, it descended so much that we began to think we had found an alternate route to the bottom, instead of to the top. For every little rise in the road, it would descend three times as much. Still, it seemed to be heading around the right mountain, and we held out hope that it would begin climbing again. Besides, there wasn't really any place to turn around -- the further we drove, the more committed we became to our new route.

Eventually, our determination proved founded, and the road began to climb again. We found several slopes that were nearly as steep as the one we'd failed to climb, and barely made it up them. Sometimes, I'd have the Jeep's

accelerator smashed to the floor for two full minutes, spinning in the loose gravel and dirt as we wound our way up the crazy road -- Dad's pickup would've never made it.

## Not Lost Yet

Zane and Dad check our maps, looking for an alternate route up to Greenie Peak after the Jeep failed to make the trail we were trying.



## Tricky Roads

Here, I'm pictured at the side of one of the narrow, winding roads that led down from Red River Pass. Behind me is the switchback and the road can be seen curling down below me. The path up to Greenie Peak was much narrower and winding, but without the steep cliffs on each side -- usually.

We finally came across other people, riding motorcycles and four-wheelers, but no more Jeeps or other vehicles. One group was composed mostly of children, one little boy -- about 8 years old -- riding a two-wheeled motorcycle by himself on the



treacherous path.

Finally, at long last, we wheeled up to Greenie Peak's smooth gravel top, to find only two other Jeeps there, and just a few people. In the distance, we could see Red River's tiny buildings, and an impromptu rain storm falling in a nearby valley.

We took a quick break there, and realized that lunch time was drawing near. By this time, the thin air at this elevation was almost unnoticeable - we were finally acclimating to the lower air pressure. But, we were hungry, and there was no denying it.

A couple on the top pointed out yet another road, up which they had come, and recommended it as a way down, saying it went through Midnight Meadows and then curved back through Red River. So, Zane took his turn at the wheel (though the rental people had said no one under 21 could drive -- Oops!) and we headed down.

This road proved to be just as meddlesome as the one I'd taken, but Zane's reaction time was quick, and he's accustomed to driving a standard transmission -- like me, he was trained to drive in Dad's 1969 Volkswagen Beetle, which has one of the toughest manual shifts on the market. Still, Dad and I clung tightly to the roll bars of the vehicle, knowing that the rough roads would give Zane a run for his money. From the fact that I'm writing this, the reader will assume that Zane got the best of the situation, and we arrived safely.

However, the real surprise was how much longer this road was. Thirty minutes after we left the peak, we were still winding down mountain sides and seeing great scenery. After descended for what seemed an interminable amount of time, we reached a sign that said: "Red River -- 10 Miles." On the interstate highway, this would've been fine, because we would have reached our destination in nine minutes. But on the loose gravel and twisting lanes of the mountains, our average speed was about 15 miles per hour.

We each let out a groan, but had no choice. Zane kept driving while our stomachs kept growling.



## Greenie Peak

Here's Zane, next to our nearly-worthless Jeep, on the top of Greenie Peak. Over his right shoulder (left side of picture), is the rain storm we saw pelting one little valley. On his other side, between two of the evergreen trees, Red River can be seen.



## View From Greenie

Here, using the zoom on my camera, I captured the bare ski slopes that hang above the town of Red River. The town and slopes could be easily seen from Greenie's summit.





## Inside the Mountain

Here, Zane peers at one of several branches of the cave we found, coming down from Greenie Peak. He is already 35 feet from the entrance, and only my camera's flash provides light for this picture.

The tunnel's shape was rectangular. The floor of this tunnel was about knee-deep in water, so we didn't attempt to go very far into it. The other branch, where collapsed mine timbers were buried in rock, showed a sharp upward slope. I climbed into this, and went about 40 feet up the slope only to find the end of the tunnel. It appeared that the mine shaft here had gone levelly into the mountain, but a pocket of upward-sloping rock had collapsed into the tunnel, leaving the upward sloping empty pocket.

Suddenly, Dad's voice grew more clear in the radio, and he said he was also in the tunnel, carrying my camera, binoculars, and his bag. It had begun to rain outside. So, we took a few pictures, and let Dad look around a little, before climbing back out and continuing our ride back toward lunch.

