

50th Anniversary in Wilderness

by Jean Jackman

The Jackman family—adult children and their partners, grandchildren and grand dog, backpacked in the Desolation Wilderness for five days in celebration of the 50th anniversary of Jean and Alan Jackman.



Brian and Jack Andersen, Skyler Jackman, Jasmine Vazquez, Jean and Alan Jackman, Kristen, Sophie and Luke Andersen.

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Desolation Wilderness, Eldorado National Forest, California. The name belies the beauty. Could our septuagenarian bodies start at an elevation of 7,400 feet and climb to 8500 feet while carrying 40-pound packs? It had been seven years since we last backpacked—and then for just one night. We wanted to celebrate our 50th anniversary on a backpack with adult children and teenage grandchildren for five days, one day for each decade. Would my husband's new knees be up to it? Would my sciatica flare up? How far could we walk with packs and not endanger our health?

We knew we wanted to be with family out in nature. That is where we've always had our best times together whether it has been to hike, ski, sail, scuba, kayak or camp.

We prioritize getting exercise each day but our 73 and 75 year old bodies have the usual wear and tear and little surprising challenges—like cramps or maybe a sudden shoulder pain. So we decided we would rehearse for the trip, plan carefully—remember past camping disasters—and be smarter this time.

The trip proved a tremendous success in a stupendous setting at a cost of \$86 for permits for nine family members and a dog for five days. Here's how we strategized, prepared, and had a joyful time together.

Logistics were complicated. Worries were many. We had one five-day window of time when all could participate given the busy demanding schedules of jobs, water polo team competitions and camp commitments. Our family is spread out—from Boston to Palo Alto and that makes it challenging. We are all tied to electronics. Could we do without? Would everyone feel

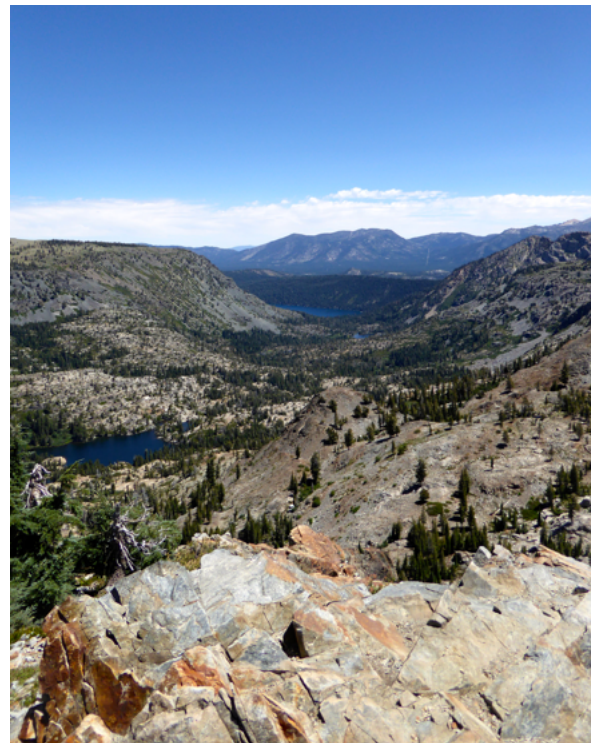
fine about digging holes to bury their poop? Could we get Rika, the dog, to wear booties to save her feet from the granite?

Initially, we wanted to share our honeymoon adventure in the beautiful Boundary Water Canoe area in Northern Minnesota. However, in the August window of time allotted, we worried there might be the notorious black flies and lots of mosquitoes—so that was out. In early marriage, we moved from the Midwest to East Coast to West Coast, which is where we settled. We had camping disasters and successes in all locations. Our first backpack ever was in the Sierra Nevada Desolation Wilderness with our first born, so we decided that would be a fitting, nostalgic event.

The first backpack in 1970 was another study

in unpreparedness. We had no idea that California could be so cold. We camped at 9000 feet elevation with wind and snow. Our one-year-old wore my underpants over her head and my socks on her hands. We had lots to learn. Several years later, another mother and I took our four-year olds into Desolation Valley for an October backpack. There was a huge, whiteout snowstorm in the night. The snow melted, leaked in and got clothes wet. We wondered if we would get out alive. Luckily, a lodge reopened for the many campers coming out of the mountains. People took turns putting my daughter's feet under their armpits. Mother Nature was still challenging us.

Neither my husband nor I learned to camp as children, so we had to learn by doing. That was before the Internet, YouTube, and

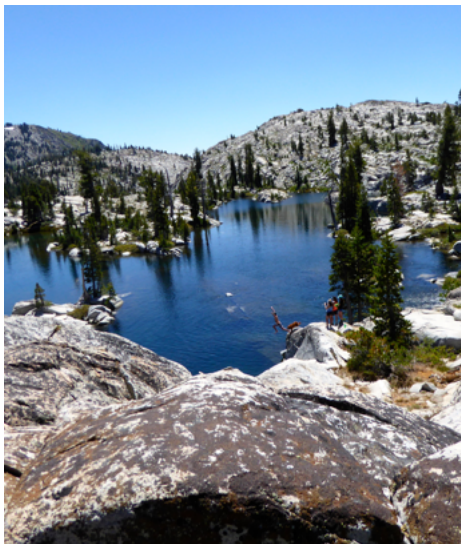


From Lake Jobu, one can see at least 30 miles to other mountains and lakes in the Desolation Wilderness, California.

so many good sources readily available for beginners in any activity today. Over the years, we got smarter and had smoother trips. Mark Twain said it best, “Good decisions come from experience, and experience comes from bad decisions.” The disaster trips made for humorous stories.

