



title: Meeting the Tree of Life : A Teachers' Path
author: Tallmadge, John.
publisher: University of Utah Press
isbn10 | asin: 0874805309
print isbn13: 9780874805307
ebook isbn13: 9780585129778
language: English
subject: Tallmadge, John--Journeys--United States,
Environmentalism, Wilderness areas--
Environmental aspects--United States,
Environmentalists--United States--Biography.
publication date: 1997
lcc: GE56.T35A3 1997eb
ddc: 508/.092
subject: Tallmadge, John--Journeys--United States,
Environmentalism, Wilderness areas--
Environmental aspects--United States,
Environmentalists--United States--Biography.

Meeting the Tree of Life

A Teacher's Path

John Tallmadge

University of Utah Press
Salt Lake City

©1997 by the University of Utah Press

All rights reserved

Design: Mary Shapiro

Cover Illustration: Ann Zwinger

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Tallmadge, John.

Meeting the tree of life : a teachers' path / John Tallmadge.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0874805309 (cloth : alk. paper).

ISBN 0874805317 (paper : alk. paper)

1. Tallmadge, JohnJournneysUnited States. 2. Environmentalism.

3. Wilderness areasEnvironmental aspectsUnited States.

4. EnvironmentalistsUnited StatesBiography.

I. Title.

GE56. T35A3 1997

508'.092dc20 9642234

Permission to reprint portions of this work is gratefully acknowledged.

Previous versions of "The John Muir Trail," "Into the Deeps," and "In the

Mazes of Quetico" appeared in *Orion* magazine. "A Home in the Winds,"

"The Great Divide," and "Moving to Minnesota" originally appeared in *North*

Dakota Quarterly. "Meeting the Tree of Life" first appeared in *Witness*.

Permission is gratefully acknowledged to quote lyrics from "Wayward Wind"

by Stan Lebowsky and Herbert Newman,

Copyright ©1955 PolyGram International Publishing, Inc. Copyright

renewed. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

For Howard and Kate Tallmadge

Contents

Preface	ix
Chapter 1	1
On the Road	
Representative Men	
A Rhythm in the Blood	
Blue Remoteness	
California	
Chapter 2	20
The John Muir Trail	
New England	
Chapter 3	32
The Fortress and the Monastery	
A City on a Hill	
A Long Weekend in May	
The Underground Library	
Finding the Book of Nature	
Chapter 4	56
The Dark Side of Katahdin	
Utah	
Chapter 5	75
Among Shining Mountains	
In Want of a Position	
Mormons and Mountain Men	
The New West	

Living with Geologic Time

Chapter 6	92
Delicate Arch	
The World in a Book	
City of Rock	
Prophecy and Debris	
Chapter 7	109
Into the Deeps	
Wyoming	
Chapter 8	126
A Home in the Winds	
The World's Most Beautiful Campsite	
Mistake Lake	
The Perfection of Nature	
Chapter 9	143
The Great Divide	
Minnesota	
Chapter 10	156
Moving To Minnesota	
A Special Place	
Prairie and Wood	
The Winter Art	
Living with Biological Time	
Chapter 11	172
In The Mazes Of Quetico	
Chapter 12	187
Meeting The Tree Of Life	
Suggestions For Further Reading	202

Preface

Imagine a map of North America drawn from your memory instead of from the atlas. It is made of strong places stitched together by the vivid threads of transforming journeys. It contains all the things you learned from the land and shows where you learned them. It reveals your home range as a creature of body and soul.

Think of this map as a living thing, not a chart but a tissue of stories that grows half-consciously with each experience. It tells where and who you are with respect to the earth, and in times of stress or disorientation it gives you the bearings you need in order to move on. We all carry such maps within us as sentient and reflective beings, and we depend upon them unthinkingly, as we do upon language or thought. For the land is part of us no matter what we believe or where we happen to live. And it is a part of wisdom, to consider this ecological aspect of our identity, so that we can become better teachers and storytellers and stewards of the earth.

