

Sample chapter from

The Middle Fork: Finding Significance in a Forested Valley

by Brad Allen

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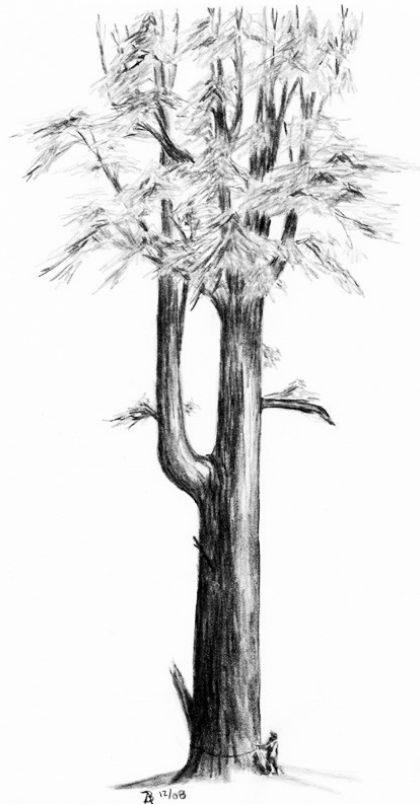
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Chapter 1: The Middle Fork Giant

I will never participate in the Olympics, be President of the United States or professionally race cars. If you know me this has always been obvious. If you are me, it is a revelation.



The tallest tree in the world may have once lived just outside Mineral, Washington, a small logging town northwest of Mount Rainier. The Mineral Tree was well known then. University of Washington forestry students, under Professor Richard McCardle, annually measured the living tree. Although only 225 feet tall in 1911, its top lay broken beside the living trunk and measured 168 feet. Simple arithmetic gives the original height of this giant as 393 feet. The remainder of the tree toppled in a windstorm in 1930. If still standing at its height in



1900, it would be the tallest tree in the world. (reference: Forest Giants of the Pacific Coast by Robert Van Pelt, p. 44).



We parked at the Middle Fork Trailhead, lashed gators around our boots, donned raincoats, and crossed the Middle Fork of the Snoqualmie River on the wooden “Wilderness Gateway” footbridge. Bradley, my twenty year old, six foot four, two hundred pound son led confidently across the bridge then turned right past the conspicuous sign warning us this was not the maintained trail.

Bradley in the lead reminded me how much had changed in the past ten years. When he was fourteen he passed up my five foot nine stature. My father-in-law asked what I thought about having a son taller than me. My response was simply, “I would be disappointed if he wasn’t”. It wasn’t his physical height that challenged me, but the transition I had to go through as he, along with my other two children Ellie and Zach, grew into adults.

The trail quickly divided into three very informal paths. Before the timber company came through the valley this was the main path to the hot springs. It was prominently marked on an 1896 survey map of the Middle Fork Valley. But now, through disuse and neglect, it was little more than tread in places. The Pratt Valley, a three-mile hike on this old way, would be a tough challenge to get to. Today, our goal was closer.

Bradley poked around and found a log crossing for Rainy Creek. We bushwhacked through a swamp formed in the delta where the creek meets the main river. We connected up with the Rainy Creek Trail, merely a waypoint to where I was headed. I had more esoteric plans.

The previous two years grew an infatuation in me for old growth giants. Left by the early loggers, these remnants of pre-settled Washington State could grow over 300 feet tall and twenty feet around at their bases. I was looking for not-yet-discovered giants, hoping to find *The Big Tree*.

Bradley contoured around the slope and blazed cross-country. At a forty-five degree angle to the steep slope we gained altitude steadily as we went. It had been months since we hiked together. In the past few years I grew accustomed to hiking and climbing with him

five to ten times each year, usually just the two of us. This year we climbed together just twice and hiked only once.

Bradley was in his third year of college, majoring in civil engineering. He was on an Army scholarship. The Army took much of his time. He lived in a house near campus, and we didn't see him much. Ann and I missed our son but knew this must happen. I was confused by how to deal with the changes.

Moving up the hill, we continued through younger trees growing between old growth stumps. Clearly logged in the twenties and thirties, I was aiming for 1,600 feet above sea level where I was convinced we would encounter old growth forest and potentially a haven for larger-than-normal trees. Bradley heard a sound, an animal in the brush, and stopped to listen.

