

THE LASSEN LOG

5-6 July 2009

Lassen Volcanic National Park, California

'Cause it's there ...



Snow is receding from Lake Helen's shore just 2,200 feet below Lassen Peak.

We came, we saw, we climbed, and we climbed, and we climbed

Lassen Peak is my Mount Everest, not Ken Henry's.

Ken, the pastor at my church, has climbed Lassen before. He knows he can get to the top.

I don't.

I've hiked in the Appalachians; Ken has hiked in Alaska. I've walked up some piddly peaks around San Jose; Ken has climbed in the Olympics in Washington –
Continued on 3rd Page

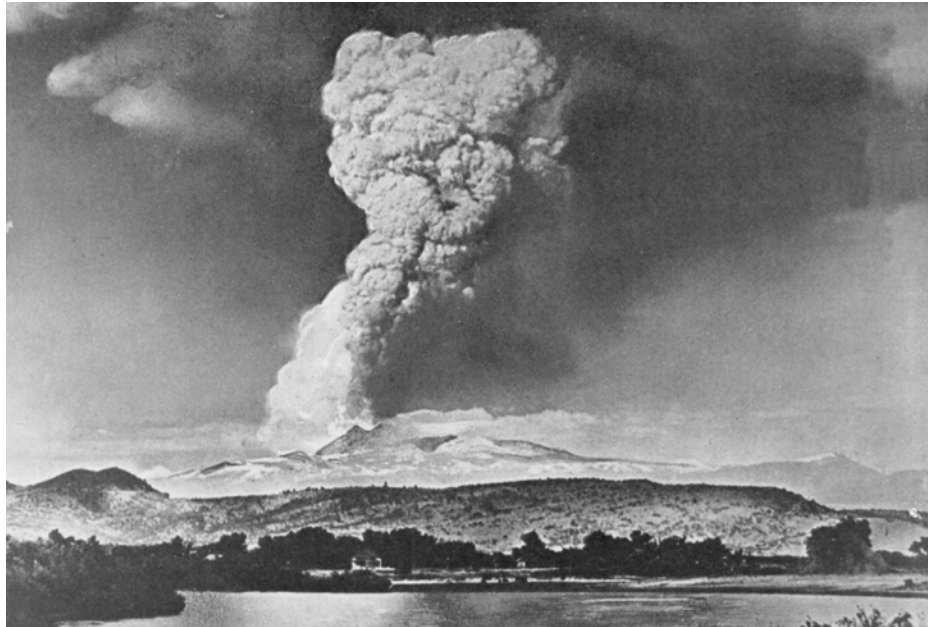
Mountain go *BOOM!* National park born

A snowcapped volcano in northeastern California, which had lain dormant for hundreds of years, awakened on May 30, 1914.

Subterranean molten rock – magma – which had been bubbling up from who-knows-how-many-miles beneath the earth's crust for who-knows-how-many-years, finally reached close enough to the surface that it heated and pressurized groundwater to the exploding point. Over the next year there was an average of one steam explosion every two days from Lassen Peak, blasting open a thousand-foot wide crater near the top.

On the evening of May 14, 1915, glowing blocks of lava falling on the mountain's upper reaches were spotted from 20 miles away. The crater filled with lava on the night of May 19-20.

May 22 was the big event.



From Red Bluff, Calif., 40 miles west, this National Park Service photo shows the plume of gas and ash boiling into the sky from the May 22, 1915 main eruption at Lassen.

An explosion late in the day opened a second crater and fired a column of volcanic ash and gas six miles into the atmosphere. On the ground, a giant cloud of 2,000-degree poison gas and pumice called a "pyroclastic flow" swept down the mountain's northeast flank at several hundred miles per hour and devastated three square miles of forest.

Heat from the eruption melted the mountain's snowcap, generating a mud slide that flowed for 10 miles. A measurable accumulation of volcanic ash fell in Winnemucca, Nev., 200 miles east.

Steam explosions continued into 1917. By then, Lassen Volcanic National Park was a year old, established by Congress to encompass Lassen Peak, the southernmost volcano of the Cascades, and more than 30 other volcanic domes within the park's 106,000 acres. Until the 1980 eruption of Mount St. Helens in Washington State, Lassen was the only 20th Century volcanic eruption in the contiguous United States.





In this view from Google Earth, you are west of Lassen Peak. The trail Ken and I climbed is the red line that begins at the trailhead at 8,500 feet and zig-zags 2.2 miles and 2,000 feet up the South Ridge to the peak at 10,457 feet.

