

Jacob's Oasis

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That is one of the most amazing stories I've ever heard! You are lucky to have survived! Your parents must have been blown away when they learned what happened to you!

I don't have a story as breathtaking as yours, but let me tell you about a hike I went on when I was a Boy Scout. I'm sure you remember that I grew up in Nevada near a small town called Straightpole which lies northeast of Reno. (Straightpole was the name of a famous local Shoshone leader.) My family lived on a ranch east of Straightpole. I belonged to a very active Boy Scout troop sponsored by the Straightpole town council. In the summer of 1965, the whole troop was getting ready for a "high adventure" backpacking excursion to Philmont Scout Ranch in New Mexico that was planned for the following summer. Everyone of us Scouts wanted to go. However, our scoutmaster, Mr. Riley, said only Scouts with a rank of Star or higher would be accepted for the trip and the patrol leaders would have to have a rank of either Life or Eagle.

The troop had five patrols. I was in the Wolverines patrol composed of just four Scouts who lived on ranches on the east side of Straightpole. I was the patrol leader and the other three Scouts were Ryan, Tom (short for Tomaso), and Skip (whose real name was Arthur). We were all 13 years old and had been in Scouts since we turned 11. Of course, there was nothing we wanted more than to go to Philmont. So this summer we were all working, as a patrol, on merit badges to become Star Scouts. Ryan already had four merit badges so he needed just one for the Star rank. Tom and Skip — the lazy ones — had no merit badges yet and thus each needed five. I was already a Star Scout and had six merit badges, but I wanted to be one of the patrol leaders at Philmont, so I needed four more to become a Life Scout.

As much as possible, we tried to work on the MBs together. In the spring we had started on the Hiking Merit Badge. It required four 10-mile hikes and one 20-mile hike, each done in one day. It was considered the hardest merit badge next to the Atomic Energy Merit Badge. Dad thought the badge requirements were too extreme. I remember him telling Scoutmaster Riley, "10 miles is a long distance for boys to be hiking alone in the desert. 20 miles is too long! For that kind of hike, adults need to be there with them, but that defeats the goal of getting boys to do things on their own."

By the time school was out, our patrol had already completed the four

10-mile hikes, leaving us with just the 20-miler, the hike Dad didn't think boys should do alone. As so often was the case, the Wolverines patrol left it to me to find a suitable 20-mile hike for us to do.

One of my many and strongest interests was map reading. I loved studying U.S. Geological Survey topographical maps. For me, it was a way to visit a place without actually going there. I could get topo maps for almost any place in Nevada at an engineering supply store in Reno. I spent a lot of money from birthdays and odd jobs on maps at this store.

One day I took a close look for the first time at a map I had recently bought. It showed an area about 50 miles east from Straightpole with just one road going through it (Highway 25) and with just a couple dozen ranches spread out along the road. There was almost nothing else man-made on the map. The topography was dominated by two long high ridges running in parallel roughly north to south with a trough in between them. In the middle of the trough was a creek running through a flat green-colored area called "Jacob's Oasis". The green color indicated that there was a wide wooded area on both sides of the creek, something that wasn't at all typical in that part of Nevada. The label "Jacob's Oasis" was alluring. I wondered if it would be something related to that strange word "idyllic" that we learned about when our teacher read us the *Idylls of the King*. Amazingly, there was actually a trail marked on the map that went from Highway 25 to the Oasis by crossing over the first ridge!

I couldn't stop thinking about Jacob's Oasis that whole day. I longed, in a terrible way, to see it in person. So I hatched a plan while I was waiting to fall asleep that evening. I'd get my older brother Gerald to drive our patrol to the trailhead on Highway 25. I figured it would take a little less than an hour to get there. Then we Wolverines would hike to the Oasis on the trail, a distance of just over 11 miles. We would take a look at the Oasis, and then hike the 11 miles back. We could both explore Jacob's Oasis and complete the 20-mile hike requirement for the Hiking MB. I thought it was a brilliant plan. I was so excited about it that I got hardly any sleep that night.

The next day I called for a patrol meeting. I told the patrol about Jacob's Oasis and my plan for us to hike there and back and thus finish the requirements for the Hiking MB. The three of them were all in. All we needed was to get our parents to allow us to go and Gerald to agree to drive us.