He broke out in a smile. He anticipated this. It was deer season and he opted to not bring his rifle, convinced I had no interest in hunting animals. I maintained we were tree-hunters.

Bradley learned to hunt with my dad. They attended the hunter's safety course together. My Dad was a little disgusted that I was not taking the course with my son like he did with his son. Dad and Bradley hunted together on several occasions getting to know each other in the same way I did with Dad twenty-five years before. In college Bradley stopped borrowing my almost permanently stored hunting rifle, bought one of his own, and hunted with his friends.

At 1,600' the stumps continued. This was frustrating. My old growth survey map indicated it stopped about there. The terrain was steep with a northeast-facing slope uphill from us. This said "old growth" to me.

Not yet familiar with the logging techniques of the 1930's, I thought they could only log approximately a quarter mile from the railroad tracks laid in the valley for the trains. The loggers covered more ground than I expected using a technique called "cold decking" where they staged log piles giving them double the reach. There was a lot to learn about this valley and those who ventured into it.

Bradley and I pushed up the hill. Our matched pace kept us together in a way distinctly different than when I hiked with other men. Years of experience showed us how to hike and climb as a team. One-hour walking, a shared quart of water, three energy gel cubes

each, another hour of walking, another quart of water, and then a homemade oatmeal bar. We could consistently climb 2,000-4,000 vertical feet per hour this way. This was much faster than the norm and unusual for more than one hiker. We were a unique team.

A saddle at the top of the ridge hid some old growth but it was far too high and exposed for what I was looking for. These trees were a mere 150-170 feet tall. I took a picture of Bradley by one of the big trees. Unlike my other two kids, Ellie and Zach, I lacked a good picture of Bradley with a “giant”.

We violated our cardinal rule of always descending the route we came up and went down the ridge’s other side, effectively traversing the ridge. It was brutally steep with tough stone finger ridges. Unable to negotiate the minor cliffs on these ridges we were forced into the gullies between them. In Washington, gullies contain thick brush and unexpected hazards. Tough places to be. In other areas, like the Desert Southwest, gullies, washes and canyons are a joy. But here they are often miserable and dangerous.

A reminder of what we looked for, an old growth log sat wedged between cliffs in the gulley we descended. Over ten feet in diameter, it completely blocked our way. Rock slides filled in beneath, cutting off any chance to crawl under. Standing on top only gave a view twenty feet straight down. These were the challenges we loved. Several minutes of scouting finally showed where we could use old branches and the cliffs to down-climb.

Finally back down to Rainey Creek we resigned ourselves to lunch. In a previous scouting trip I came down this very same drainage and found it as logged-out as the ridge we just crossed. Bradley and I sat down and ate homemade oatmeal bars and drank some coffee.

I started the day with high hopes of finding a new grove of big trees but was completely “skunked”. Bradley laughed and we talked about school. He asked for some advice. It was tough to balance what the Army wanted with his desire for an engineering degree. He thought he wanted to be in the infantry but attending the Army’s Mountain Warfare School and later Airborne Training seemed to temper his motivation for ground combat. We discussed the pros and cons of combat arms verses support functions such as the Army Corps

of Engineers. I did my best as a former Air Force officer to give decent advice to this up and coming Army officer.

We walked out of the forest happy with the day's hiking but I knew the ramifications to my tree search were mildly dire. I thought the old growth survey map would lead me right to my targeted big trees, but instead the map was only "directionally correct". The real giants must lie in the deeper, darker, harder-to-reach corners of the Middle Fork Valley.

The other possibility was more discouraging. What if the old growth giants were long gone? I was banking on finding a really big tree for many reasons.



"Even with the cold deck, along side of a track, the track machine, like "the Unit". We called that a "track machine". He'd only go up twelve hundred, thirteen, fourteen hundred foot from the track. Then you have a cold deck there. He could go up another twelve... fourteen hundred foot... and that was the end of it. If there was more timber that way, how was you goin' to get 'em?... So you might say that half a mile is probably all that they could reach from the track."

