

Ormand Family Activity

June 2011: Mt Lemmon Vacation

Being part of a private (christian) school is the obligation to participate in fundraisers. Last year, the fundraiser for classroom equipment was a silent auction. Some of the things I bid on and won were worth it. Like the professional tennis lesson for Faith (which, in spite of her initial trepidation, was both enjoyable and profitable). And the two-night stay in a Mt. Lemmon cabin owned by one of the school families. The fundraiser was in the fall, and unless you are ski people (we're not... yet) or cold snow people (we're not) or just enjoy driving on mountain roads with chains on snow and ice (we DON'T), using the cabin in the winter season just didn't appeal to us. Besides, it's at *Summerhaven*! So we waited until Summer 2011 to claim our auction win.



The Barton cabin is owned by a family who, turns out, are acquainted with Jerri's mom and her First Southern Baptist friends. It's not a *big* cabin (bedroom, bathroom, kitchen, living room, and a loft - guess who claimed the loft), but very pleasant and comfortable. It took us a little while to figure out we didn't have to follow the "turn on the water to the

water heater before turning on the power to the water heater" instructions posted in the kitchen (apparently for winter guests). After that, it was a delightful place to work jigsaw puzzles in the loft or read books on the porch while watching the hummingbirds.

And... going on long hikes. After arriving and preparing for dinner, we discovered that in the haste to pack the undersized ice chest, I had forgotten to include the steaks and hamburgers! Still in the fridge back home! So "dinner" is scrambled eggs and bacon, and Jerri offers to drive down to Tucson and back up with the beef (and replacement eggs) the next day. While she is doing that, the rest of us go on a long hike.

Well... not *long*, exactly. There's a topo map pinned up behind the front door, and it seems there are hiking trails all over this part of the mountain, two of which leave the Summerhaven area and converge at "Marshall Saddle". The Mint Spring Trail is 1.6 miles long and departs from Carter Canyon Road, not far from our cabin. It is an official Forest Service trail, so I am not surprised to find an official trail marker.



It's Mt. Lemmon, and cooler than the valley, but still warm threading through the stumps of burned-out pines from the Aspen Fire that destroyed much of Summerhaven about eight years ago. The aspen are growing back in, and baby pines are shooting up beside their dead ancestors, and it's warm enough that I am growing concerned that we will have enough water for the round trip, at the rate Faith is swilling it down.



Finally we reach the confluence at Marshall Saddle. Five trails leave this point. Nobody is tired, yet, not even these two young women.

The trail back is down along Marshall Gulch. The other trails leave north and east, to Ski Valley and Sky Center and the radio relay towers on the ridges.



But before we start back, we have to check out the big rock formation which is visible from the trail point.

Sure are some big squirrels up here.





There is a little trickle running down the gulch, enough to form pools where Faith wades in among the water striders and the mosquitos and the flies and the bagworms creeping up twigs and stones. We stop and look at this sharp cliff overlooking a larger pool, and help Faith dust off her fanny from where she "sits down" suddenly.

After a pleasant walk down the Marshall Gulch Trail (more so than the Mint Spring Trail we took to the saddle point), we emerge back into the public at the Marshall Gulch picnic area. There are a lot of people here this Saturday morning - which explains why we met so many hikers coming up the trail (many with dogs, some of which were serving as pack animals, with little saddlebags tied over their backs). We are pretty sure (from the topo map in our cabin) that Summerhaven is up the paved road, and after maybe a half-mile walk up the hill, we find that it is so. It turns out that the main road through Summerhaven continues on to the Marshall Gulch picnic ground; according to the map, there is a road to the Loma Linda picnic ground as well, but that is an adventure for another day. For now, we discover that Mom has just now gotten back to the cabin, so the timing is perfect. We immediately get Mom and walk back down from where the cabin is to the main road and the Cookie House, where we get a pizza for lunch, followed by their specialty: a pie-size chocolate-chip cookie with a huge mound of ice cream! It's hard getting back up the hill! The rest of the day is spent relaxing with books and puzzles, until suppertime arrives and we cook those truant steaks that Mom had to bring back up.

The next day will be a visit to Ski Valley and the Iron Door restaurant. I don't know how the privately-operated Ski Valley stays in business; the skiing season is so short and unpredictable and irregular. However, during the summer months, when most of the operation is closed down (only the gift shop and a candy shop are open) and costs are low, they

get a fair bit of business from people who come to ride the ski lift to the top of Mt. Lemmon. Like us!