This book offers a glimpse of how such a map can grow. It draws on my experiences in the wilderness and the university from the time I left

the army as a young man of twenty-six until I left the classroom as a seasoned teacher of forty. During this period I was learning my craft, seeking a home, and exploring both inner and outer landscapes under the influence of great nature writers, whom I regarded not just as artists and scientists, but as guides for the conduct of life. My outer landscape consisted of cities and colleges and some of America's most remote and beautiful places. My inner landscape consisted of memory, desire, great books, and a soaring idealism shared by all those who came of age in the 1960s. We were all inspired by the movements for peace, civil rights, women's liberation, and nature, though some expressed themselves more flamboyantly than others.

Although the stories in this book are drawn from experience, the fact that they happened to me matters less than the common process they reveal. Memoirs are usually produced by celebrities, but there must be as much wisdom and miracle in the events of anyone's life, and even more, if we only took time to look. That grace abounds has long been known but is somehow quickly forgotten. With respect to danger, endurance, and heroism in general, these journeys will hardly seem melodramatic. Anyone can go to the wilderness, after all it's one of our country's most democratic endowments and a modicum of attention will always yield valuable lessons. As for speaking in the first person, Thoreau proclaimed that he would not talk so much about himself if there were anyone else whom he knew as well. But writing, I think, can serve just as well for discovery as it does for exposition, and minister to ignorance as well as to knowledge. More often than not, I have written to find out.

Nor does the book aspire to autobiography, that is, to a comprehensive account of the writer's life. For one thing, life consists of many concurrent stories, braided like colored yarn. Slice through it on a given day, and you get what appears to be a complex mosaic of events. The writer's task is to follow the colors, to tease out those episodes that belong to the story at hand. For another thing, my career as a scholar and teacher went on after the catastrophic events recalled in the final chapter. I became a husband and father, a householder, a dean. I moved to another part of the country and took a position at a new kind of university. I found that one can enact a vocation in rich and productive ways never before imagined. But all that belongs to another story.

This book is written for all those who have tried to pursue their personal, professional, and ecological lives with dignity. I hope it will speak especially to students and teachers drawn to the wisdom and beauty of the land. They have been my closest companions on the journeys herein described, and for them a short bibliographic essay has been appended.

No book like this comes to light under one person's hands alone. An author's last pleasure is to offer a bow of gratitude to all those who have helped with the work. I owe deep and profound thanks to my family: to my parents, Howard and Kate Tallmadge, who taught me to love adventure and care for the land; to my brother and sister, Allin Tallmadge and Mary Kate Holden, who accompanied me on my earliest travels at Lake Waramaug; to my wife, Pam Bach, whose love, constancy, and good sense have sustained all my life and work for more than ten years; and to my daughters, Rosalind and Elizabeth, who remind me each day that exuberance is beauty.

I have been blessed with wonderful teachers during my growth as a writer and scholar. My undergraduate mentor, Peter Bien of Dartmouth College, helped launch my teaching career and has sustained me with friendship, wisdom, and critical insights for more than twenty-five years. The late A. B. Giamatti and Peter Demetz of Yale University provided models of humane and rigorous scholarship combined with first-rate teaching. The late Ken Eble of the University of Utah and Wayne Carver and Bill Woehrlin of Carleton College affirmed my faith in the academy as a community of teachers. Sherman Paul, of the University of Iowa and Wolf Lake, Minnesota, jump-started my scholarly career with an invitation to write on John Muir; he improved this book immeasurably with heady draughts of encouragement and tough-minded critique through a correspondence that continued, with heroic generosity, into the final months of his life.

