



Trip to Montana – Alan's House

June 30 – July 8, 2002



The Mission Valley...a slice of heaven on the way to Alan's



At the gate of the Ramshead Ranch



A beautiful meadow on Alan's rolling 200



The feudal baron surveys his fiefdom (that's FEEF, you serf)



The baron himself...proud owner of castle (moat not shown)



I see horses...lots of horses...



Boy, I miss that patio



A great room that lives up to the name



“A host of golden daffodils”...



...and a picturesque stream to boot



It just doesn't get much better than this...what a place to call home



We mixed relaxing...



...with incredibly challenging Moroccan yurt construction



The powwow at Arlee—a unique way to celebrate the Fourth of July



Watch this, ladies...



The Tango King shows 'em how it's done



MacDonald Lake (maybe we should've just camped here...)



You poor fools, you have no idea what you're in for...



Okay, there *were* some pretty awesome views...



...not to mention awesome company



Melissa's boots rule!



A rare deadfall-free zone



“Melissa and the Ruddy Udder”...a cautionary tale



Deadfall? Hah! We laugh at your pitiful deadfall!



The baron tempts a serf with a bite of his royal sandwich



Robin's porta-pack with adjustable towel straps marks a new era in backcountry fashion...



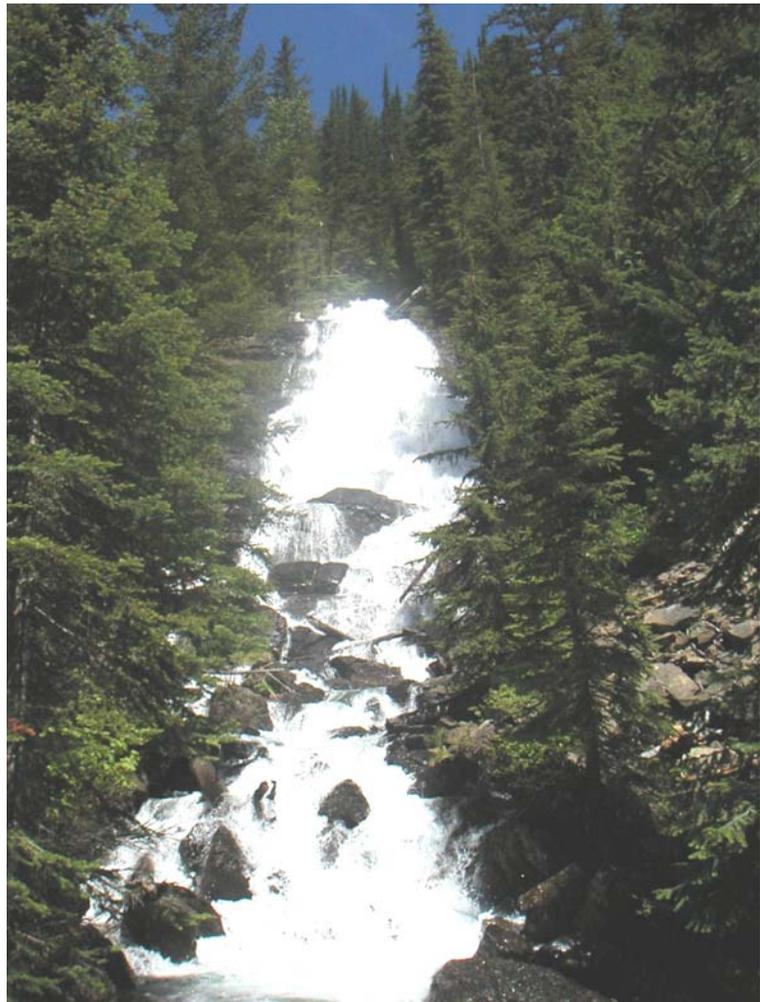
Summit Lake at last!



A ribbeting view from Frog Lakes



Robert rules



Alan's backup water supply



Wandering through a cedar cathedral



Cool water on hot toes...the best way to end a hard hike

Some snippets from our journal...

...After turning off the main road, we traveled another five miles over gravel roads. High grass grew in the middle and brushed the underside of the car. A hawk circling above seemed to be leading us to a sacred place. We stopped to open and close two fences—and realized that all this beautiful acreage of lush green meadows and hilly pastureland dotted with pines was Alan's! Over two-hundred acres of stunning land rising gently upward toward a magnificent house of stone and logs—the Ram's Head Ranch.

...To the west, we had wide views looking back over the flat farmlands of the Mission Valley. To the east, the land sloped downwards briefly then rose up again, green hills leading to mightier mountains beyond...This land is vintage Montana.

...I sit on Alan's porch, under the shade of a black-and-pink Balinese umbrella, on a wooden rocker, with my feet up on a bench. A soft breeze blows. It's 70 degrees and the sky is Montana blue. The only sounds are crickets, birds...and some distressed-sounding cows. The land up here is green and lush; clearly the drought in Colorado has had no effect here. Yellow and white daisies sprout up riotously through the grass. Bees buzz in a pollinating frenzy. The mountains to the east are a mix of rocky cliffs and dark green pine-covered slopes. Lower down is lighter-green pastureland and the characteristic squares of vibrant gold and green farmland. Alan's house sits atop a hill overlooking all of this. I sense what it must have been like to be a feudal baron surveying his fiefdom.

The house itself is log and stone. The logs are huge and honey colored. The great room has a round, central fireplace with an enormous black metal chimney pipe rising several stories through the rafters. A flat stone "sitting area" surrounds the fireplace, with slatted wooden chairs and a curious furry bear placed next to it. A long dining room table with high-backed Amish chairs sits off to the side, in front of tall windows and patio doors overlooking the deck. To the east are French doors also leading to the deck. To the west is the kitchen, still a part of the same great, tall-ceilinged room.