-Jack Smith, logger in the Pratt Valley during the late 1930's in a 1989 interview with the US Forest Service-



Around age 40 I became aware of how much my goals were focused around my children and how they didn't address what I was going to do after they left home. This, coincidentally, was the year I hiked with my brother-in-law and our five boys, ages 9 to 17, through Washington's North Cascades. We selected a most scenic route with a full six days to make our 70 miles. Up from Ross Lake, we hiked

through the Big and Little Beaver Creek Valleys, over Whatcom Pass, around to Copper Ridge and ended at Hannigan Pass.

This journey was a bit of a reunion. My brother-in-law, Kevin, and I were best friends in high school. We hiked and worked on a number of service projects together. We shared a tendency to dream big, a love of science fiction, and a passion for faith. We married sisters and became ubiquitous.

Now, years later, Kevin and I brought our boys along to share an adventure probably larger than any we had as youths; almost a full week of blissful wilderness. The North Cascades have a reputation for grandeur but their glaciated granite peaks, densely vegetated valleys, numerous water falls, and giant trees are only hinted at when driving on Highway 20, the only road through. A few miles up the trail and one becomes lost in the blues, whites, and greens of a magnificently pristine wilderness. Sixty-five miles later I realized how different Kevin and I were.

During the first two days of the North Cascades trip, Kevin, the boys, and I hiked up the Big Beaver Valley. A radical departure from what was my typical wilderness experience, this marvelous old growth forest contrasted to the alpine meadows and glacial peaks I frequented. The valley not only *had* large trees, it was virtually *all* large trees. With the branches forming a 200-foot ceiling, the sun rarely penetrated to us on the trail below; a primordial gateway to a new look at life.

Somewhere along the trail I took a picture of the boys hiking, in line, past a big tree. Even though their faces don't show, their five backpacks formed the multi-colored 'models' for the shot. The picture was of them, not the tree. Settled into the digital storage of my Canon camera, the image rode in my backpack until we returned home.

After any great trip, I select one photo to be the new wallpaper on my work computer. There are, of course, a host of criteria for new wall paper choices; must look good in a horizontal format (certainly can't turn the laptop sideways); has to have a lot of open space (to put my herd of icons in); best if there aren't lots of contrasty lines (can't distinguish my icon herd); but perhaps most of all, it needs to draw attention. The image of five boys in front of a giant settled onto my laptop in the fall of 2005 with little fanfare.

This would all have been merely an interesting side note in my life was it not for a book by Richard Preston I read in 2007; Wild

Trees. This intriguing book details the search for the largest redwoods in Northwest California. The largest redwood, at least at this writing, is named Hyperion. It is 379 feet tall, is the largest tree in the world, and was discovered in August 2006. That was one year before I read Wild Trees and the year I turned 42, two to three thousand years younger than the trees.

I built most of my house by reading books. I learned to climb mountains by reading books. Once I even designed a very robust and efficient heat exchanger; by reading books. So, I read books on trees. I am occasionally accused of living by the life-mantra “there is nothing that can’t be over-analyzed.” How can you argue that there is anything wrong with that? I had that burning desire now, to over analyze. “Giant trees” is a pretty big subject to over-anything.

Living in Washington State, “The Evergreen State”, I not only had a few trees to choose from, there are some big ones as well. We have some impressively large trees, mostly of the Douglas fir variety. We have some very large cedars and spruces as well. Cedars intrigued me if for no other reason than the largest cedar I could find listed for Washington was a mere 226 feet tall. Obsession requires more than just a focus; it requires an obscure and eccentric focus.

Life seemed to be slinging a consistent set of curves at me. Bradley was in his third year of college, my eighteen year-old daughter Ellie was starting college, and my fourteen-year-old son Zach was in high school. I recently switched positions at work. Leaving behind a very fulfilling role, my new position was painfully administrative. To compound it all, the entire world slipped into a recession, everyone’s pay including mine was cut, and nothing seemed to be going anywhere. “At least you have a job” was a recurring and infinitely unfulfilling comment.

My kids are not gone, completely. Bradley and Ellie are in college and Zach is in High School. We are at a point financially where I’m pretty sure we can pay for their college. Ann and I eat dinner alone on a fairly regular basis. I needed a big dream to fill a void developing from their growing absence.

