





Inspiration and **Hard Work** on Forester Pass

By Marty “Reaper” Maine

Laboring to reach a windswept ridge, I notice a small weathered sign marking the saddle for Junction Pass. I check the map and realize that I’m finally at the obscure gap where the John Muir Trail once crossed. This part of the JMT was abandoned around 1932 for its present route over Forester Pass.

Altimeter check: 13,240 feet.

I’m peering at tiny hikers trudging below as they approach the zenith all PCT hikers recognize as “the highest point on the Trail.” That’s where I’m headed.

In the 1930’s, President Franklin Roosevelt created the **Civilian Conservation Corp** (CCC) as part of the “New Deal” legislation. The CCC was a work relief program for unemployed men ages 18 to 25. They planted trees, built parks and buildings and most notably, from my vantage point, hundreds of miles of trails.

The climb over Forester Pass, as thru-hikers will attest, is a beautiful section of the Pacific Crest Trail. The PCT and JMT share tread over the 13,180-foot pass. It’s not only the boundary between Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks, it’s one of the most notorious ticks on the PCT. Here our beloved Trail passes into my work zone, where our modern day CCC crew is spending a portion their 2010 summer efforts.

Back at Junction Pass, I’m about five or six miles into a long day hike. My intent is to survey the section of the Trail below and north of Forester. I sit and melt a little snow to quench a troublesome thirst and give my lungs time to recover from the climb.

As an employee of the **National Park Service** (NPS), it has been my privilege for the last couple of years to work not only at the park but specifically for the Trails Division. More than 97 percent of Sequoia/Kings is designated wilderness. Almost 100 miles of PCT pass through our work area, and five trail crews spend their entire summer building, brushing, blasting, logging and sometimes re-routing sections of tread. Most are seasonal employees who return every summer to get their “trail fix”.

However, one group is unique.

In his first stint as California’s governor, **Jerry Brown** modeled the “California Conservation Corps” after FDR’s version. The 1976 arrangement gives “corpies” opportunities in environmental conservation, firefighting, maintenance and emergency response to natural disasters.

Only one of five applicants – men and women ages 18 to 25 – are accepted into this six-month program. Many never have backpacked. They must pledge to stay sober during the hitch, part of the non-stop

Left, Alex Garcia belays Andi Anderson as they work in tandem to strengthen the rock wall buttressing the Trail at Forester Pass.
Above, Garcia passes stones to Anderson. Photos by Phil Gross.



The California Conservation Corps crew pause for a group shot in the thin air of Forester Pass. Agnes Vianzon (far left) is crew leader.

discipline required for the back-breaking work, endless regimen of chores and sense of responsibility needed to become a crew member. They can be tossed out if they don't abide by the rules. Very few fail. They learn skills, receive a scholarship award and earn a paycheck, and along the way they gain the maturity that only a season in the wilderness can provide.

Back on my feet, my path travels in and out of ambiguity as I plummet into the Inyo National Forest. I need to make it over two more high-altitude passes today before I get to the job site and loop back to camp before dinner. I'm stationed there for several weeks. My wife **Norma**, aka "**Hot Pants**" volunteers for the NPS and will be joining us as well.

I climb to more than 12,000 feet, over Shepherd Pass, another lung buster and the gateway to Sequoia Park, stopping to contemplate the massive east face of Tyndall and finish the last of my lunch. It's the first day I've had to explore the area.

The week before, we held training classes in Center Basin with about 20 young adults, teaching them "fall

protection." Our project includes working on deteriorating sections of the PCT below Forester Pass, many with extreme exposure to a potentially fatal fall. The 1930's-era trail desperately needs repairs. Crew members will need to be roped in while they work. Not all of them warm up to the task of literally "hanging out," but less daunting repairs allow the more faint of heart some options.

I still have several quad-flaming miles before I reach Forester and if I want to get fed tonight, I need to pick up the pace. Heading cross

country, I meet several hikers setting up camp at a tarn as dusk approaches. The John Muir Trail and the PCT are one and the same in this area. The mesa should be familiar territory in that it's only been three years since Hot Pants and I covered this section on our 2007 thru-hike. Ice blanketed the Big Horn Plateau and although it was a low snow year, our faces felt like a Klondike Bar in a wind tunnel. Racing to beat an impending storm, we climbed Forester on June 6th with fellow thru-hiker, "**SlothMan.**" Visiting today, before autumn sets in, makes for a lazy afternoon stroll around now thriving sedges.



The author, Marty Maine, and his wife, Norma, take a self portrait at Glenn Pass.

Do you ever wonder what has happened to all those crazy, wonderful people you met on your thru-hike? At last year's kick-off I had the opportunity to reminisce with many, and found a common thread entwines our brains: Not a day goes by without being reminded, in some way, about our hikes.

One thing is certain, when the passion for trail life gets into your system, it never leaves. It's something you dream about daily. Dreams aren't generally realized without certain sacrifices. Our thru-hike resulted in the loss of employment, income and material possessions after the fact. If I'd known the consequences prior to the trip, my responsible side probably wouldn't have gone. But we went, we survived and now I'm working for the NPS, which was unimaginable in 2007.

Looking at my third pass and last major obstacle of the day, Forester, I stop to make note of the magnificent example of 1930's ingenuity as well as flaws. The early trail crews did a marvelous job with dry stone masonry. These switchbacks, built on sheer granite, are epic. They've lasted almost eighty years, but because of time and exposure to the elements, they demand intervention. Tomorrow we'll return with the crew and start the rebuilding process.

The center sections bulging out of the buttresses will be addressed. We'll secure anchors in the wall above the trail to attach top ropes for static safety lines and for lowering new stones. We'll drill holes to place hardened steel pins out and away from the existing toe. The crew will place new stone starting at the point of the pins and angling into the center. In this way, the weak spots will be re-supported with new footing. Corpies will work in pairs. Hanging like window wash-



Evening around the fire.

ers in Manhattan, they will call out specific shapes and sizes of rock to a partner above. Hot Pants will be on hand to check belays and "shag" building blocks. The construction site will be monitored for safety, integrity of work and functionality.

A 3.5-mile descent to camp is all that's left for me today. My 53-year-old knees threaten mutiny. We will all "round-trip" this distance daily until the project is completed. Heading into the shadows, the temperature drops along with my energy. I'm at least 17 miles into the day and it's now way past dinnertime and we stick to a strict meal schedule. I don my fleece and race down to Center Basin. Under the forest canopy, it's all but dark and I can just make out the faint spur trail that heads to camp. As I approach, a young man named **Julian** with dreadlocks and a "welcome home" grin, shoves a plate of pot roast and potatoes into my hands.

"Hey Dude, we got your back!" he chides.

Table etiquette stops at roads' end and I reach into the dirt to grab something that had fallen off my plate. No food is wasted nor is any scented item allowed to remain unattended for the bears that patrol the Sierra. Even our trash gets washed with the dinner dishes and hauled out weekly by packers.

Hayden riffs on his guitar with female associates leaning against him. **Bobby Z** organizes tools for the next day's endeavor. **Jenell** flashes me the stink eye because I told her to quit whining. It's a typical night in camp. Watching the crew interact, I ponder their special moment along the PCT. There might be better ways to spend a summer but I just can't think of one.

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