Much of whatever literary quality these stories possess is due to the counsel of wise and perceptive editors. Aina Niemela, George Russell, and the late Olivia Gilliam first brought my wilderness writing to light in Orion magazine; without them, this book would never have been born. Barbara Dean saw the potential in these early articles and solicited the germinal proposal, then offered priceless wisdom and encouragement during the long years of gestation. Ed Lueders of the University of Utah

has been an invaluable mentor, colleague, hiking companion, and editor; to him I owe particular gratitude for my understanding of personal narrative, for astute stylistic suggestions, and for recommending this book to the University of Utah Press. Thanks to Peter Stine and Thomas J. Lyon, who commissioned the title essay for a special issue of *Witness*, and to Robert W. Lewis for publishing three chapters in *North Dakota Quarterly*. And particular thanks to Mick Duffy and the staff at Utah for investing so much faith, imagination, and effort in bringing this book into the world.

I am grateful to the companions, named and unnamed, who made each wilderness journey so much more than a lonely pilgrimage. I am particularly thankful to Vern Bailey and Bob Tisdale for introducing me to the Boundary Waters and Quetico. Thanks to my students at Yale, Dartmouth, the University of Utah, and Carleton College for helping me learn the art, craft, and humility of teaching. Thanks to the learners, faculty, staff, and administrative colleagues at the Union Institute who provided intellectual and professional support during the final years of composition. And special thanks to the Orion Society and the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment for creating opportunities for dialogue and fellowship on a national scale.

Many companions in the nature writing community have nurtured my work over the years. John Elder of Middlebury College has been a constant friend and inspiration during our long shared journeys in education, literature, family life, and the way of the spirit. Parker Huber has been a vessel of light. Ann Zwinger has strengthened me with her wisdom and her art, especially her lovely gift of a jack pine bough used in the design. Many others read portions of the manuscript, offering counsel that strengthened my resolve and improved my prose. Particular thanks in this regard to Scott Russell Sanders and Mitch Thomashow, who reviewed the manuscript for Utah; to Mike Branch, Scott Slovic, and Cheryll Glotfelty of ASLE; to John Calderazzo, Tom Fleischner, Ed Grumbine, Bill Howarth, Torsten Kjellstrand, Barry Lopez, Tom Lyon, Joe Meeker, John Miles, Sy Montgomery, Gary Nabhan, Dick Nelson, Michael Patton, Fred Taylor, Steve Trimble, and Terry Tempest Williams. You inspire me by your example and challenge me with your regard. You teach me the meaning of grace.

Chapter One

On the Road

Representative Men

They say a thousand-mile journey begins with a single step. Today that step is usually into a car.

The car I stepped into one hot July afternoon in 1973 was a Volkswagen beetle, folk vehicle of the Vietnam era. It was parked in a Philadelphia suburb shaded by trees so dense that moss had grown up through the cracks in the pavement. After three years in the army, its owner and I were about to set off for California. We intended to hike the John Muir Trail from Mt. Whitney north to Yosemite Valley, following the crest of the High Sierra. Two hundred miles of backpacking at altitude, with several peaks thrown in, seemed a good way to purge ourselves of the toxins of military life. After that we could return with a free will to graduate school and resume the long climb toward careers in college teaching.

My friend hugged his parents and slipped behind the wheel. As we backed into the street, I felt our journey begin as smoothly as the launching of a canoe. We glided past large, elegant homes that showed no inclination to move for in this town the money was as old as the trees and entered a thoroughfare clogged with rush-hour traffic. It was an unobtrusive beginning. The maze opened without a sound, and we entered intent on the path ahead, never imagining which turns would eventually give our journey its true shape. Movement was freedom, and freedom burned on

my tongue like cinnamon after three years of numbing routine. I began to watch for the blue and red signs of the interstate highway that would carry us west toward a new life of adventure.