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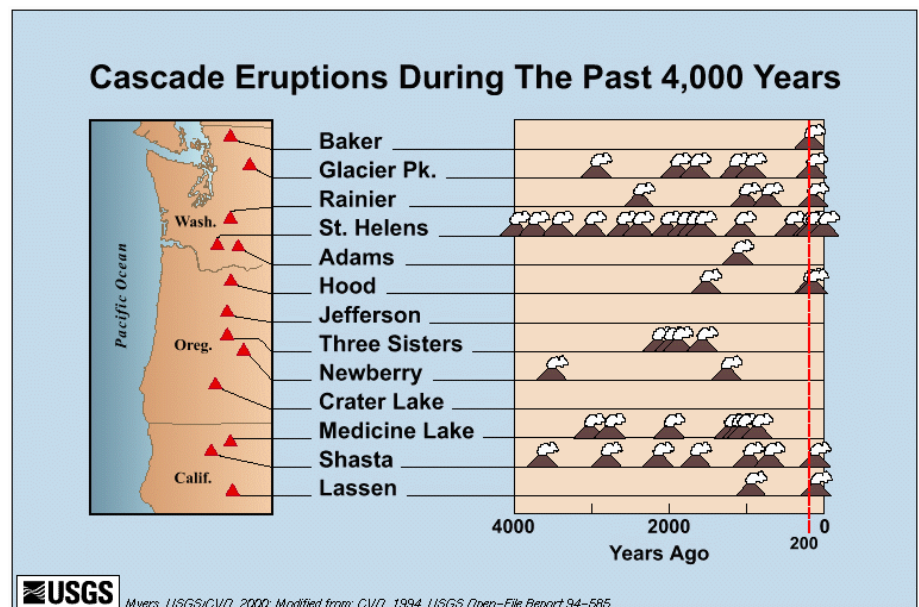
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State – among other places.

He does have an Everest. Right now it's Mount Shasta, 4,000 feet taller and 75 miles farther north in California. It's a volcano, too.

But mine's Lassen. It's 10,500 feet, and there's snow on it all year. It's on the bottom end of what I consider *real* mountains, but then I don't even know if I'm at the bottom end of what I consider *real* climbers. I want to find out.

Continued on next page



Once you escape the human frame of reference on time, it's much easier to understand how active the Cascade volcanoes have been.

'Cause it's there ...



Tired but on top of Mission Peak on the Fourth of July.

Continued from previous page

When I told Ken my plan was to try Lassen on the Fourth of July weekend while Emily and Gordon went to Charlotte for a visit, he said he'd like to come along because his wife and daughter were going to visit folks in Oregon.

Neither of us thought of hiking as code for a trip to Argentina.

Ken told me he'd vouch for anything I wrote in this newsletter as long as I said something complimentary about his physique, like he has "rippling abs," or perhaps "torrid abs," or maybe a line like "When I shook his hand, it was as hard and rough as pumice."

So I did.

He suggested I add Mission Peak, over in the East Bay, to the places I hiked on weekends. Said it was steep and tough, about the same length and vertical climb as the 2.2-mile, 2,000-foot route up Lassen. I decided to try it Saturday after Emily and Gordon took off.

Before I'd gone a mile I hated the climb. I hated the breakfast I ate that wanted to come back up. I hated the way my head was spinning. A man coming down from the top said I didn't look good, that I might consider turning around, and I said he might be right.

I sat down on an embankment to let my heart and respiration rates come down, and dozed off for a few minutes. Then I felt good enough to go a little farther, maybe to that next bend in the trail, and headed up again. My stride began to lengthen, my pace increased, and I made it halfway to the bend before I had to stop to rest.

It was like that for three hours, trying to make it to the next landmark, resting before I got there, but finally reaching the top. As happy as I felt, it was a test run for disappointment. The climb to Mission Peak began at sea level. The climb to Lassen Peak begins 8,500 feet higher in thin air. I know from ski trips to Colorado, where we sleep at that altitude, that it takes me a couple of days to get over the headache.

I missed Emily on Mission Peak. She's run at least a dozen marathons and knows both endurance and exhaustion. When I struggled up the Nevada Falls trail in Yosemite, she was my Sherpa, staying with me every step. When we skied slopes as steep as a refrigerator door, I stayed with her.

Continued on next page

'Cause it's there ...

Continued from previous page

"Mission Peak is tough," Ken said.
"You can make it up Lassen."

He would be my Sherpa.

Monday morning breakfast was half a bagel and coffee, two half-liters of water and two Tylenol. Four more water bottles went into my pack along with a fleece jacket, first-aid kit and camera. No matter what, I'd take just baby steps and trudge, rest before I was breathless. This was not a race.

I was encouraged when I didn't need to rest at the first switchback in the trail. We kept climbing across some small patches of snow and onto the South Ridge. We were about 300 feet into the climb when I paused to shoot a picture and the battery signal blinked. The spares were back at the parking lot, but nothing could make me surrender an inch of what I'd already climbed, even if you'd think this was a fish story without pictures.

"I'll go back and get 'em," Ken said.
"You keep going and I'll catch up."

So it was me again and the mountain. And the cold, which felt so much better than the 90-degree heat of Mission Peak, and the wind, which sometimes felt refreshing and other times seemed to push and tug at me on the steep, narrow trail.