After a late lunch at the hotel, we took the Jeep up a dirt road that headed southwest from the northwest end of Red River, following Pioneer Creek up through a valley. Dad had a map that listed more than a dozen old gold mines dug into the mountain along Pioneer Creek, so we began looking for them. The first one we found went back about 40 feet into the mountain. After following that disappointing tunnel, we began to look for the others. The brochure failed to tell us that every single other mine along Pioneer Creek was caved in. We spent about two hours following that tiny, rough road, and climbing up the hills on either side, but found only buried mine entrances. With a little equipment and more time, we surely could have dug through the initial piles of rock and found the tunnels, but it wouldn't have been worth it.

We turned the Jeep back into the rental place just before 5 p.m., and went looking for other caves, some of which Dad and Zane had seen the year before. It took a little rock climbing from Zane and I, carrying our two-way radios so we could talk to Dad, but we found only more disappointing caves.

As a last resort, Zane and I placed our hopes in the brochure Dad had about the Placer Creek mines (on the southeast end of Red River), but there was no way to drive along that road, especially with the truck, because the entrance to the road was crossed by Placer Creek. But we walked the footbridge there, and started up a steep trail that discouraged Dad. He returned to the truck. Zane and I walked -- steeply uphill -- for nearly an hour, but found none of the mines listed on the brochure. Finally, we came back, ready for supper, bed, and the next day's hike up to Wheeler Peak.

Then, just as the roads were leveling out at a low elevation, and the curves were straightening out, we sighted a cave, up in the rocks on the right side of the road. Being cave fanatics, we had brought our flashlights, hoping for just such an occasion.

Zane and I scrambled up to the cave's mouth, about 15 feet above the road, carrying our flashlights and two-way radios. After going straight into the mountainside about 15 feet, the cave branched, to the left, to the right, and downward. Our flashlights showed that the left and right branches didn't go far, but the downward slope showed some promise. We scrambled (carefully!) down into the widening hole, finding two more branches. One doubled back under the entrance, and appeared as if it had once been a mine shaft - - it was supported with timbers and the

Dad was worried that Zane and I had walked too much in one day, and that we'd be sore in the morning, before heading up Wheeler. And Wheeler would be, we knew, the most difficult walk we'd had yet. But I tried not to think about it. In fact, instead of just eating with Dad and Zane in the hotel, I went walking up through Red River, and found a steakhouse, where I had a large hamburger and fries, then walked back.

Dad and I spent a few minutes in the hotel's hot tub, before we turned in for the night.

## Wheeler Peak

When Zane and I awoke at 6:30 a.m. (Rocky Mountain Time), it was raining outside, and appeared to have been raining for some time. It was also only 50 degrees and didn't look like it would get warmer. Dad was already trying to accept the fact that we couldn't go, because of the rain, and the chance of lightning at the top. Zane and I said we'd at least drive up to the beginning of the trail, and see if the rain didn't cut out.

We filled up Zane's backpack with four bottles of water, two sandwiches each, two fruit bars apiece, and rain ponchos. I filled my pockets with a map, Dad's compass, and a flashlight. On my belt, I wore the small binoculars I borrowed from Mom (because they were so much lighter than mine) and a pocket knife.

Ready to go, we ate waffles in the hotel's lobby at about 7:20 a.m., and Dad gave us his last advice: "Be careful," before settling down for a day by himself. Zane drove out to the end of Highway 578, with rain still splattering on the windshield -- about a six-mile drive. There, we turned right, and went another 1.3 miles down a very rocky and torn up road. That took us about

## Looking for the Trail

Zane follows me as we use the map and compass to rejoin the trail after we took a "shortcut."



## Starting the Trek

Here I am, on the early part of the rising trail to Wheeler Peak. At first, Zane got a little irritated when I kept wanting to stop and take pictures, but eventually he got in the spirit, and was even suggesting photos for me to take, besides acquiescing to getting a few shots of me.