What we had planned was nothing special, of course. Americans have always gone into the wilderness. Young Indians on the threshold of manhood went off to fast and dream in the mountains, seeking visions. White settlers, less attuned to the spirits of place, just filled the powder horn and hopped the back fence. Genteel explorers like Francis Parkman and Henry Thoreau used the railroad or the steamship to reach their jumping-off places. For all of these people, an obvious frontier still bounded the civilized world. But for us, living late in the twentieth century, frontier had always been more an internal sense than a geographic fact. Because we had grown up far from wilderness, in cities and suburbs whose land had been shaped to our needs, adventure always seemed to begin with a drive on some interstate highway. The road plucked us bodily from a seething indoor life, but it also imposed a passive interval that prepared us, like meditation, for the second step of the journey, the one that leads out of the car and onto the trail.

Up on I-76 the traffic was rushing westward, and we accelerated to join the flow. I watched Philadelphia shrink to a smudge in the mirror as suburbs whizzed by and thinned to farmland and woods. The sun poured a long, mellow light on the road as my mind relaxed to familiar highway sounds: the roar of the engine, the hum of tires, the thumps of the wheels riding over the pavement joints. After a while I ceased to notice these sounds; they became background noise, like my heartbeat or breathing. In the exhilaration of departure, I fancied the road would bear us to California in no time. I ceased to remark the small towns we passed Ephrata, Carlisle and fell into memories released by the sounds of the road.

During the Vietnam War, a man with a low draft number had three choices: report for duty when called, enlist with a training option, or flee the country. My number had come up during my first year in graduate school, and I had enlisted for Russian training at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California. For a scholar, this was pretty soft duty, more like a college than a military post, but my friends and I still felt like political prisoners. I remember craving freedom and authenticity during that winter in California. After class there was nothing to do on base except

bowl, watch movies, or drink beer. But off-base lay the grand seascapes of Big Sur. Each Saturday I would hitchhike down the coast, admiring the gaunt cliffs edged with surf, the silver fog, the calligraphic cypresses, the gray light sparkling on the sea below. In a bookstore on Cannery Row I found thin volumes of Robinson Jeffers, whose bitter verses reflected the alienation and wonder that I had felt. More important, I found John Muir's guide to Yosemite. Written in the serenity of age, it captured the passion of a young man's first encounter with mountains. Muir had turned to nature at a time of despair. After nearly losing his sight in a factory accident, he had given up engineering and disappeared into the Sierra Nevada. There he had lived like a tramp for six years, exploring, collecting, tracing the ancient glaciers. Muir had discovered beauty and grace in the most rugged and inaccessible places. In the midst of solitude he had found joy. His words awakened the hope of an inner freedom won through strenuous encounters with wilderness. Perhaps the Sierra could offer a healing joy to counteract the dead days of the army.

By May the coastal counties were already turning brown, but snow still lay waist-deep on the rim of Yosemite Valley. One Friday evening I left the barracks with a couple of friends and drove eastward away from the sea toward the Coast Range hills. We stopped on Pacheco Pass to look out across the Central Valley as Muir had done, but instead of his sea of wildflowers we saw only the colored grids of industrial farming. The road cut through baked fields reeking of dust and fertilizer, past small towns of pink stucco houses surrounded by almond and fig plantations beyond which tall orange clouds rose over the mountains. At dusk the city of Merced appeared like a smear of lights, and the road began climbing through foothill pastures where slabs of eroded slate stuck up like tombstones. Behind us night filled the valley with blue haze; ahead the black, crystalline silhouettes of pines appeared. Cool air poured into the car, fragrant with sage. The road twisted into the night, and I soon lost all sense of direction apart from the glowing center line. Eventually we began to descend, cutting back and forth until the road suddenly leveled off, and I heard beyond the roar of our engine the glorious, liquid rumble of mountain water. This was the Merced, John Muir's "River of Mercy." We stopped and got out to listen, inhaling its clean, effervescent, and scentless fragrance, feeling through our soles the thud of boulders shifting in

its bed. Perhaps it was only the accumulated distaste of months of army life, or my dreamy mood after three hours of driving, but as I gazed at that tumbling water, glowing faint blue in the starlit air, it seemed less like a geological phenomenon than a living creature. I felt an inclination to bow, to thank it for greeting me. But instead I shivered and got back into the car.