For our 50th anniversary backpack, we were determined to be wise old owls. We drove up to the area and took a day hike to check out the first part of the trip, a trailhead at Echo Lake in the Sierra Nevada. Studied the map and saw we would have many choices for lakes after the first night at Tamarack Lake—the very lake where I had experienced the snowstorm with our preschooler 43 years earlier. We got a permit. In that area, a limited number of first night permits are given for lakes to maintain the wilderness experience.

That day hike rekindled our love for the Desolation Wilderness—our



Luke Andersen leaps into Ropi Lake at the bottom of a half-mile hike along cascading Pyramid Creek in the Desolation Wilderness.



Jean and Alan Jackman celebrate their 50th Anniversary with a jump into Lake Aloha while being photographed by Skyler Jackman and Jasmine Vazquez.

very own Switzerland, just two hours from our home. Each time we visit, we discover new features. Desolation is a unique landscape with massive granite peaks, glacially formed valleys, alpine forests, meadows, raging streams, long waterfalls, and accessible and panoramic summits. It is so easy to see long distances that it invites going cross-country. During summer drought time in the Central Valley where we live, springtime is still happening in the mountains—even as late as fall, with flowers of many species blooming.

Next we did a three-day back-

pack by ourselves in the Emigrant Wilderness to audition an alternate location friends told us to consider. We also wanted to see how long it would now take us to go a mile. How much weight could we carry? Would backpacking still be fun? It was—and we met colorful, adventurous people. A swim to an island rock was exhilarating and made us feel so alive. Yes! The 50th backpack was a good idea. We decided Desolation was still our first choice.

We started experimenting with suitable food for the trip. Fires are not allowed

in Desolation Wilderness. There would be nine of us. Backpacking pots are small. Luckily there are now many easy-to-prepare packaged meals, instant soups and sauces, instant potatoes, pasta, instant rice. We have a camping ritual of eating the same thing for lunch every day—food that we would never eat at home but that tastes fantastic on the trail—dried salami, bread and crackers and oranges for lunch. I bought nine dried salamis.

One day, I tried to get out of my house but boxes blocked the door. Our daughter had ordered lots of freeze dried food. Only add boiling water. And water was made easier by something new to us—a gravity water filter. You scoop up water in a big bag, hang it from a tree and the water is instantly purified. It



Sophie Andersen, age 14, searches for frogs and tadpoles in Tamarack Lake, Desolation Wilderness.

eliminates endless pumping to fill water bottles for nine people.

Everyone in our family has traveled to distant lands—something I consider a privilege, as I never even flew on a plane until age 25. However, the area we chose was only two hours from our home. We had backpacked in the Desolation Wilderness many times but we usually entered via Wright Lake and always camped at the same lakes. This time, we had five days and could go cross-country exploring. We decided to camp three nights at Lake Aloha but take ambitious day hikes. We followed a cascading Pyramid Creek for half a mile. It rushed so fast that there was no way to ford it. It finally emptied into Ropi Lake where we swam. We continued hiking around Lake of the Woods that was forested all around. There, we met a young couple that excitedly told us they had just

scared away a bear. Luckily, they had bear canisters for their food.

On another day, we hiked up to Jobu, a lake that stands on the lip of a thousand foot cliff. From that cliff we could see for thirty miles. Patches of snow were alongside spring flowers. Everywhere we hiked, different flowers—lots of orange Indian paintbrush, blue lupine flowers still not at peak and many other species blooming.

We lucked out because the weather was beautiful and the skies generally clear. Although this time, we were well prepared for cold and rain. I loved to awake at night and

watch the sky. Within minutes I could spot a shooting star. How thrilling and what a luxury to be out away from city light pollution and able to view so many constellations.

I gave everyone a moleskin blank journal with a request to write at least a haiku a day. A haiku is a poem of three lines—5 syllables,



Indian paintbrush bloom in the Desolation Wilderness.

7 syllables and then 5. Many did more and sketched. Son Skyler pulled up his hoody and chanted an anti-haiku gangster rap, which ended with a haiku on pride in family. Fourteen-year-old Sophie had never been backpacking, yet she is most observant of nature. She was the one to find frogs and tadpoles, a snake and write numerous haikus as well as sketch. She wrote:

*The clouds are cotton
Candy in the sky so too
Bad I can't eat them*

Her sketch was of Rika, their Nova Scotia duck-tolling retriever, jumping off of a twelve-foot cliff into the lake.

I cannot imagine a more magical 50th celebration. It reignited our desire to backpack again. We are not so fragile. We can do it. And we are reminded that right in our very own region await unimagined discoveries.

Son Skyler said, “I’m happy that my parents know the value of a true luxury vacation.” ♦

This essay won a contest honorable mention and was published at Parksandpoints.com.



Jean Jackman has written a nature column with photographs for the Davis Enterprise newspaper for 16 years. She has

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