Lassen may look like a giant baked potato rather than the beautiful snow-capped symmetric cone of classic volcanoes like Japan's Mount Fujiyama. It may be the centerpiece of one of the most obscure and least-visited national parks. But it is



Looking back down the ridge in a telephoto view to where Ken is pausing at a trail marker.

a *real* mountain and a real live volcano to boot.

It deserves some respect.

There's a mean, no-nonsense aspect to a place where the whitebark pines, which cling to the lower slopes by wrapping themselves grotesquely around Mercedes-sized boulders on California's snowiest peak – 55 feet in an average winter – give up midway to the top.

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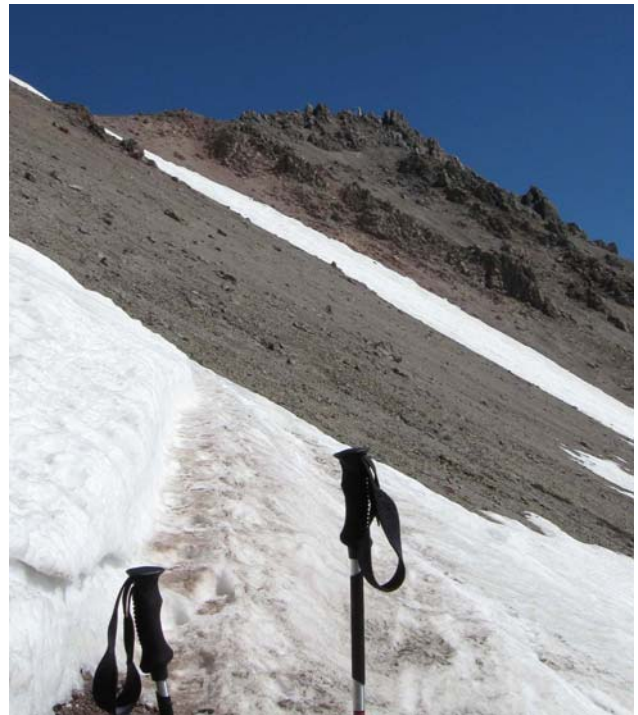
Lassen Peak from King's Meadow. The South Ridge trail to the summit ascends from the left and follows the upper edge of the snowfield until it traverses the snow at the point indicated. The trail line did not show in the photo.

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But there's exhilaration up there, too, when the switchbacks behind you stretch to the bottom like sutures holding the sides of the naked gray ridge together. Way down – so far down he was ant-sized – Ken waved up to me from his perch on one of those sutures.

The sign at my next switchback said I was 1.2 miles from the summit. I was almost halfway up, but unlike Saturday, I knew I was going to make it. The air was thin, but I could fill my lungs with it at my trudging pace.

I was pondering the philosophical truths that the great climbers who've returned from the mountaintop always fill their books with when, at 10,000 feet, I reached what Ken and I identified as the crux of our climb. From King's Meadow almost a half-mile lower than where I now stood, we had seen a dark line traversing the top of a snowfield that covered much of the ridge's eastern flank. We knew it was the summit trail.



About to traverse the snowfield with trekking poles.

"If we can see it from here, the trail has to be a boulevard," I had said.

It was an 18-inch catwalk, about 60 yards long. Anybody who slipped in the rotting snow wouldn't slow down for 800 feet. Later in the day we would find out

Continued on next page

'Cause it's there ...

Continued from prev.

from Nora, the Hungarian student working at the visitor's center, that two climbers had misstepped here the week before. One was OK but the other had to be helicoptered off the mountain.

I had my trekking poles, I had my baby steps and I had all day. When I reached solid rock on the other side, Ken was just about to cross.



Ken at the top of Lassen Peak, elevation 10,457 feet.

The final 500 feet of climbing was anticlimactic, but cresting Lassen's false summit opened up the entire world for 150 miles in any direction you cared to look. We relaxed on the snowfield near the summit crater, then moved across a saddle in the ridge to the true summit, a tangle of volcanic rock that also is the site of an automated weather and seismic station.

Ken, my Sherpa, had brought along a celebration feast: Triscuits *avec fromage suisse*, hard-boiled eggs, nectarines, chocolate wheat and rice Chex, and red wine in a small

Aquafina bottle. *Très magnifique!*

We spent an hour on the summit before heading down, greeting perhaps 50 climbers as we edged past each other on the narrow trail. One Connecticut family had split up at the snowfield traverse, leaving part of their group to wait for their return from the summit.

As we descended further, word came up that the second part of the family had now successfully crossed the snowfield. When we reached it, there was a woman from another

group waiting there with her water bottle rather than attempting the traverse. I offered her my trekking poles, but she declined.

The climb had wiped away my memories of Mission Peak. I felt so good at the bottom I suggested to Ken that we go to hell. It was only three more miles. But that is for tomorrow's newsletter.



I'm traversing the snowfield on the descent from Lassen Peak



Mount Shasta, 75 miles northwest, framed by rocks on the rim of Lassen Peak's crater.

Certified. Certifiable.

Snowfield on Lassen's false summit.