The road burrowed into the mountains, following the Merced Canyon. At one point it passed under a boulder that had slipped from the wall above. A toll booth appeared, built out of logs, and a sleepy ranger waved us through. Huge trees loomed in the headlights, crowding the road. We could no longer hear the river, but we felt the canyon widen as if its walls had suddenly swung back. A white glow broke through the trees on our left. We pulled over and stepped outside. Beyond the trees rose an immense rock wall. A full moon had risen, and the rock glowed under its light like marble. This was my first view of El Capitan. I could not see the top without tilting back far enough to endanger my balance. Yet strangely enough, I felt neither shock nor fear. It was as if a great wave had lifted me up and left me gently but permanently displaced.

Next morning we hiked up the Merced toward the high country, following the first few miles of the John Muir Trail. Gazing at Vernal and Nevada falls, I felt all the lover's emotions: excitement, wonder, breathless anticipation, even a deep ache in the chest. I hardly noticed the cars and tourists in the valley, or the paving that had been slapped incongruously on the first mile of trail. All that seemed parenthetical, of less consequence amid Yosemite's flooding beauty than dead leaves scattered on a stream. That night we camped at Nevada Fall and watched a bear try to steal our food. The next morning we climbed the shoulder of Half Dome and gazed off toward the head of the valley, where other domes sloped as gracefully as sculptures into a toy forest three thousand feet below. At the sky's edge rose the peaks of the High Sierra, gray as aluminum and streaked with snow. The Merced wound in among them and disappeared. I wanted to follow it to the regions of rock and ice from which all the life in the valley seemed to flow. I could feel those high peaks beckoning me. I knew that I had to come back here as often as possible. I had to know this place. Like the pilgrim whose soul once felt the force of overmastering love, I had to behold its spirit face to face.

From that moment I understood Muir's extravagant desire. But unlike him my friends and I were forced to make trips on weekends. The road made it possible for us to lead double lives. Weekdays we reported for duty, taciturn, uniformed, and obedient. Weekends we followed rivers to their sources in glacial ice. We cooked over campfires and made our beds under the sky. And when we returned, exhilarated and overtired after five hours of driving, we slept lightly and took up our duties next day with the buoyant deliberation of sleepwalkers. Our uniforms were a perfect disguise; they made us invisible to the eyes of authority. No one could hurt us, because our souls were elsewhere: as we lay on our bunks in the hours before dawn, we could still feel them leaping upon the mountains.

The wilderness gave us a sense of authenticity. At times I felt guilty about having so much fun, even while other GIs were wasting their weekends in beer joints or topless bars. When I watched news clips from Vietnam or read about someone burning his draft card, I wondered if my friends and I were living in bad faith. But as Yosemite sank more deeply into my mind, I began to see that these weekend excursions were part of a great turning toward nature that had engaged our entire generation. We had not been acting solely for ourselves, but as what Emerson had called "representative men." Our journeys were quests for a durable scale of values, explorations of moral as well as physical landscapes.

That was why we needed wilderness, not the tamed and well-groomed nature of gardens and parks but nature in its most elemental and inhuman form. Our generation was struggling to form an identity based on romantic principles: deep feelings, artistic intuition, the worship of nature, and the politics of rebellion. Like Protestant reformers, we sought to go back to a purer life by rebuilding our institutions upon the foundation of nature. It was not just bored GIs, but a whole generation that felt this hunger for authenticity. Raised in a time of prosperity and technical marvels, we had come to believe that all things would be possible for us, that nothing would be denied. Yet as we came of age, we had discovered how much this good life depended on cheap minority labor, the despoliation of land, and a military-industrial complex that required human sacrifice in the form of wars in remote, "expendable" countries. We saw in the wilderness, with its healthy and interdependent communities, a model for just and sustainable human societies.