Is the goal of post-parental life to keep working, lumping gold into a pile ad-infinitum? Is it to retire at 56 years old and spend the rest of my life gratifying some set of travel and leisure dreams? Or am I stuck working this same job for twenty more years? This must be a

pretty big point in my life journey. A moment. The opportunity had and realized? Or the opportunity had and wasted?

John Krakauer wrote a short, autobiographical story called “The Devil’s Thumb”. It is my favorite mountain climbing story. I could certainly not do it justice but an aspect of that story hits home.

Writing about himself when a young man, John Krakauer went to Alaska to climb a previously unclimbed route on a mountain named the Devil’s Thumb. The peak is a terrifyingly steep, ice-covered pinnacle in the Southern part of the state. These are the reasons he gives for his obsession:

“Writing these words more than a dozen years later, it’s no longer entirely clear just how I thought soloing the Devils Thumb would transform my life. It had something to do with the fact that climbing was the first and only thing I’d ever been good at. My reasoning, such as it was, was fueled by the scattershot passions of youth, and a literary diet overly rich in the works of Nietzsche, Kerouac, and John Menlove Edwards.....

....To one enamored of this sort of prose, the Thumb beckoned like a beacon. My belief in the plan became unshakeable. I was dimly aware that I might be getting in over my head, but if I could somehow get to the top of the Devils Thumb, I was convinced, everything that followed would turn out all right. And thus did I push the accelerator a little closer to the floor....”

- John Krakauer from *Eiger Dreams*, pages 165-66 in the story “The Devil’s Thumb”, Anchor Book, 1990

I seemed to be caught within the same grip, a need to find some sort of obscure notoriety mixed with an overwhelming urge to make life changes. The big trees had to be the answer for me but I needed to focus, a niche, some aspect of trees with the same allure as Alaska’s Devil’s Thumb. By the grace of God, no more than 30 miles from my house in Western Washington lay the Middle Fork Valley of the Snoqualmie River.

Known to locals as “The Middle Fork”, this deep valley’s mouth is visible from the highly traveled and densely populated I-90

corridor. The entrance guarded by Mt Si, the Middle Fork of the Snoqualmie River snakes along North Bend to where it joins the South and North Forks near its namesake town, Snoqualmie. Jewel of calendars, Snoqualmie Falls lies just below the “three rivers confluence”. The real gem, though, is upstream. At first look the Middle Fork Valley is 20-30 miles long up into the Cascade Mountains. But a closer look at the map reveals this valley as much larger. Tracing the Middle Fork’s headwaters requires looking farther east; past the Middle Fork Road; past Goldmyer Hot Springs; past Williams Lake; all the way to the alpine flanks of La Bohn Gap, a minor pass many would say was in Eastern Washington.

Ironically, most people are completely unaware of this land beyond “the Zorro hill” (nick name for a particularly ugly clear-cut with a “Z” carved by eroding old logging roads). Exit 34 along I-90, the gateway to the Middle Fork, is known to most simply as “truck town”, a collection of gas stations, service bays, and parking lots for semi-trucks.

The Middle Fork was railroad logged in the 1920’s, 30’s, and 40’s, a romantic technique where train tracks were laid temporarily into the forest with locomotives and a tough breed of men felled and removed the logs. Logging returned to the valley in the 1960’s and 1970’s. Modern efficiency focused on the west side, clear cutting in all directions. When the loggers moved out the valley became an outlaw place of poaching, target shooting, and eventually meth labs; only to have the County move in during the late 90’s to clean it up, grade the road, and eventually work with the U.S. Forest Service to add a new campground.

The new Middle Fork is served by an eighteen-mile dirt road that varies in condition from season to season. At times a passenger car travels there with ease while at other times a high-clearance four-wheel drive is required. Sometimes it completely washes out. Easy access brings people to anything readily accessed by the road or developed trails. But a few hundred yards off these thoroughfares is a wild place awaiting the weekend adventurer. This was the Middle Fork Valley I drove into in 2008.