Map of the ski runs. These maps were posted everywhere, at the bottom of the hill and at the top, so skiers could tell where to go. Maybe someday, after NAU students Charity or Faith (if she doesn't go to Baylor instead) take the one-credit "How to Ski" class and return to teach the rest of the family, we will visit these trails when there is snow on them. Today, there is none, and a beautiful Arizona sunshine floods the valleys and the hilltops. Complete map found on their website, www.skithelennon.com



Lift tickets are \$9 each. The lift operator at the bottom stands you on a box, the chair swings up from behind, you sit down, and he drops the safety bar. Then it's ten to fifteen minutes of quietly gliding up over the grassy slope, twenty to fifty feet above the ground, seeing nothing but (mostly unburnt) pine trees until you reach the top and get off the chair, and see the view from the peak.



Charity and Faith discover a local denizen, who blends in with his environment very well, and doesn't like people getting close enough to take his picture.





There are quite a number of people up here already, hiking from the lift terminus on the broad trail to sites to the east and west. We follow them, starting westward (to our right). On the way is a collection of radio relay towers. And other facilities, like this University of Arizona Atmospheric Studies Cosmic Ray Laboratory. When I was a physics student at UA, the department

headquarters was the PAS - Physics and Atmospheric Sciences. So I guess atmosphere research is a big thing, and I didn't know they had stuff on the mountain.

The westward trail ends at a vista, from which the city stretches out below. The long road on the left side of the photo is Houghton, and most of my family (dad, brother, sister, and their families) live near that road out there somewhere. The bare spot to the right is Davis-Monthan Air Force Base. It's hard to see because there is so much haze; later, we learn that the haze is smoke from huge wildfires burning to the southeast ("Horseshoe Two fire").



I've brought up the little binoculars with the built-in camera. Unfortunately, the batteries have died, so the camera can't take a picture of the Downtown Tucson tall buildings we can see with the binoculars past this mountain saddle, right under the giant red arrow floating in the sky.





Then we turn around and walk the trail eastward. From here, we can see the peaks between Summerhaven and the Palisades ranger station. On the side of one of those peaks is a UA Steward Observatory telescope. I knew this was here, but never visited; my acquaintance with the Steward as an Astronomy major didn't go past the

21-inch telescope under the dome on the campus.

More towers on the east end of the peak. With the towers and their aircraft warning beacons on Mt. Bigelow and all along the ridges of Mt. Lemmon, I don't know why we can't see more of them from the city, especially when we can see the city so clearly from here.





Three girls looking through the burned-out pines to the peaks and the valley beyond.

The same three girls after they notice I'm taking their photo.





From this eastern part of the peak, we can glimpse part of Summerhaven. It really is a pleasant place, especially in the summer when it's 105F in Tucson and 85F up here. But it was more pleasant when all the pine trees were green. With as little rain as we've seen the past several years, it will

be a long time before it gets back to anything close to what it was.

Having seen most everything now, it's time for our return, and lunch. We greet some of our fellow vacationers riding the lift.





Coming up, we are facing the grassy slope. Coming down is more impressive, for we can see out and around, including the Iron Door restaurant (at the top of the photo). To the right, we glimpse the San Pedro valley. Ahead, through the trees, we can see the plains north of the Catalina Mountains and the town of Oracle.

Jerri and I arrive at the lower platform first. Three or four chairs later, here come our children.





The parking lot of the Ski Valley complex is built upon fill on the slope. On the north end, right by the Iron Door, is a timber guard wall where the fill ends. It's very steep, and an interesting view on its own merit. My daughters and I enjoy the view before going in for lunch.

The Iron Door is one of those places that most people in the Tucson area have heard about, like McMahon's or Janos' or Pinnacle Peak. It's also a place that you don't just casually drop in, so being on the mountain ourselves, we've made a point of coming here.

The menu for lunch is sandwiches and chili, nothing exotic but still quite good. They put an Alpine spin on it by including sides of German potato salad and red cabbage; unsurprisingly, I'm the only one who eats it. Their specialty, however, is pies. We each have something different for dessert. After a large sandwich, two pickles, one and a half servings each of potato salad and red cabbage, and a bowl of mountainberry cobbler a la mode, I'm doing pretty good to get back to the car.



This trip has been a discovery of what lies beyond the farthest we've ever gone before. We found the Marshall Gulch picnic area farther down the road through Summerhaven; we had never attempted that road before. Here, the road to Ski Valley continues but has always been

blocked by a gate. Now, the gate is open. At the top is another picnic area and trailhead with a tremendous view of the city below, but the road continues beyond the locked gate and "Service Vehicles Only" sign.



This does not hinder the intrepid explorers. At the top we discover another significant part of the Steward Observatory that I did not know about - Sky Center. Which offers tours and night viewing to the public by appointment, see skycenter.arizona.edu. But that adventure will have to wait for another time. The time for our departure has come, so we end our

mountain cabin weekend and return (with our uneaten hamburger and leftover pizza) to the balmy temperatures back home in Tucson.