25 minutes, due to the extreme low speeds we had to use. There, we found the parking area for Middle Fork Trail, where only two other cars were. After making sure we had the truck keys, Zane and I locked it up, not to see another motor vehicle for more than nine hours. It was 8:10 a.m. when we locked the truck.

Again, the trail we walked on was narrow and rough, and



climbing steadily, reminding me at first of the Placer Creek trail. But, it quickly dawned on me that this one would be different. For one thing, unlike at Placer Creek, we were both committed to going all the way to the top. And I don't know about Zane, but I was already feeling like we were in a competition. I was wondering if I would be able to keep up with him, and how long I could go on before telling him to go it alone. The trail zig-zagged up the side of one mountain, climbing sharply the whole way. It's not like taking a walk down through your subdivision, where sometimes you're going up, sometimes down, and sometimes level. This trail went up, up, and then went a little further up. It wasn't 10 minutes before I was huffing and puffing, and my thighs began to ache.

Because the trail zig-zagged predictably up the mountain, Zane and I took a few shortcuts between them. This going was even steeper, but each shortcut knocked several minutes off our total time, and that was fine with me. Then, at about 8:30 a.m., we took another "shortcut," heading up to where we hoped to find the trail that should have zig-zagged back to a point above us on the steep slope. We hadn't climbed far before Zane realized that we weren't going to find the trail above us. He suddenly remembered last year, and that the trail had at this point headed toward a waterfall. We had just climbed above the last "zag."

Unsure of whether to go back down, wasting quite a bit of time, or to plunge on, trusting the map and compass, we plunged on, though Zane was skeptical. It wasn't long, though, before he heard the sounds of the waterfall. We went right along the slope and slightly downward, until we rejoined the trail. That "shortcut" cost us only about five minutes, by my estimation. It took 15 minutes to get back to the trail, but we were way ahead of where we had left the trail. We decided that in the future, we'd only take shortcuts if we could see where the trail was ahead of us.

At 8:52 a.m., we crossed the walkbridge at the bottom of the waterfall, and began zig-zagging up another mountain, heading generally south-southwest.

At 9:10 a.m., one hour after beginning our trek, we took our first break. We'd already paused a few times to catch our collective breath, but this time we actually sat down for about five minutes. I looked at the map, and estimated we'd gone only 1.5 miles, according to the map. (It turned out that this estimate was very close to accurate). We had some water and let our legs rest. I was encouraged by the fact that Zane seemed just as out-of-breath as I was.

Zane had carried the backpack the whole first hour, with me carrying only my camera bag, so we switched off. That was a mistake. My legs began to tire even more quickly, carrying the extra 10 pounds or so in the backpack, while Zane was now blessed with the much lighter camera bag. We started walking again at 9:15.

Fortunately, we reached Middle Fork Lake at 9:21 a.m., and took a few minutes to rest and take pictures. That last half mile or so before the lake had seemed tremendously steep, and Zane and I were both covered in a light sheen of sweat before we arrived, prompting us to remove our outer clothing -- my sweatshirt and his windbreaker. But when we topped the rise to the lake, a cold wind was blowing across the ice-cold water. We estimated it was about 55 to 60 degrees Fahrenheit, with a wind chill in the mid-40s.

While we rested for about five minutes, a



## Middle Fork Lake

That's me and my shaved head, standing in front of Middle Fork Lake, just before I led Zane off the trail. If you're ever heading to Wheeler Peak, and see this view, go *left*, not right.

couple passed us, and headed right around the lake. So, when we finished our short break, we also headed right, along a very thin trail through the grass. Tiny chipmunks were all around the lake, completely unafraid of us. It took about 10 minutes to get to the opposite (southwest) end of the lake, but there the trail disappeared.

Zane showed me where he had gone up the ridge last year, without a trail, high up what looked Frazier Mountain (12,163 feet). We spent about five minutes looking for a continuation of the trail, but couldn't find it. While doing so, we saw the first of the marmots, large rodent-like mammals that look like beavers without tails. Zane, when he first saw it out of the corner



## Marmot

of his eye, thought it was a racoon, but soon identified it as a marmot -- he'd seen dozens of them the year before, hopping and playing around him. The creature hurried to a hiding-hole and peeked out at us as we passed.