The wilderness also provided models for individual life. Compared to us, who felt torn by conflicting loyalties, wild creatures seemed to be living with perfect integrity. We admired the resolution with which they pursued their lives, the faith they kept with ancestral patterns, the fierce attachment they showed for their native ground. Especially we honored them for refusing to be intimidated. When civilization moved in, they generally died or moved on. Unlike us, who had put on uniforms, they never accepted domestication. In this sense they seemed more virtuous and heroic.

Our generation had also turned to the wilderness out of a deep nostalgia for possibility. The swarming cities in which we lived only reminded us that nature had once stretched pure and clean for thousands of miles to the west. Thomas Jefferson's dream of yeoman citizens living at peace with the land had seemed possible then. Perhaps in the remnants of timeless, Edenic wilderness we could rediscover the seeds of that dream and learn how to transcend the depredations of history. Perhaps we could reach back to a time when the world was young, or if not, at least pay homage to an ideal.

Finally, we had gone to the wilderness because we yearned for power. Like all young people, we experienced the world as a mass of congealed and suffocating demands. We took to heart Emerson's claim that society conspired against the manhood of every one of its members. To our restless eyes, the older generation seemed hopelessly compromised, even diseased. We did not want to become like them! And so, after rejecting their values and institutions, we sought to reconstitute our moral lives through direct encounters with nature. We viewed the hardships of the trail as a discipline that would open our souls to the totemic spirits of place. We felt that our purity of heart, intensity of desire, and willingness to suffer would win from nature the power to prophesy and change our people's angle of vision.

Such was the mood in which I encountered the High Sierra. In retrospect, it all seems clear, but of course I hardly thought of these things at the time. I did not even think of them, consciously, on the first night of this new cross-country journey, as our Volkswagen soared and plunged through the folds of the Appalachians. All I felt was an inarticulate purpose, as if I were riding a wave that was rolling west through the hearts and minds of our generation. Even the interstate seemed to serve our desire,

as it bored through the darkness beyond our headlights. For almost two centuries these mountains had kept the Europeans at bay. Daniel Boone had grown up in their shadow and dedicated his life to the lands beyond. The range was a labyrinth, a Gordian knot of ridges, canyons, and twisted streams, but the road took no heed. It cut through the landscape as rudely as Alexander's sword. In one stroke it canceled the geography of the past.

Perhaps we should have realized how much of America we were leaving behind, how much these aspirations carried an ominous strain of denial. But we were confident in the intensity and purity of our desire. We had faith that nature would empower us to live without the past. And so we hardly thought of these things as we rushed down that smooth and luminous road through the twisted mountains into the American night.

A Rhythm in the Blood

Next morning we woke in a motel near Cambridge, Ohio. The sun rose, blond and steaming, beyond fields that stretched in all directions. At 6:30 A.M. the radio carried commodity prices, bluegrass music, and the Reverend Ike exhorting his listeners to "Use your mind *power* to get what *you* want!"

The interstate headed west, as straight as a furrow. Beyond its fenced corridor county roads ran off at right angles toward the horizon. We had left the Appalachians and entered the central lowlands of Ohio. This was pioneer country, and these farms had fulfilled Daniel Boone's American dream. Neat and prosperous, they breathed an air of solid contentment. It was hard to imagine the land so thickly forested that a squirrel, as they said, could run all the way to the Mississippi without ever touching the ground. Where these houses and barns now stood, there were once only log cabins whose owners lived on potatoes planted among the stumps of five-acre clearings.

Still, the present landscape was more benign than Philadelphia. Nature felt closer, and after a day of driving the road had become familiar. Because of the uniform scenery, we seemed to be moving more slowly, as if we were drifting in green sargasso. I felt my mind sink toward deeper memories. I knew our journeys were representative, though they had not been conceived as political gestures. But what were our personal motivations?

During the 1950s my hometown was a crowded place. With fifty thousand inhabitants and an area of two square miles, East Orange, New Jersey,

