

The Art of Poking Around

Gail Balden

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In Oregon's high desert, 34 miles southeast of Bend, after turning off Highway 20 and washboarding it eight miles on a winding gravel road to an elevation of 6500 feet, another world awaits. It's the location of the University of Oregon's Pine Mountain Observatory, where on Friday and Saturday summer nights, one can view planets, stars and galaxies through large telescopes, see the dazzling Milky Way, and watch meteors and satellites move across the sky. Pine Mountain was part of our recent "Poking Around" camping trip to the central part of the state. We were a week early for the Perseid meteor shower, one that has been observed for about 2000 years. There was much anticipation for this once-a-year event although a full moon threatened to obscure clear viewing. Still, seeing Saturn, the Milky Way and a variety of nebulae and constellations was enough to keep even the most amateur astronomers filled with the awe and wonder of our universe.

I enjoy the planning and preparation for any trip, the excitement of what's to come, the change of pace. Guess it reminds me of summer vacations when the idea of anything new was an adventure. That included everything from eating out at roadside diners or having a picnic at a roadside table to individually wrapped soaps in motel rooms or an outhouse in the woods. Even pumping our own water from a well at a remote cabin in upper Michigan was a novelty, perhaps not for my mother, but certainly for my best friend and me. Still, once a trip commences, I'm often filled with a longing to return home. This push and pull between wilderness and the familiarity of home always seems to be a part of travel.

Summer, almost over now if we count Labor Day as the closing act, is a time of indulgences and simple pleasures, travel being one of them, and I intend to relish every one while they last—naps; real tomatoes ripe and juicy off the vine; the smell of newly mown hay and freshly cut grass; sheets hung on the line; fried chicken and potato salad eaten at a picnic table; chatting with old friends over an outdoor fire. Then there's seasonal food, bare feet, fishing, County Fairs, dog shows, hot dogs and thunderstorms, cows on their way to the barn, a child throwing a Frisbee, picking Queen Anne's lace, reading murder mysteries in the hammock. Sometimes, it seems as if joy has been leaking out of our lives. But then along comes summer with a rhythm all its own, a time to slow down, stroll and dawdle rather than race. Summer needs time. It takes time to adjust our rhythms, slow the pulse—a quick weekend trip isn't quite the same.

I tried to capture summer on our poking-around trip. We hiked snowfields, balanced on logs over roaring creeks, hiked miles and miles on trails through meadows of bursting wildflowers. I even took delight in road signs:

Don't Pass Snowplows on Right

On this date in 1648, nothing happened here.

I was surrounded by wonder—jagged snow covered peaks of Mt. Jefferson, Mt. Bachelor, the Sisters, the Mighty Metolius River, Fort Rock, Badlands, a solitary deer on the trail looking directly into my eyes; a Merganser family of ducks, mom and pop and ten babies, lined up on a sunny log over the river; the headwaters of Metolius rushing out of a mossy bank, the beginning of a river.

For most of us, the pleasure of being somewhere else lies in the vividness of small things simply because we found them when we were away from home. Travel brings clarity because we know we aren't going to there long whereas at home we think things will always be there to notice. So the lesson for me is this: Be open to where we're planted, see it through new eyes and become enraptured with the wonder of it all, whether on the top of Pine Mountain, hours from home, or on Neahkahnie Mountain in our own back yard. Life is fleeting. Still, for some things, you need to leave town in order to see your own backyard with new eyes. How about now?