Here, a marmot peeks out from his cover, watching us as we passed. The marmots, like the chipmunks, didn't seem afraid of the humans.

Finally, after looking at the map, with the help of Dad's compass, we realized that the trail had gone to the *left* from where we'd arrived at the lake. Already more than halfway around, we continued our circuit of the body of water, and returned to the side of the lake we'd originally approached (the northeast side). There, we easily found the trail that headed nearly due south -- and steeply *up* -- from the lake, along Middle Fork Creek. It was about 9:51 a.m.

Then, staying on the west side of the creek, we headed ever upward. Once, Zane stopped me and said, "Listen." We stood perfectly still and listened. We could hear the creek gurgling along beside us quietly. Occasionally a bird would call out. Other than that, there were no sounds.

With Frazier Mountain towering to our right (west), we kept trudging up the trail, already completely winded. Every 10 minutes or so, we stopped for about 20 seconds and got our breath, then kept going. A few times during this trek, to the southern end of Middle Fork Creek, the trail would twist around a tree and we lost it for a few minutes, but quickly found it again and kept going. Also, every 20 minutes or so, I would check the compass and the map, estimating where we were and making sure we were on the correct trail.

At 10:31 a.m., we took our second sit-down break, drinking water from our water bottles and each having a fruit bar from the backpack. To our left, we could see a treeless ridge, which we later learned rose up to help encircle the La Cal Basin. The only animals present that we could see were chipmunks, ants and birds. No mosquitoes, no horseflies, no snakes, nothing else. If there were any other creatures in that neck of the woods, they kept to themselves. The stream gushed to our left. Our legs were beginning to get dead tired, and I could feel the fatigue growing in my lungs from constantly taking deep breaths, yet neither Zane or I really complained yet. Still, at the same time, we felt wonderful. We were in the shade here, so we had cooled off a little and the air was nearly devoid of the humidity we're so used to in Oklahoma.



## Chipmunk

Above, at the top right corner of the picture, is one of the chipmunks that approached us at the lake, only 18 inches from Zane's foot.

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## Fatigue Setting In

My weary face, as we neared the end of Middle Fork Creek.



As our break ended, Zane and I went over to the nearby creek and felt of the water. It was ice cold, feeling like it had just drained from a freezer. I suggested to Zane that we take a drink, adding that it might be the purest water we'd had in a while. Sure enough, there wasn't a speck of mineral or dirt in the water, and it tasted like wind-blown snow, scooped off the lawn after a fresh blizzard.

Here, the trail didn't really zig-zag like it had before, but traveled relatively straight up the narrowing valley. By 11:20 a.m., the trees were thinning enough that we could see quite a ways ahead of us, and saw a ridge that looked like it could be Wheeler Peak (but later turned out to be the southwest ridge of La Cal Basin). The thinning trail proved to be continuously elusive, and it was frustrating to continue to look for it. I decided to trust the map and compass, but this worried Zane, who didn't want to come all this way and then get so far off track that we'd miss our destination. But, for a time, he trusted me, and we headed in what I believed was the right direction.

As the creek began to thin down to a trickle, the narrow valley began to widen out, as we entered La Cal Basin (although at the time, we weren't entirely sure where we were), and the map says we were still 2.4 miles from our destination. Fortunately, we didn't know this at the time.

There, we rejoined the couple who'd passed us at Middle Fork Lake; they were coming down toward us from the right (west) side of the basin, having seen the trail on the left side of the basin. Zane and I hadn't yet seen the trail on the left side, and we didn't think to ask the couple if they knew where they were going. We could have saved 20 minutes by asking them, or checking the map a little more carefully. We were somewhat surprised to see a herd of cattle at that elevation, chomping stupidly at the lower edge of the basin. As I headed up the right side of the basin,

## La Cal Basin

Zane stops for a look back at where we've been. To his right, and further right, is the shallow bowl of La Cal Basin. Wheeler is behind and to the right of me, as I took the picture.