I had a certain affinity for the Middle Fork prior to 2008; a relatively wild place close to home. The road is at a low elevation (under 1,000 feet) keeping it below most snow but it also sits on the Western slopes of the Cascade Mountains, thus is drenched with 100

inches or more of precipitation each year. One hundred inches of rain makes for a very wet place.

Although the Seattle area is known for rain, few people, even those who live here, truly appreciate why. There are two aspects to rain; how much and how long. Seattle receives just 30 inches of rain per year, stretched out over an average of 226 cloudy days. Not too much but really long. As one proceeds east towards the mountains, increasingly more rain falls. Issaquah, a country town that used to have the coolest airport in the world but is now a suburb with a mall where skydivers once landed, receives over 40 inches, Fall City 60 inches, North Bend 90. The western slopes of the Cascade Mountains are the home of 100 inches annual rainfall. Rain brings growth and big trees thrive on those slopes, some deep within the Middle Fork.

There are four things required to have really big trees. The forest must be at a temperate latitude. Large trees do not like either heat or cold. The area must have been missed by the 20th century loggers. They were very efficient. The trees must be sheltered from the prevailing winds or the giants, sticking their heads above the crowd, will simply have their crowns blown off. And, most important of all, there must be lots of water. Since I was looking for a big tree that no one had yet measured and identified as a big tree, I added a fifth requirement, it needs to be someplace someone else hasn't been looking. The Middle Fork was PERFECT! It fit all five criteria with a significant bonus added in. It is close to my home.

So, armed with my newfound knowledge of the Middle Fork's great potential for harboring abnormally large flora, early in the winter of 2008 my daughter Ellie and I drove into the Valley for a hike. I possessed one clue to the location of my first big grove of trees, a mention in the book 101 Hikes in the Alpine Lakes by Harvey Manning. Harvey was the picture perfect quirky local character and wrote many books on hiking in the Cascades. His description of the hike to Marten Lake includes:

“A mean little old trail 100 feet short of the plank bridge climbs to awesome ancient cedars, some more than 12 feet in diameter”

Off we went in the Frontier pickup truck, the sturdy workhorse for any adventurous approach. We were dressed to hike, snow shoes

on our backs, packs packed, and a thermos full of coffee tucked in for good measure. It was a tough year at school for Ellie, her senior year in high school. We talked about plans for the summer. Six miles up the Middle Fork Road, four miles past where the pavement ends, we ran into snow. Not just light snow. Not just a dusting of snow. But a foot of wet, dense, Cascade-concrete. On we went.

The Marten Lake trail is three miles up the Taylor River trail, which is 12 miles up the Middle Fork Road. An unusual situation, this was a “big snow year”.

As the valley got deeper, so did the snow. Taller trees, steeper ridges, darker shadows, thicker moss and deeper snow. At first I was convinced this was the perfect excursion for an almost new four-wheel drive but some semblance of sense kicked in at about mile ten. Do we really want to be stuck here for the entire winter with nothing but a lunch sized for two high school girls and a thermos full of coffee?

No. No, we don't. So Ellie and I turned around and drove back a mile to the beginning of the CCC trail. The CCC trail, which stands for Civilian Conservation Corps, is an extension of the CCC road, built in the late 1930's to connect North Bend with the Middle Fork Valley by road instead of just logging railroad. Prior to the late thirties the only access was to walk or ride on the logging trains. The CCC road brought public access and truck logging. The trail was newly rebuilt and ready for us with a bit of snow for our snowshoes.

We snow shoed up the first set of switchbacks, me pulling at the invisible reins that run between hikers who travel together, searching for that first big tree, Ellie enjoying the wilderness. There really was no hope or reason for there to be a big tree along the CCC trail. It was on the heavily logged West side of the valley and my one clue to big trees was six miles away as the raven flies. Neither quanta of logic trespassed into my irrational exuberance. I measured trees along the way. Tall ones, short ones, older ones, younger ones. I had no idea how to judge how tall they were and was determined to learn.

Then there it was! Mired down in a swamp where no one wished to bother with it, arms stretched skyward, was a giant cedar. This was the majestic sort of tree; sturdy, wide in girth, and with limbs that put normal tree trunks to shame. Hundreds of tops leapt from the upper limbs, jewels on a thirty-yard-wide crown.