I knew that the hardest part would be to get Dad to agree. If he agreed to let us go, Mom and the other parents would also agree. Getting Gerald to agree wouldn't be a problem because it would give him access to the family car, something he was always on the lookout for.

I talked that evening to Dad. I asked him if he knew of Jacob's Oasis. He said he'd never heard of it, and I told him where it was and that the Wolverines patrol would like to hike there and that I was going to ask Gerald

to drive us to the trailhead. I reminded him that all four of us had been in Scouts for two years and had done lots hiking and camping in desert areas. Dad asked me all kinds of questions. He seemed satisfied with my answers and said I could go if the other parents agreed. He didn't ask me how long a hike it would be, and I didn't volunteer this information. At the end of our conversation, he said, as he always did, "Use what you know and don't do anything stupid." He also said, "Be sure to bring plenty of water with you."

Mom went along with Dad's decision, but she was always a bit concerned when we went hiking on our own in the desert. The other parents also agreed, and Gerald needed no persuasion. He said, "I am happy to do it. The four hours I spend dropping you off and later picking you up will be fun driving for me."

The next Saturday the Wolverines gathered at my house early in the morning. We figured the hike would take about 12 hours: 5 to get to the Oasis, 1 to explore the area, 5 more to get back, and 1 one hour in reserve. Therefore, we asked Gerald to drop us off at the trail head on Highway 25 at 7:00 AM and pick us up there at 7:00 PM. Gerald said he didn't want to have to rush his dinner, so he told us not to expect him until 8:00 PM at the earliest.

I knew we needed to take with us a lot of water; it was going to be a hot sunny day. I filled eight 1-gallon plastic milk jugs with water, two for each of us. I told the other Scouts that two gallons each should be more than enough water since we could get more water at Jacob's Oasis. We loaded up the water, some food, and our gear (including water purification tablets) into our packs, got into the car, and Gerald drove us east to Highway 25. We arrived at the trailhead almost exactly at 7:00 AM. Gerald told me to be careful with our water and said that, if we needed help, to go to the ranch on the highway that we passed a couple miles back. We thanked Gerald and immediately set off on our hike and adventure.

The first ridge, the one we had to cross, dominated the horizon in the direction the trail was taking us. Ryan said, "I'm can't wait to see what Jacob's Oasis is like." I replied, "Yes, this will be a real adventure. We're going to a place we've never seen, never been to." Skip, who already looked tired and bored, said, "This would be a boss hike if we didn't have to carry all this water. Why do we need it if there's water at the Oasis?" "The water at the Oasis may not be the kind we want to drink", countered Ryan. Skip then continued his contrariness with, "But don't we have a whole bottle of purification tablets?" Tom ended the conversation by saying, "Let's talk less and hike more. We have a long way to go."

After a couple hours of hiking, Skip was complaining nonstop about the how heavy his water was. We couldn't get him to shut up. When we got to a spot near to the ridge about three hours into the hike where a bunch of

large rocks were on both sides of the trail, Ryan suggested that maybe we could leave some of the water here and pick it up on the way back. Skip and Tom quickly agreed with the idea. I wasn't sure it was a good idea — we had at least eight more hours of hiking to do — but I went along with the proposal. We each filled our canteens and one gallon jug with water and left the rest at the rocks.

Now with the lighter load, we were moving along faster. I knew from studying the topo map when we were driving in the car this morning that there would be a fork in the trail when we got close to the ridge. Sure enough, we came to a fork and took the left branch that would take us over the ridge. The trail, however, didn't go immediately over the ridge. Instead, it went parallel to the ridge. This is not what I remember from the map, but I was sure that trail split at only one spot, and so we must be on the right trail. Maybe the trail wasn't marked on the map correctly. I didn't mention any of my thoughts to the others. I just kept leading them farther down the trail.

After about an hour the trail gradually petered out at a point where we could clearly see a cut through the ridge. There was no apparent trail along the cut. I admitted to the other three that this didn't seem right and maybe we were on the wrong trail and should backtrack to where the trail forked. Or we could just try to cross the ridge through the cut which would likely lead directly to Jacob's Oasis. I was confident in my thinking and didn't bother pulling out the map and checking it. Everyone agreed that going back would be a waste of valuable time and that we should use this cut to cross the ridge.