## Still on the Trail

Zane takes a minute to grab his breath. Behind him, the trail continues to wind ever upward. This was taken near the south end of Middle Fork Creek. We're only about half a mile from the tree line here.

Zane told me several times that he wasn't sure it was the right way. He saw the trail on the left side, zig-zagging steeply up a ridgeline. But he followed me up to the top of what I loosely called "Gravel Ridge," in honor of one of my former places of residence in Arkansas, but this one was made up of rocks much larger than gravel. Huge



chunks of rock were piled together to form that ridge. They looked like gravel from a distance, but when you get there, the rocks range in size from basketball to Volkswagen. From that ridge, on the southwest side of La Cal, we looked down across an extremely deep valley, and up the next ridge. For a minute or two, I despondently thought that Wheeler Peak would be on that next ridge, to our south. We later learned that we were staring out across the Taos Ski Valley, and seeing the tops of Kachina Peak and Lake Fork Peak. But, in those moments, as I looked at them, thinking one of them was Wheeler, I was ready to give up. Completely worn out, and out of breath, having been off the trail for almost half an hour, I was ready to quit. Zane was frustrated at me for having chosen the wrong trail again, and was starting to sport a pretty big headache, partially due to the thin air.



## On Top of 'Gravel Ridge.'

Here, thinking we were staring across at Wheeler, Zane and I were almost ready to give up. It was getting close to 12 noon, and we thought we still had another deep valley to climb. Fortunately, we were a lot closer than this.

We decided to head east, straight across the bottom of La Cal Basin, toward the trail where we'd seen the couple go. At that point, we could still see them, like tiny ants, nearly a mile away. From the wrong side of La Cal, already above the treeline, we could easily see the trail, zig-zagging up the opposite ridge. But, as tired as we were, and seeing the steepness of that trail, I wasn't feeling too confident. Not being the types to quit, we headed across the basin.



## Out of La Cal

Here, Zane is pictured leaving La Cal Basin behind. In the direct center of the picture, and just slightly right, is what I was calling "Gravel Ridge," on the wrong side of the basin. Having found the correct trail, Zane and I made good time exiting the basin and heading for our final destination.

I don't recommend this, especially for anyone with a history of spraining ankles or tripping. Crossing the south end of the basin, we almost never saw grass. Zane and I crossed several acres of the huge rocks I've already mentioned, stepping from one lopsided stone to another, and sometimes slipping in between them. I think we each twisted seven or eight ankles crossing that. We could have backtracked to the north end of the basin and rejoined the trail there, but we were intent on reaching Wheeler's top before the thunderstorms forced us to turn back, and we didn't want to waste anymore of our traveling time.

But, we reached the left side of the basin, and cut straight up the steep, treeless slope, finally gaining the trail. This part was torturous on our legs



and lungs -- it would have been much easier to travel this slope on the trail, but we had just the right amount of confidence in ourselves, and scrambled up the steepness like mountain goats, finally rejoining the trail. The map shows about four “zigs” on that slope, heading out of La Cal, but there are actually about a dozen. We skipped the first four or so by cutting straight across the bottom of the basin, but we were glad for the zigs once we got there. As we climbed on out of La Cal, I think we stopped eight or 10 times to grab our breath. Zane, who was leading at this point, would look back at me, his hands on his knees, breathing heavily, his eyebrows raised, as if to say, “It’s harder than I thought, but I’ll go on if you can.” I would look back at him with my hands on my hips, wheezing, my head lowered slightly, as if to say, “I’ll force myself to go as far as you do.” We would shake our heads and laugh, and then keep going.

By 12:15 p.m., we were long out of La Cal, and heading up the ridge that holds both Mount Walter and Wheeler Peak. Due to the rounded shape of the ridge, though, we couldn’t see either peak for a while. By the time we could see what we thought was Walter, we decided to eat, but agreed that we should keep walking. I was wearing the backpack at this point, so Zane reached in for our sandwiches and water bottles, and handed me my share. Then we walked as we ate, briskly now. After leaving the steep side of the basin, we soon found we’d passed the steepest point of our travel, except for just a few steps, near Wheeler Peak. Now, though, we were walking almost due south at the narrow peak of the ridgeline, with the slopes heading sharply downward to the right and the left. The wind blowing across the ridge’s top was cold enough to inspire us to return to heavier clothing; Zane re-donned his windbreaker, and I returned to the warmth of my sweatshirt. In the pictures, with the sharp sunshine and brilliant blue sky, it looks warm enough to take a nap, but it’s not, not even in August. I was guessing the temperature at 45 degrees, with the windchill in the mid- to upper 30s.

