

## HIKING AT MORROW MOUNTAIN STATE PARK

I had been watching the weather forecast for Saturday all week, and the closer it got, the better it looked – partly to mostly cloudy, 71°, light winds – not quite perfect perhaps, but practically unheard of for mid-January, even in the sunny south. It was ‘way too good to waste by staying inside or running errands. It called for being outdoors, so after considering several possibilities, I decided to take Katie to Morrow Mountain State Park for a hike. The park is located on the Pee Dee River a few miles east of Albemarle, NC, near the northern end of Lake Tillery, and it really is nice – miles and miles of horseback riding and hiking trails, fishing, rental canoes and rowboats, picnicking, camping, cottages – and only 15 minutes from downtown Albemarle.

I’m not usually thinking of the mountains when I head down east. It’s more likely that I’ll be thinking of Lake Tillery (we have friends who have a place there), or the racetrack at Rockingham, or the Outer Banks, but the mountains are there also. Several peaks of the Uwharrie Range (thought to be the oldest mountain range in North America), including Morrow, Sugarloaf, Hattaway, and Fall, lie within the boundaries of the state park. Though now less than 1000 ft. above sea level and rising only a few hundred feet above the surrounding piedmont plateau, these mountains remain quietly beautiful, but offer little evidence to the casual visitor of their majestic past. They are the remnants of a chain of ancient volcanoes which formed a mountain range along the Atlantic coast some half-billion years ago. In their time, with peaks soaring to 20,000 ft., they would have dwarfed the Rockies or the Alps, but now after 500 million years of erosion on the one hand and uplift of the seafloor on the other, they are much less formidable. In fact the Uwharrie peaks in Morrow Mtn. State Park are just about perfect for a middle-aged man and a five year old, comfortable and easy, like old friends - very, very old friends.

We arrived at the park just after noon (Saturday, Jan. 13, 2007). Knowing Katie’s love of the water, and considering the amount of daylight we had, I chose a section of the Fall Mountain Loop trail that, for the most part, follows the shoreline of the Pee Dee River upstream to the base of the Fall Dam, a 30’s vintage hydroelectric station that was built by the WPA. So that was the plan: hike in along the river 1½ miles to the dam, find a good place to rest and eat our picnic lunch, and then backtrack out the same way. The entire loop trail is over 4 miles, and would have perhaps been a bit too much for Katie. Heck, it could’ve been too much for me, for that matter. After all, I hadn’t been on a hiking trail in fifteen years, and even more significantly, that was 30 lbs. ago. In any case, I knew we could handle a 3 mile round trip with negligible change in elevation, and it felt great to have on hiking boots again and to slip on a backpack – even a lightly packed daypack, so after looking one more time at the park map, off we headed toward the dam (and lunch).

The weather was as had been predicted – near 70° under broken clouds with a very light breeze – and the trail was wide and smooth as it meandered among the pines along the river bank. Katie walked in front noticing (and commenting on) almost every stone, fallen tree, and place to get down close to the water’s edge. As the distance between us gradually widened, my thoughts wandered. I thought of the movie we had watched the

evening before – one of my favorites, The Bridges of Madison County. In my mind I saw Francesca running through the house to get what she thought would be her last glimpse of Robert Kincaid as he drove away in his pick-up truck. My thoughts shifted, and the scene was a country home on the Russian plain in mid-winter. Yuri Zhivago was frantically making his way to the highest window in order to get one last look at his beloved Lara as she rode away with Komarovsky across the white vastness. I thought of Katie; the distance between us had continued to grow, and once at a bend in the trail, I lost sight of her completely. I quickened my pace. It made my eyes hurt to think that there could come a time that I would never see her again. “What would I do?” I asked myself. Would I run down the street after the car until it was completely out of sight? Would I stand squinting out the window at the airport until the plane was lost in the sun? Would I close my eyes in my hospital room and pray for the Lord to come quickly and take me home? What in the world would I do?