Going through the cut was an easy uphill hike at first, but when we got to the top the cut narrowed and started dropping precipitously. It became essentially a treacherous cliff. Climbing down it was very scary, but no one suggested it was too dangerous to proceed. I got to bottom first. The other three worked their way down much slower than I did. This gave me time and opportunity to think how they could get hurt, or worse, how Skip might stop and say he wasn't going to go any farther.

They all made it down, and we moved forward at a fast pace, excited that we would soon arrive at Jacob's Oasis. We came to a flat area with a dry creek bed running through it. Tom said, "Don't tell me that this is Jacob's Oasis. There is nothing green here. Where is the water we need? Skip is almost out of water. What are we going to do?" I asked Skip, "Are you really almost out of water?" He said, "Yes, it has been really hot. What do you expect." I said, "I expected you to conserve your water, especially after you insisted that we leave half of it at the rocks." Ryan jumped in and said to me, "Don't flip your lid. Let's abort the hike and go back the way we came." I replied, "Do you really think we can safely get back up that damn cliff we just came down? I can see no one wants to do that. We are clearly

not at Jacob's Oasis. Let me get out the map and try to figure out where we are."

I took out the map, which I should've done a couple hours ago when we came to the split in the trail. None of the others seemed interested in looking at it with me; they were happy to let me do the map reading task by myself. It took me several minutes to determine where we were and how we could get to Jacob's Oasis. I explained our situation as honestly as I could. "I've bad news and also good news. Here is the bad news: We took the wrong branch when the trail forked. That fork isn't on the map. The fork we were looking for must have been farther down the trail. We aren't at Jacob's Oasis. We're in a flat area in the middle of the ridge. We — and I mean by that, Skip — are very low on water, but this creek here is completely dried up. Here is the good news: If we follow this dried creek it will drop down out of this ridge into Jacob's Oasis. Hopefully, we can find water there, then find the trail, and then take the trail back over the ridge to Highway 25 in time to meet Gerald."

There was silence for a moment after I spoke and then Ryan said, "Well, let's get going." And I said, "Skip, if you are nice, we might be able to share some of our water with you." We followed the dried creek out of the ridge. It was a stunningly beautiful walk through an otherworldly landscape, but it was hard to appreciate it with all the worries we had about whether we would be able to find water and get back to Highway 25 in time.

As soon as the dried creek came out of the ridge, we found ourselves in a surprisingly lush and sonorous forest of cottonwood and quaking aspen trees. The dried creek connected with a larger dried creek, which we concluded had to be the Jacob's Oasis creek. As we followed it through the forest, we saw several amazing cylindrical potholes that were filled with fairly moist soil. (I learned later that these were carved out of the rock by swirling, rock-filled water.) It was clear that the only way we could get water out of this creek was to dig for it.

We picked the most promising pothole and started digging. (We had brought a camp shovel with us.) At a depth of about two feet, a layer of muddy water formed above the soil. We fashioned one of our empty plastic milk jugs into a scoop, and started filling up another empty jug with the water, filtering it through a neckerchief, which turned the color of the water from black to grey. After about 45 minutes of work, we had filled up two jugs with this filtered water and then added purification tablets to them.

We all felt better now. We had plenty water, and it looked like we had plenty of time to get back to Highway 25 before Gerald was expected to arrive. We took a short break and finished off all the remaining water we had brought with us, leaving us with just the creek water. As we walked south following the creek, Ryan put a damper on our good mood by saying,

“How do we know that the creek water isn’t contaminated with arsenic?” I replied, “Well, we don’t know, but let’s hope it isn’t.”

We soon came to the intersection of the dried creek and a trail where there was a sign that said “Jacob’s Oasis”. I carefully checked the map. This was certainly the trail that would take us home. It was 2:00 PM. We had six hours before Gerald would arrive, likely just enough time to complete the hike. We started down the trail back toward the ridge. Ryan suddenly yelled out, “Look over there! It’s some sort of squarish thing!” We all looked and saw some kind of structure about a half mile away. I took out the map and found on it an open square exactly where the structure was. (An open square normally designates a nonresidential building like a garage or barn.) I said, “It’s a pity that we don’t have time to check out what it is.” Tom started immediately walking toward it saying, “We certainly do have time to look at it. It’s not far away.” Skip and Ryan followed him without saying a word. So we all walked toward the structure.