Out came my extraordinarily crude measuring device. I later determined this hastily thrown together inclinometer based on an eighty cent protractor, had an accuracy of about plus or minus fifty feet. I measured this tree at 205.3 feet. I used some more irrational exuberance to power a little dance. I easily believed his tree was only a few feet short of the tallest cedar in Washington (according to a ten year-old book that may or may not have been correct at the time). I named it CCC tree #1 and had some coffee. Ellie just laughed.

Several months later Ellie and I would make it to Marten Creek and the group of trees Harvey Manning wrote about. The road was clear but snow still covered the forest floor. Trillium, the beautiful three-petal white flower that so represents Spring in the Northwest forests was poking up from place to place. There are some big trees there. One especially caught my eye.

Once again my complete lack of preparedness hit home. I measured the largest tree in the area that I could find at just over 201 feet (with the +/- 50 foot tool). I took a picture and didn't think much of it because this tree was a Douglas fir. The largest Douglas fir in Washington is 130 feet taller than that so I wasn't even close. Three months later while putting the picture on my web site I realized it was a cedar. I later determined the tree in the picture was well under 200 feet tall but there were two other cedars nearby that do stretch beyond 200 feet, neither as tall as CCC Tree #1.

I was either lucky, blessed, or both to stumble into a beautiful old growth tree on my first trip out. It was then double that blessing to find one of the best groves around on trip number two. I fancifully prefer "blessed", a divinely providential arrow pointing towards the Middle Fork. More likely, it was closer to "inspired". This was just the inspiration I needed.

I returned home from that spring trip and started to prepare, in earnest, for the big tree hunt. Internet searches turned up little information specific to this area and the library seemed to have even less. An obscure bibliographical reference led to a 1989 archeological report titled Pratt River Logging Camp Evaluation. The Pratt Valley is one of the Middle Fork's primary tributary valleys and seemed like it might hold some big trees. The report was available from the University of Washington Library. Focusing primarily on the social history of the logging camps and some sort of maintenance operation, it said nothing about the old growth forests either historically or now.

The camp and its resulting report were centered around a small facility called the “sand shed”. I was very disappointed.

My younger son Zach said to me “Dad, do you think the reason you believe the largest cedar in Washington could be in the Middle Fork Valley is only because you want it to be?” No, of course not, there is plenty of evidence to support my... if you... well... OK, maybe. The real question I should ask myself is, “Why am I looking for big trees?”

I have known for some time that a transformation was imminent. Although it is hard to tell whether I am apprehensive or excited, there is no doubt I am expecting a change. My life so far, the “first half”, has been dominated by a determination to establish myself. My determination and drive were focused on success. My life can now either become something else or end in a type-A, stress-induced heart attack.

This particular intersection in middle life, especially for men, is frequently branded “mid-life” and we suffer a “mid-life crisis”. I was not experiencing a crisis. There was something oddly different about the questions I was facing. They didn’t fit the notion of mid-life I was expecting. I couldn’t put my finger on anything specific, so I simply went forward, looking for big trees.

I had tried many of the classic obsessions men engage during this phase. I proved that giant house projects, woodworking, building a boat, learning to ride a motorcycle, working on engines, or climbing mountains hadn’t taken me to my goal, a newly defined life.

Mountain climbing comes close to transformation, but the high is temporary and I had to keep feeding the need.

It is painful to admit that what I have is not enough; I am not satisfied. Yet it is crucial to admit that something inside is causing this unrest. I had a need to find something. I am what most would call a religious person and I have been told that what I have is all that I need. I am confident in my faith but unsure of my mission. Something is screaming inside me that there is more I was meant to do. I just can’t figure out what it is. I enter this time of transformation with blind faith.

John Krakauer concluded towards the end of his story [The Devil’s Thumb](#):

“It is easy, when you are young, to believe that what you desire is no less than what you deserve, to assume that if you want something badly enough it is your God-given right to have it.”

I knew I could never live one of those “lives of quiet desperation” (Thoreau). I desperately desired transition from seeking *success* to seeking *significance*. I inventoried my gear, packed my bag, brewed a thermos full of coffee and prepared to go into The Valley.

I was determined to take on my life’s middle fork.