With some effort, I dropped that line of thinking and quickly caught back up to Katie as we crossed our second foot bridge, this one over a creek that fed into the river. We stopped to give Katie time to check the depth of the creek with a stick, which at the place she chose was about 3 inches. Just beyond the bridge, the trail slanted to the left away from the riverbank and up a hill. At the top of the hill the trail continued upland away from the river for several hundred yards through a sparse stand of loblolly pines. After a few minutes of this, Katie turned to me and asked in all seriousness, “Do you do this for fun?” I have to admit, it was noticeably warmer walking there than it had been along the river, and when I added that fact to the gentle but unmistakable upward incline, I wasn’t particularly surprised when Katie made her first request for me to carry her backpack. I very tactfully refused, but we did stop to rest and have a little snack. We were a bit more than half-way to the dam, on the back section of a horseshoe-shaped detour around a portion of the riverbank. I didn’t know the reason for the detour, but as David Crosby said, “. . . life is for learning.”

Presently the trail bent back to the right and we started down a gentle slope. As we walked, Katie made two or three other appeals for me to carry her backpack – all of which I respectfully declined. At length, we found ourselves back on the riverbank trail, and at almost the same time, we began to hear the sound of falling water – a lot of water. A short distance on up the trail, we got our first glimpse of Fall Dam, and within a couple more minutes it was in full view. The turbines were running, causing the noise we had heard, and several people were fishing from their boats in the churning water. We found a good spot on a large rock near the bottom of the dam and settled down for lunch. At one point I remarked to Katie that one of the best things about having lunch on a hike was that the more you ate, the less you had to carry for the trip back. Katie looked at me as if that might have been the most intelligent thing I’d ever said to her, and while she didn’t say a word in response, she nevertheless proceeded to eat a tremendous meal and to drink almost all of her water.

While we ate, we watched the parade go by – several couples, a group of young women who appeared to be college age, and a large troop of Boy Scouts with their Scoutmasters. Each group seemed instinctively to follow the same routine – they would linger for a few

minutes at the water's edge, maybe toss in or try to skip a couple of stones. Next, they'd take a drink from a water bottle, and then they'd begin to climb up and over the boulders toward the top of the dam. Of course Katie wanted to follow them, so once our meal was over, I hunted through my pack and found a length of rope. I tied one end around Katie's waist, left about six feet of slack and then stuffed the remainder into my pocket. That way if Katie slipped, I could instantly have the rope in my hand, and if I slipped, the rope would pull out, and Katie would not fall with me. In truth, I had no personal fear of falling, but I really liked the idea of having Katie on the rope. As we climbed upward, we quickly discovered several of the people who had passed. The group of young women was only a short distance above us. They appeared to be in the process of deciding to turn around and go back down. One of them asked to borrow our rope (perhaps to hang their leader). I just laughed, but Katie began to explain in detail why that would not be a good idea. "Well you see my Daddy had this rope, and he tied it around me so that I wouldn't fall down the rocks, but so far I've been doing really well because I take gymnastics, and I'm very strong, but Daddy slipped one time, but he didn't fall. He just slipped and got his pants dirty. And one time we went to Chimney Rock and we were at a stream, and we went wading in the stream, and Daddy tied a rope on me that time too, so I wouldn't get carried away by the water. And while we were walking to the stream, Daddy got stung by a bee on the end of his big toe, but he didn't cry and he didn't get blood, and another time at Kiawah, Daddy got stung by a Portugese Man-of-War, and he had to go to the hospital. This is the first time I've been hiking, and I . . .

Well, the girls were politely hiding their amusement, and I was just glad that I had Katie on a rope. Otherwise, we'd likely have been there 'till dark. Nevertheless, I understood the issue perfectly. We'd been in the woods for almost two and a half hours, and I had been the only person for Katie to talk to. She finally had the opportunity to talk with someone else, and she had to make the most of it.

