

PARALLEL JOURNEYS

By Russ Hanbey

(1,194 words)

The grizzly sidled across the backdrop of the cliffy stream edge as we gathered our gear and moved slowly in the opposite direction. We did as we had been told and lumped ourselves together so we might appear larger as a group than individually. We didn't panic as the bear turned to face us, his broad shoulders and thick head swaying slightly as he sized us up. We were thirty feet apart and eyeballing each other with measured deference. The drama seemed to play itself out in slow motion. As we eased our way upstream, the bear sniffed the air and moved on.

He had come up on us as we dozed, he foraging along the stream midday, and us resting after lunch from a long morning of wet and cold restoration work along Moose Creek in the Alaska interior. Sarah had awoken first and in her surprise, had yelled out 'lion'. Of course, the 'lion' was of a slightly different species, but none the less daunting. Once safely away, we sighed collectively, and organized ourselves for the afternoon's work. This was another small adventure to add to a growing repertoire that would add up to a collectively powerful summer for all of us. What we didn't know was that thirty miles to the northeast of us was another young man, not much older than our crew, slowly starving and playing out his own drama. He was Chris McCandless and he was immutably tethered to his own destiny.

As for us, we were leading a crew of six teenagers, living and working together in Denali National Park in the summer of 1992. We had been recruited and trained by the Student Conservation Association, an organization with a long history of providing volunteer crews of high school students for our National Parks and Forests. Our job was

Page 2

to participate in a streamside rehabilitation effort orchestrated by Denali Park engineers. Later, we would be helicoptered to the base of Mt. McKinley and work on closing out a road to an old airfield that had been built before the establishment of the existing 6,000,000 acre park in 1980.

Our six teenage participants had come from disparate parts of the country with the lure of Alaska in their blood. There was Cynthia, fresh from her private school in Maine, full of life and ready to take on anything wild and free. From Kansas was John. He had grown up on a farm, wore his brother's army fatigues, and was anxious to spot wildlife with a hunter's eye. Sarah was from New York and was primed up for a powerful group experience, no matter where it was. Bigger than life and full of fun was Liam, the son of a Pittsburgh steel worker. The third female was Laura, hesitant and withdrawn but game for whatever lay ahead. Finally, there was Brinton. He was from Seattle and was easily prepared for anything to confront him in the wilds of Denali National Park.

Like McCandless, our crew was looking northward with stars in their eyes. They had no illusions about living off the land, but they knew that anything 'Alaska' was going to be bigger than life. Even at their young age, Alaska had entered their consciousness as a raw and wild landscape, remotely connected to the US proper. They seemed to know,

just as McCandless, that time in the back country of Alaska would be a defining moment in their lives.

As we gathered our crew in Anchorage and made final preparations for four weeks of work in Denali, Chris McCandless, true-to-life main character of John Krakauer's best seller, Into the Wild, had already worked his way into the Alaska wilderness west of

Page 3

Healy. He had crossed the Teklanika River at low water and found an abandoned bus to inhabit while he continued his personal journey of seclusion and self-discovery. He was to live there for 100 days before succumbing to starvation, possible food poisoning, and a series of bad decisions.

Our crew would live in similar environmental conditions as McCandless- the landscape, weather, remoteness, presence of predatory animals- were all eerily the same. Our group was younger than McCandless yet were willing to take similar risks and measure themselves against the elements. The primary difference, it seems, was that our crew was prepared and supported by adults who cared.

As opposed to Krakauer's character, our crew slept on the ground, worked all day in either bone chilling weather or mosquito saturated heat, and shared the landscape with large four-legged carnivores. We carried no weapons, using only learned knowledge of how to manage ourselves around wild animals. This was tested as our crew faced grizzlies on two occasions at close range and came away unscathed. This included an intimate experience with a sow and cubs and aforementioned streamside standoff that ended benignly.

Our perspective was safety and common sense, not the trial and error strategy of Krakauer's antihero. We had no pretensions of being able to survive by living off the land, especially in Denali, where humans are not at the top of the food chain. Our experience didn't dissolve into a life and death struggle, yet we were in a position where Mother Nature could have taken charge. For example, our forty mile cross-country recreation hike at the end of our assigned work weeks required crossing three rivers,

Page 4

including the mile wide McKinley Bar. We selected an early morning crossing, recognizing the wisdom of not challenging the river after a day of snow melt off nearby Mt. McKinley. We traversed from sand bar to sand bar with our arms interlocked and facing upstream. We wore neoprene socks which cut the frigid cold of the glacier melt somewhat and helped each other through the unstable footing. We emerged chilled but elated and continued on to an awaiting bus at Wonder Lake.

McCandless did try to leave his hermitage, but was pushed back by the Teklanika River. This ultimately forced him back into his shell and ultimate death. His pathway out was blocked by a river that had risen over its banks as a result of a 25 year rain event. We encountered the same flooding along our creek, having our tools and much of our work washed away by the deluge.

He also cast fate to the wind and didn't carry an adequate map of the area, which would have offered him several alternatives. We, on the other hand, had a detailed map and were able to easily navigate ourselves over miles of road-less and trail free terrain, choked with muskeg, willow thickets and a somewhat featureless landscape. Along the way we encountered moose, wolves, caribou, fresh bear signs, and even an arctic fox.

Our strength was in our preparation, confidence, and ability to adapt. Our experience was not destined to be tragic. We didn't underestimate the powerful and neutral personality of the Alaska outback. No one will make a feature-length film of our journey. As with most SCA crews, especially those in remote areas, we all came away with intrinsic measures of growth, a deepened understanding of wilderness, and of course, some great stories.