

July 22, 2009

Having been out of the range of technology most of this past week, it has been important to record the magnitude of the landscapes we have been passing through. From the heights of the mountains to the depths of the earth, my family and I have been exploring the incredible diversity of the Pacific Northwest. We have spent time in some remote areas: without electricity, Internet or cell phone access. We have met some ferocious mosquitoes and kind people. Now I am sending you back a couple of photos and short musings on the challenges that met the pioneers and our own generation here in Cascadia.

In the earlier part of our journey down from Washington to the Oregon Coast, we traced the steps of the early Europeans who journeyed from the East down through the Columbia River Gorge to the Pacific Coast. Lewis and Clark only made it through because they had an Indian guide to save them from starvation and attack. Sacagawea was truly their guardian angel. Later, waves of settlers followed, hoping for a new life in a land far from oppressive laws and taxation. After months of hardship crossing badlands and prairies, their wagon trains were met with a seemingly unsurpassable river. Resourceful to the end, they converted their wagons into rafts, and navigated the rapids westward.

From there, they could head north or south into the broader valleys that lay between the mountains and the coast. Farming settlements sprang up along rivers, which provided water for crops and transportation. The Cascadia region preserves a spirit of resourcefulness, individuality, and a dislike for people “back East” telling them what to do. Along the roadsides in California and Oregon, there are occasional signs proposing a “State of Jefferson”: a separatist nation within a nation with control over the resources and lawmaking.

Along the way, we have also seen how the First Nations peoples of this region have more (or less) adapted. Many were nomadic tribes, with summer camps in the mountains and winter quarters in more sheltered spots. With the advent of Europeans, the tribes were unilaterally forced onto reservations or told to assimilate with the white culture. Some were given the option of choosing a portion of land for themselves, and we have seen native families who have done extremely well through the canny use of their “real estate”.

From hunting wild animals for food, they have turned to fleecing tourists in their casinos, or leasing prime land in resort communities. But hidden are all the attendant problems that we recognize in urban Vancouver: those who have left the reservations or have not joined band enterprises have high levels of unemployment, alcoholism, and broken family structures. There has been no apology from levels of government for the policies of the past, unlike Canada. The official policy is still a forced choice: apartheid or assimilation. One highway sign I saw proclaiming the “improved order of red men” made me shudder. But the landscape still bears witness to these peoples being first in this nation.

After the first settlers brought their ways and their Christian faith west, another two waves of immigrants affected the history of Cascadia. When gold was discovered in the hills of California above Sutter Creek in 1849, the Gold Rush brought speculators and prospectors by the thousands. They landed in San Francisco by boat and made their way across the Sacramento Valley to the hills. Following them were the Chinese to work on the railways and make a living in the land of the Gold Mountain. We stayed with an aunt near Sutter Creek and visited the epicenter of the Gold Rush before descending into the bowels of the earth at Black Chasm. In the silent and oppressive dark of this natural cave network, we got a small inkling of the millennia needed to shape these magnificent formations, before humans stripped them of their treasures.



cave formations in Black Chasm

From the foothills, we headed up to Mt. Lassen Volcanic National Park, up to the 7000-foot level to camp at Summit Lake. Here the landscape is so unique that it was declared a World Heritage site back in the early 1900's. Mt. Lassen is part of the Pacific "Ring of Fire" that circles from Japan across through Alaska, British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, and California, and down through Mexico to South America. When you travel in a north-south direction down through Cascadia, there is a magnificent pointed mountain peak every fifty or so miles. From Vancouver, we can see Mt. Baker on a clear day – this is one of the dormant volcanic peaks in the Ring of Fire. Mt. Lassen is very active, with steam vents, fumaroles, boiling springs, and boiling mud "paintpots" on its southern and eastern flanks. Specialized equipment monitors the activity of the mountain for safety, but here is one of the few places where an average person can get up close and personal with these forces of nature.

Some early explorers got too close; Bumpass Hell was named after a Mr. Bumpass who tried to traverse this volcanic vale. He broke through the thin crust of earth to lose his leg in the superheated water lurking below. Now raised boardwalks with stern warnings keep visitors from suffering the same fate, but each year the overly curious still get scalded. Mt. Lassen was last actively erupting in 1914-1916, when tons of superheated gases threw boulders and ash from its 10,500-foot summit. Originally the mountain may have been much higher, as part of the primeval super-volcano Tehama, according to geologists. It's activity was another reminder to us that we live in a seismically active region, an unstable and changing landscape that we cannot get too complacent about or think that we can totally subdue.



approach to Mt. Lassen

After days of heat and citronella to ward off the flies, we were ready to head north and west again to the Rogue River. Byron looked longingly at this famous salmon habitat, but it was time to head north once again, hopefully to cooler regions and clean showers. On Monday afternoon we arrived at Mt. Angel Benedictine monastery, just east of Salem, Oregon, where we will stay for two days. Leaving our camping gear in the care, we were grateful for the warm (still 32°C) welcome, the clean rooms, and the peaceful atmosphere. The original founders of this religious community were Benedictine monks from Switzerland who traveled out with the settlers in the 1870s. In 1882 they established Mt. Angel as a monastic foundation, and it has grown and ministered to the surrounding communities since that time. The sound of the bells rings out across the Willamette Valley to mark the daily Offices, beginning at 5:20 am (I did warn Byron and the girls).

Some of you may not know that Mt. Angel is the mother-house that planted Westminster Abbey in Mission, BC, where the Roman Catholic church still runs Christ the King seminary. Here there are over 200 students studying for ordained ministry, and around 75 lay and ordained monks – one of the largest foundations in North America. Their formula for successful ministry? Location, active engagement in community, and the rhythm and balance of a prayerful and God-centred life. Even during last Christmas's record snowfall, pilgrims from as far away as Vancouver and San Diego struggled to this pastoral hilltop to join in the celebrations here. People come from all over the continent and the world to stay in the guesthouse and study here. I intend to explore their new library and enjoy participating in the Offices (although perhaps not Vigils at 5:20 am!).



guardian angel at Mt. Angel monastery

Blessings to all of you at St. Timothy's. In a couple of weeks I will be returning to you with much to share. I pray that you are continuing to look after each other in love, and especially to minister to your wardens: Pat, Charles, and Maribeth. If you have not invited them over for supper yet, now is a good time!

Yours in Christ,
Stephanie