Well, we looked around for the Boy Scouts, but they were gone, so we climbed on to the top of the dam for a quick look at the reservoir, and then it was time to start back. At the bottom of the rocks, we grabbed our packs and headed back down the trail. Kate made another appeal for me to carry her pack, and I didn't resist. I lashed it to mine, and we continued on. At the point of the trail detour, I made the decision to ignore the detour and stick to the riverbank. My legs were beginning to tire after the climb on the rocks, and I wanted a shortcut. Undoubtedly the riverbank would be shorter than the upland detour, and it was – but it was also a heck of a lot rougher. The riverbank trail had eroded away, and the bank itself was littered with fallen trees. When we weren't slipping and sliding on the mud bank, we were scrambling over, under, or around the fallen trees that continually impeded our progress. But we pushed on, and presently our efforts were rewarded. At one bend, a huge boulder – as big as a house – jutted out into the river and provided a panoramic view of the Fall Dam and the eastern bank of the Yadkin River all the way down to the point where it joins the Uwharrie River to become the Pee Dee. We rested for a while and enjoyed the view while thinking how unfortunate it was that the prescribed hike in to the dam no longer included this magnificent highlight. After our break, it was back to the slopes - the slick, muddy slopes. Our shoes were getting wetter and wetter, and our clothes were becoming muddier and muddier, but we kept going. For

me it was becoming a matter of pride (one of those male idiocies) not to turn back – besides we'd still have to walk the detour, which wouldn't be any fun either, especially as tired as my legs were getting. So on we went, with me often picking Katie up by one hand and swinging her over particularly treacherous spots. For her part, Katie really had no idea what to think, but at one point she did say, almost under her breath, "This way is ROUGH!" And she was right. I had begun to entertain some serious doubts as to the wisdom of my decision to ignore the detour, and the thought had just crossed my mind to perhaps consider turning around, when I began to hear voices. Not that kind of voices – people voices, voices of people on the trail detour. Then in a moment we scrambled around one last muddy point and found ourselves back at the footbridge where the trail had first diverged. We had possibly saved ourselves ten minutes of walking, and we had only expended three times the energy to do it (but it would've been a bargain at any price).

We paused for a couple of minutes to allow our breath to catch up with us, then we straightened our clothes and retied our shoes in preparation for the final leg of our little journey, the smooth, wide trail along the riverbank back to the parking lot. Along the way we came upon a middle-aged man with a smallish black and white dog that I took to be a Border Collie. Katie, being the dog nut that she is, ran ahead to greet the dog, but stopped a few feet off and asked if it would be OK to pet. The gentleman assured her that it would be fine for her to pet the dog. He was a tall fellow with the carefully studied casual appearance of a college professor, and he explained that he was from Charlotte – the university area. He asked Katie if she had a dog. "No," she said, but my school teacher, Mrs. Garrett has one, and her name is Halley. Halley is solid black with brown paws, and she's been getting spoiled. Mrs. Garrett's Daddy has been feeding her anything she wants and letting her sleep anywhere she wants and taking her for walks all around the neighborhood. She used to sleep in Mr. Dean's chair. Mr. Dean is Mrs. Garrett's husband, and when he goes to work, Halley sleeps in his special chair, but Halley can't sleep in his chair right now, because they're moving to a new house, and they're living with Mrs. Garrett's Mommy, so Halley sleeps on the couch, but when they get in the new house, Halley will have to sleep on the floor – except when Mr. Dean's at work. Then she'll get right in that special . . ."

On and on she went – all the way to the parking lot. The professor walked along with us (much like his dog) and listened obediently. Occasionally he would ask a question to let her know that he was still paying attention, and occasionally he would smile, as if perhaps remembering some other extroverted little girl from another time. Katie would have followed him all the way to his car, if I hadn't called out and reminded her that we were parked on the opposite side of the lot. I flipped up the tailgate on the van and tossed the backpacks inside, then I sat down on the pavement to remove my hiking boots. It was only then that I realized how tired I had become. I leaned back on the soft, cool asphalt, and I might have taken a nap, if a family in a Volvo wagon hadn't insisted on driving through my bed. As I climbed in and cranked the van, the college girls emerged from the woods and came laughing and stumbling across the parking lot. "We left before you," one of them said; "how in the world did you beat us back?" "We took a shortcut," I replied with a smile.

It was less than two miles back out to the main road, but Katie was sound asleep before we got there. “Yes Sweetheart,” I thought to myself, “I do this for fun.”

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