Not long after Zane and I finished our sandwiches, we spotting the sign that *just had to be* Mount Walter, and sure enough, it was. Relieved that we were so close, we sat down at that peak at 12:35 p.m., resting comfortably against jagged stone at 13,133 feet above sea level. Not quite to the roof of New Mexico, we were close enough to relax a little. Though the sun was so bright it was difficult to open my eyes all the way, it was still very cool, and the wind was blowing at a brisk clip. Surprisingly, there were flies all around the peak. Ordinary, bothersome houseflies, we’d call them down here in Oklahoma. Just buzzing around, as innocent as they could be, waiting for the next group of hikers to drop a corner of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Other than that, we didn’t see any animals at the peak, though there were several holes under rocks that could have belonged to marmots, which had been plentiful in La Cal Basin.



## Mount Walter’s Peak

Do I look tired yet? In the background is the ridge that will carry us on to Wheeler Peak, which is farther away than it looks. Besides the trail, there’s about eight feet of relatively level ground at the top of the ridge. After that, it’s a long roll to the bottom, with nothing to hang on to. In fact, the ridge in this background is one of the most rounded we saw.

After reaching Mount Walter’s summit, it was anticlimactic to get to Wheeler Peak. Just follow the ridgeline down a little ways, and then back up, and you’re there. We reached Wheeler’s top at 12:50 p.m., Rocky Mountain Time. But we weren’t alone. Just before reaching the plaque at Wheeler Peak (see 1st page), we met up with about 10 young men coming up from the other direction (from the direction of Horseshoe Lake). They were all dressed in

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relatively new athletic clothing, and most of them had metal walking poles with sharp points at the bottom, which allowed them to go up and down the trails more quickly. Zane and I took each other's pictures at the top, and then had one of the other men take a picture of both of us (thank God I didn't bring my tripod; the extra weight might have been too much for us.) Then, I took about six cameras from the other guys and took group pictures of them at the top of the mountain.



The guys were from all over the country, but most notably California and Michigan. After spending about 20 minutes at the top, we began noticing thunderstorms building over the mountains around us, and one of the men pointed out lightning flashes several miles away. In Oklahoma, when there's thunder and lightning, we generally go on about our business, just taking a few precautions like staying off the roofs of buildings, or not standing under the tallest tree around. But, on top of Wheeler Peak, we knew we would be the easiest possible target for the lightning, even if it was weak compared to that of Oklahoma thunderstorms. And Dad had told us he'd read that the lightning, when it hits above the treeline, just bounces around from rock to rock until it hits something. So the whole group of us decided to head back down.

## Wheeler Peak! Finally!

Zane and I relax at the top for a few minutes, enjoying the view and taking a break. "It's all downhill from here," as the saying goes. Or so we thought. Getting down was almost as tiring as getting to the top.

The other men had camped a mile or two east of Horseshoe Lake, they said, to where they'd driven in four-wheeled motorcycles, so they were going back down the way they came... and the way that we'd planned to go down. Except we had *a lot* farther to go than they did, and had already come a lot farther!

Zane and I started down the trail first, but within 10 minutes, the other guys had all passed us, jogging down the slope with their metal poles used for greater balance. One of them stayed behind to chat with us for a while, but finally moved on.

The trail continues south from Wheeler, then curves slightly eastward as it approaches Simpson Peak (12,976 feet), which actually looked higher than Wheeler from where



## The Way Down

Leaving Wheeler Peak, the path continues south along the ridgeline, then curves slightly east, to Simpson Peak, which is visible here, at the far left of the picture. Before reaching Simpson, the path zigs back north-northeast, and down a long slope to Horseshoe Lake.