Later, we took a walk down to what we've dubbed the "writer's cabin." This is a small building with a porch and swing overlooking a bubbling stream. Peaceful and idyllic.

At the powwow in Arlee...

...Next came the processional, the big entry, where all the Indians in full costume danced in a slow, regal circle around the pavilion floor. An old Indian with full feathered headdress and a staff led the processional. He danced dignified and slow—a step forward and a step in place with one foot, then a step forward and a step in place with the other foot. All the others followed slowly behind until the floor of the pavilion was filled with dancers. The children danced energetically. Some of the men danced simply, others gyrated as they danced or moved with a variety of steps to the beat. Most of the women danced even more sedately than the old Indian chief, taking one slow step for each two steps the men took.

Following the processional, there were specific dance competitions by age. We saw the youngest dancers, cute five to ten year olds in their costumes. There were the buffalo dancers, the fancy dancers, the jingle dancers, and the traditional dancers.

In between these friendly competitions there were open dancing sessions where anyone could dance. This was too good to pass up! When an older Indian gentleman who played a double flute encouraged us to participate, we got up and took a couple turns around the floor. The basic step is simple and easy, and the beat is obvious. It was a treat to be a part of things, to dance in the same slow circle with the Indian dancers in all their regalia. This was the highlight of the event for us.

The backpack trip to Summit Lake...

Packing for the trip was interesting because we had only three real packs and had to improvise the fourth with a daypack and fanny pack. We filled the daypack full of all the heavy foodstuffs. Ten apples, a bunch of bananas, plums and apricots, two loafs of bread ("misc" and wheat), ten energy bars, five avocados, goat cheese, cucumbers, tomatoes, two boxes of couscous, a pat of butter wrapped in tinfoil, chicken strips, shredded cabbage, a bag of baby carrots, boxes of raisins, beef jerky, dried fruit, graham crackers, a bag of marshmallows, five chocolate bars. We justified all this with the oft-repeated phrase, "It's just for one night." To which Alan added, "How bad can it be?" Judging from our soreness by the end of the trip, pretty bad.

We didn't hit the trail until noon. This may mark our latest start ever. A very pretty lake called MacDonald Lake is situated right at the trailhead, and we kidded about camping at its edge and calling it a day. It was sunny, cloudless, and hot, and in no time at all we were perspiring under our loads. MacDonald Lake stretches for a mile or so. We climbed above it, then hiked parallel to it. The trail for the first two or three miles was undulating and clear of deadfall. We passed through several cedar groves, culminating in a beautiful cedar grove with a gorgeous rushing stream. The soaring trees, soft cedar needles, dappled sunlight, enormous fire ring, flat camping spots, fast-rushing water, and potential swimming holes made this a favorite spot for all of us.

What made the hike hard was the brushy undergrowth you had to push your way through at many points, and the deadfall you had to work your way over, under, or around. Many trees had fallen across the trail, and it was tiring work to get past them with packs on. Earlier in the day we had asked a fellow backpacker coming down the trail what it was like up ahead. "Lots of snakes," he replied. Snakes? In Montana? But he had said "snags," referring to all the deadfall.

We stopped for "lunch" around 4:30 pm, at a scenic overlook along the switchbacks, with our backs against a cliff wall—all except Robert, who sat at the edge of the precipice and made Melissa quite nervous. Melissa and Robert built big, fat, delicious sandwiches out of the misc bread, goat cheese, avocados, tomatoes, cabbage, and chicken we'd brought along. This plus the energy bars and fruit we consumed lightened Robert's pack appreciably. I must say, I've never eaten tastier food on the trail than I did on this trip.

As it got later, we realized we had significantly underestimated the distance. What we thought was a six-mile hike was more like eight miles, and we were proceeding very slowly because of all the deadfall. The trail dwindled until it disappeared in places, especially near marshy areas and snow-covered fields. We had to search a good ten minutes to find it again at one stream crossing. By 8:30 pm we caught our first glimpse of Summit Lake. It was a beautiful lake, tucked up under Mt. Harding, but we were so tuckered out we only gave it a quick glimpse. Our legs were battered and scratched, our shoulders ached, and our hips were bruised from the weight of our hip belts. Nevertheless, we were in good spirits, having arrived at our destination. It felt funny to be pitching tents after 9 pm, but it was still light out. We even found time to take a much-needed swim in the icy waters before it got all the way dark. Brrr, but it felt SO good to be clean.

Then came dessert—smores! We toasted marshmallows over the fire and made open-faced sandwiches with chocolate and graham crackers. Melissa provided the entertainment. She ate lots of marshmallows, burning most of them in the process. "Oh, no," she would say with less than convincing concern as her marshmallow caught fire. Half the time she left it in there anyway, and the other half she took it out but was laughing so hard she couldn't blow it out.

Poor Alan and Robert were sharing a tent—and a mummy sleeping bag—without a sleeping pad underneath. Their tent was right next to ours, and we could hear them laughing as they tried to get comfortable in such a tight and uncomfortable space. I fell asleep to the sound of them quietly laughing.

Our growing pile of trash went into what Melissa called the "gomi bag"—the Japanese word for "trash"—but Robert dubbed it the "Gucci bag."

Back at Alan's, Melissa made a late but delicious dinner of gazpacho soup. We had lots of diced tomatoes, onions, cucumbers, and avocados "to taste." Dessert was wonderful, too – pecan pie a la mode. A fitting end to a wonderful trip.