

# Families Go Hiking

## Back to My First Backpack Trip

BY DAVID WILLIAMS

I have few memories of my first backpacking trip, but I know this: I hated it. The trail was steep and the switchbacks endless. It rained the entire time. Someone knocked down the line holding up our rain fly. I awoke cold, wet and crying. I didn't poop.

I am pretty sure that I went in 1978 when I was in seventh grade. I think we set up our tent in the middle of a side trail. I have foggy memories of rocks or piles of rocks in the middle of a lake, but I am not exactly sure where we went. I vaguely remember a name, Pinnacle or Spectacle Lake, but could not find either listed in area hiking guides we owned.

Despite my inauspicious beginning, I have spent much of my adult life working or teaching in the outdoors, including many great days and nights camping. I have thought about this first backpack trip for years. When my wife and I moved back to Seattle, after my absence from the Northwest for 15 years, the trip began to take hold of me. While hiking or backpacking, I'd wonder if we were where it had all begun, particularly if there were switchbacks.

As the years passed, I kept thinking I would go up to Lakeside Middle School, which I attended in 7th grade, and see if they had a list of where students went hiking. We must have signed up for a particular trip and they, of course, kept those lists for people like me. Optimism can make the most boneheaded ideas seem realistic.

I called the school. The archivist kindly listened to my rambling story and told me that no such records existed. She suggested that I contact one of the teachers, a Mr. Dougall, involved in the hiking program. He told me that in the 1970s Lakeside did go to

a spot called Pinnacle Lake. It was off the Mountain Loop Highway, which was chosen because the bus could drive down the road, drop kids off, and continue to the next trailhead.

With the name, I began to search in more hiking guides. I finally found a Pinnacle Lake listed in *Trips and Trails*



*Hiking trips help foster a lifelong love of nature. Here, the Swisher family walks Ruby Beach, Olympic National Park.*

*I*, a venerable, but now defunct series of hiking guides published by The Mountaineers. According to the book, the trail was only 1.7 miles to the lake. It did not mention any switchbacks. I could see why the books were out of print; they shortened the distances and minimized the hazards of the trail.

I knew that I had to go to the lake. I wasn't positive that Pinnacle was the correct one, but it would do. On September 5, 2004, eight months after talking with Mr. Dougall, my wife and I drove with our dog to the trailhead. By this time I could admit that Pinnacle Lake was only 1.7 miles from the road, but I wasn't sure about the switchbacks.

We arrived under an overcast sky, put on our packs, and started hiking at about 10 a.m. After half a mile we hit a switchback. And then another. I joked that I recognized them. We continued on, eventually snaking up 14 switchbacks. We reached the lake at

11:30.

It fit the image I had: a rock or rocks in a lake—certainly a unique sight in the Northwest. I had remembered a more prominent pinnacle, but the low mounds would do. I looked for the spot where I had set up the tent, but nothing looked remotely like I remembered. We remained at the little lake only long enough to take a few pictures.

We continued around the shoreline and made two startling discoveries. First, an outhouse. Had this potential refuge been there in 1978? Would I have used it? Some questions we cannot answer. Second, we found another, larger lake, the official Pinnacle Lake. It was a handsome lake but not nearly as charming as my Pinnacle Lake.

After a short lunch, we hiked around the larger lake, up a drainage colloquially known as Iodine Gulch, to

Bathtub Lakes, a beautiful plateau of clear ponds, windswept trees and exposed granite. The stark beauty made me wish we had brought our camping gear and could have spent the night.

I have often pondered why, after such a disastrous first camping trip, I now love to hike and camp. My return to Pinnacle Lake confirmed what I have thought for many years. I am grateful that I gave camping a second chance. I treasure the beauty and solitude of the wild. Like many people, I am energized by being outdoors, by hiking, by sleeping out, even by being cold and wet. To paraphrase Thoreau, in wildness is the preservation of my world. ♦

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