## Go Northeast, Young Man

The dropoff to the right of Zane looks sharper in real life than it appears in this picture. Far in the distance, ahead of Zane, some of the other young men are barely visible. Here, Wheeler is to our left and behind us.

Just before 2 p.m., we reached Horseshoe Lake, which is indeed shaped roughly like a horseshoe, or a fat “U.” We’d seen it over one side of the ridge as we’d made our way up to Walter. There, we were blocked by the ridgeline from the high winds, but were now almost constantly in the shade from the cloud cover that was building up. It definitely looked like rain.

After leaving the wide valley where that lake was, the trail dropped steeply in elevation, zig-zagging down a winding valley in terrain that must have given the original explorers fits. Starting at Horseshoe, the trees began appearing again, and just as we dropped below the lake’s elevation, we were once again in the forest. Nearly a mile later, we found where the trail branched to the right, leading to the campsite area where the young men had gone. Feeling quite alone again, we continued to head north, toward Lost Lake. It was a total of 1.4 miles from Horseshoe Lake to Lost Lake, and getting colder, now that the sun wasn’t visible.

Just before the final approach to Lost Lake, we felt the first rain drops, and donned our ponchos. I was carrying the camera bag, with an awful lot of expensive equipment in it, so I took the heavier

we stood. Just before reaching Simpson, the trail zigs back to the north and northeast, a long downward slope of about 1.3 miles to Horseshoe Lake.

During this part, I was more apt to walk quickly than was Zane, who was really struggling with a killer headache by this time, to the point that every step hurt his head. I, on the other hand, was in some kind of euphoria induced by a combination of the thin air and the sense of accomplishment at having reached the top. While ahead of Zane, I several times got more than 100 yards ahead of him without realizing it. I didn’t want to go around a curve and lose sight of him, so I dropped back, and let him lead the way, which was clearly marked in this direction.



## Lost Lake

Wearing my rain poncho after a small shower, I’m shown here taking a break at Lost Lake, at an elevation of 11,495 feet. The wind coming down this valley was tremendously cold.

poncho and Zane got the cheap one. We had no more than fully adjusted the ponchos on ourselves when the rain quit. Nothing like Oklahoma rain. These were tiny drops of water, falling far apart. But, we decided to keep the ponchos on for a few minutes, in case it started again.

Then we came to Lost Lake, walking up to the sign at 3:10 p.m., weary but triumphant, knowing we only had 4.9 miles to go. Lost Lake is shut up in a tight little valley, with nearly sheer slopes above it, and the wind came whistling down that slope, cutting across the ice-cold water and snow banks on the other side, then hit us with full force. It felt like a cold November day, not like a day at the beginning of August. But, the extra layer of clothing provided by the ponchos was enough to shield us long enough to sit down for five minutes, take a couple of pictures, and then we moved on.

As the trail continued, we saw that we were still thousands of feet above some of the valley floors. Above us, along the ridgeline, were some horned mammals, that were either really large goats, antelope, or horned sheep. They were almost too far above us to see, but there they stood on impossibly steep slopes, watching us. It felt like they were smirking at us.

Winding our way through the valleys and slopes, we had to cross several large patches of loose shale, much like we'd climbed up a few days before, when first arriving to Red River. But those patches of loose rock near the town had only extended for 50 yards or so. Here, the trail cut across patches of this loose rock that were 200 yards across in places. Our feet, already sore from supporting our weight all day, were punished further as we navigated across the shifting, poky and uneven surfaces. On one such crossing, Zane and I both twisted ankles, but kept on going.

Not far past Lost Lake, I noticed a shadow of a trail, going through the woods beside us. It looked like it might have once been the original trail, but was now blocked off with fallen trees. After having already lost the trail several times that day, both Zane and I were very wary about leaving that "Y" behind, but we did. Thankfully, about two minutes, later, we met some young men hiking in from the other direction, all carrying heavy backpacks. They assured us that they'd come in from the direction we were supposed to be heading, and had seen our red pickup truck in the parking lot. So, we knew we were heading in the right direction. We told them where we'd just come from, and about how far it was, and then parted ways.