As we got closer to it, we could see that it was a huge metal cubical cage. Yes, it was a huge cage in the middle of nowhere! Tom ran up to it ahead of us. When he reached the cage, he found a door into it which was apparently locked. He tried to open the door by repeatedly pulling and pushing it. When we all got there, we could see that he was profusely sweating and getting very tired. Then suddenly the door opened and Tom walked inside the cage. Tom said, “Can you dig this cage. It’s really far out.” And then, before we could stop him, he pulled the door closed and we all heard a sickening click.

Tom looked at us and said, “What are you worried about. Just shake it open as I did before.” We tried that, but it didn’t work. Ryan and I studied the lock and concluded that there was no way we could open it. It must have been stuck but not locked when Tom had rattled it open. In the mean time Skip was having a freak out using every kind of swearword he could think of, many of which are no longer in use. Basically what he said boiled down to “Tom, you are the biggest idiot of all time. You don’t deserve any help or consideration. We should leave you here to rot.”

Ryan noticed that the cage had no floor, so maybe we could lift it up or dig under it. This seemed to be a promising idea until we realized that the cage was too heavy to even budge and all four sides of the cage were sitting on rock. Tom was starting to get really worried. I think he was beginning to believe that we might just leave him in the cage, as Skip said, to rot. I said that we could use a lever and fulcrum to lift up the cage. We needed a long log for the lever, a big rock for the fulcrum, and another big rock to keep the cage up while Tom crawled out.

We all went to work. I found a small tree back at the dried creek that I cut down with the hatchet we brought and shaped it into a log. While I was doing that, Ryan and Skip found two large rocks and rolled them to the

cage. Like a charm, we were able to use our lever and fulcrum to lift the cage and push the second rock under its side.

We made sure that it was safe for Tom to crawl under the cage. When he started crawling out next to the rock holding the cage up, he could get his head out but that was all. His torso didn't fit under. It looked like we had to get bigger rocks and start over. Ryan told Tom to exhale as much as he could and then Ryan pulled Tom out another inch or so. Tom started a muffled sort of screaming. We got him to quiet down, telling him that we could only get him out if he relaxed. He did calm down, and we slowly inched him out of the cage by having him exhale, pulling him an inch, letting him inhale, and then repeating the process.

When Tom was finally all the way out from under the cage, he was one happy boy. Skip, to everyone's surprise, apologized to Tom for suggesting that we should leave him to rot. We removed the rock holding up the cage and each of us had a big drink from the grey-colored creek water. As we walked back to the trail, Skip asked us what arsenic poisoning felt like. We were extremely tired, but happy that we saved Tom. We still had at least five more hours of walking to do. It was highly unlikely that we would get to Highway 25 by 8:00 PM. Skip and Tom were worried that Gerald would give up on us and that we would have to hike some more miles to get to a ranch.

By the time we got to the rocks where we had left a big part of our water, we had drunk all the nasty creek water. We retrieved the good water like people dying of thirst in the desert and drank some of it. It tasted better than any water we had ever had. It was extremely hard to start walking again. We were utterly exhausted, but we somehow got ourselves on our feet, started walking, and kept walking. We arrived at Highway 25 at 9:15 PM. Gerald was there waiting for us. (I could've kissed him.) He helped load our packs into the car, we got in, and off we went. We said almost nothing on the way home.

A mile or so before we got back to Highway 25, we all agreed — so that we wouldn't jeopardize our trip to Philmont — that we wouldn't tell anyone about how we left a major portion of our water on the trail because we assumed we could later find water in a desert oasis, didn't consult the map when we needed to, took the wrong branch of the trail, climbed down a dangerous cliff, got lost, drank muddy (possibly arsenic-laced) water from a dried creek, and allowed one of us to lock himself in a big cage in the middle of nowhere. All four of us received the Hiking Merit Badge and got to go to Philmont the next year for the best Scouting experience ever. I never told my parents nor any of my siblings including Gerald about what really happened on our hike to Jacob's Oasis.

You know, kids and even Scouts don't do these kinds of things anymore!