From 3:30 to 5 p.m., Zane and I didn't talk much. Our feet were killing us. I was starting to come down with the same headache that he'd been dealing with for hours. And the scenery got less and less interesting as we descended. The slopes rounded off. For quite a ways, the trail wasn't even on a slope, but just on relatively level place. Then, for about 30 minutes, it seemed we were heading upward the entire time.

Then we realized we had only about a cup of water left, after starting with about a gallon and a half. Zane spotted a trickle of cold mountain water coming down the side of the mountain, and we refilled our water bottles. That had a downside too. Now the backpack, which had been growing lighter all the time, was suddenly heavy again.



## Flowers

Here, I stopped for a picture with some flowers we saw on the way down. It's not a great picture, but I needed one on this page. :-)



Finally, at about 4:30 p.m., the trail widened out, got smoother, and we were sloping downward at such a pace that it was difficult to keep from running. But walk we did, caring for our ginger and worn out feet. At some point we crossed over a ridge, through a small pass, and the ridge was to the right of the trail, instead of the left. We were still heading roughly north, about to curve sharply to the west, back toward our vehicle.

At 5 p.m., Zane and I took a 15 minute break, eating the last of our fruit bars, and talking of our pains. Again, we shared knowing looks. Neither one of us might have come that far without the sense of proving that we could. I joked with Zane about him carrying me the rest of the way. And I said, several times, enough that Zane got irritated, "Down is my friend." After coming across a few more upslopes, I realized that going down was so much easier on these worn out legs, even if the rocks were rough.

Getting started again, we estimated that the valley down to our left was about 750 feet below us. To the north-northwest, we could see a thunderstorm hovering over a mountaintop, but again, it looked very weak compared to what we're used to.

Then, 3.2 miles past Lost Lake, we rejoined the trail we'd come in on, leaving us only 1.7 miles back to the truck. That was the fastest I think I've walked in a long time. Both Zane and I were increasing our speed, in anticipation of getting back. I started thinking of the soft cushions of the seats in the vehicle, and being able to rest my weary legs and back. My shoulders were now cramping from carrying the backpack so long, even though Zane and I had switched off fairly regularly.

At 5:35 p.m., though, we walked up to Dad's pickup, just as it started to rain again.

I let Zane drive, and we headed back to the hotel. We considered pulling a practical joke on Dad, telling him we hadn't made it to the top, just to see what he would say, but by the time we pulled into the parking lot at the hotel, we were just too tired.

## Return Trip

After telling Dad as much as we could about our hike and showing him the pictures I'd taken, we ate a brief supper, and then I went souvenir hunting, finally finding a shirt that said "Hike Wheeler Peak." (It was less than \$10).

Dad and I spent a half-hour in the hotel's hottub, and then I was ready to fall asleep. We all slept a little sounder that night.

The next morning, on Friday, Aug. 6, we woke up at 7 a.m., packed, ate at the hotel, bought some bags of ice and Dr. Pepper at the little grocery store, and then rolled out of town at 8:28 a.m.

Here's a time log of the rest of the trip home:

8:52 a.m. (RMT) - turn right on 64 (west) at Eagle Next Village.

9:01 a.m. (RMT) - turn left on 434 (south) toward Angel Fire.

10:14 a.m. (RMT) - enter Las Vegas, N.M.

10:25 a.m. (RMT) - turned onto Interstate 25 (south).

... We took I-25 to highway 84, which led us south to Interstate 40, which we took (eastbound).

11:40 a.m. - 11:50 a.m. (RMT) - got food at McDonald's in Santa Rosa, N.M.

2:10 p.m. (CST) - crossed into Texas, still on I-40. (would be 1:10 p.m. RMT)

3 p.m. (CST) - saw the famous buried Cadillacs outside Amarillo.

3:02 p.m. (CST) - enter Amarillo, Texas.

4:20 p.m. (CST) - got gas in McLean, Texas, and Wil began driving.

7:48 p.m. (CST) - arrived at Wil's apartment in Seminole, Okla.