

High Camp at Hilton Lakes

By Helen Gilbert

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OUR HORSES climbed steadily up the switchbacks of the first hill – a sandy moraine sparsely covered with mahogany and sagebrush – from where we could look back to Long Valley and Crowley Lake gleaming in the morning sunlight. Beyond, the White Mountains stood sharply etched against the dear blue sky. After months of dreaming, we at last headed back to Hilton Lakes!

For 25 years our family has roamed High Sierra trails and spot-packed to remote areas. We now prefer Hilton Lakes in the Inyo National forest because the pack-trip is shorter and less strenuous than to other favorite spots, and yet timberline lakes are easily reached by one-day hikes. Hilton Creek canyon is just over a ridge from popular Rock Creek resorts on the south. Although close to well known areas, it's primitive and reached only by foot or pack-train.

To reach Hilton Lakes pack station, you turn off U. S. 395 about 31 miles north of Bishop and then west for half a mile to the pack station. The best time is in July or August, as the season is short at these 10,000-foot elevations.

At the corral, Ed Kyte was getting our horses ready. In spite of his long workday, Ed Kyte is easy-going and friendly, with the courage and patience born of long hours on the trail. We have learned to trust the packer and respect his "know-how," which makes our trips safe and pleasant. Ed led off with his pack-string, each mule carrying two balanced loads of provisions and camping gear, with riders following.



At the top of the switchbacks, Hilton trail follows an old mining road, then turns towards Hilton Creek. As we pulled up our horses at the creek crossing in a beautiful grove of Aspen, Ed was telling some of his guests how the canyon got its name:

"Richard Hilton ran a dairy on this creek for more than thirty years," he said. "The Hiltons grazed cattle up this canyon in the early days, before 1870, furnishing milk to the McGees, the Sommers, and later, to gold miners. John Hilton was one of the first settlers."

We who enjoy eastern Sierra resorts and reach them easily from paved highways can scarcely realize the hardship, violence, and bloodshed that were a part of the history of these borderlands of California.

Our trail skirted the big upper meadow – a favorite with those who prefer stream fishing – and continued climbing. Although the trail does not cross any major pass, the first part traverses open country and is hot, sandy, and steep. Even if you hike "out" as some do, it's better to make the trip up the canyon on horseback.

There's an unusual absence of a transition life zone in the canyon. After pinyon pine and mountain mahogany a lodgepole forest follows immediately, with occasional Jeffrey pine on sunny slopes.

We saw the waters of Davis Lake set in lovely meadows dotted with gentian. Across the inlet and along the shoreline there's a sandy, crescent-shaped beach ideal for picnicking. Tracing the streams through the meadow, there's a picturesque waterfall where the stream drops from an upper basin called "the tub." Here the lake is well stocked with German Browns, but of course they don't compare with the fighting Rainbows in the higher lakes.

We made the five-and-a-half mile trip to Hilton Lake in two-and-a-half hours and it seemed like coming home. On a pack trip we take only the barest necessities. One item especially useful is a pan made from a square-sided, five gallon oil can. This fits the pack boxes and can later be used to carry water or for a boiler. Eggs are carried in coffee cans, packed solidly with oat meal which is later eaten and the cans used for cooking. Two "tin" frying pans of the same size fit together and serve as griddle, fish fryer, or dutch oven. Clothing, towels, and other small items we packed in duffle bags in place of suit cases. A tent and air mattress are worth their added weight, too, we think.

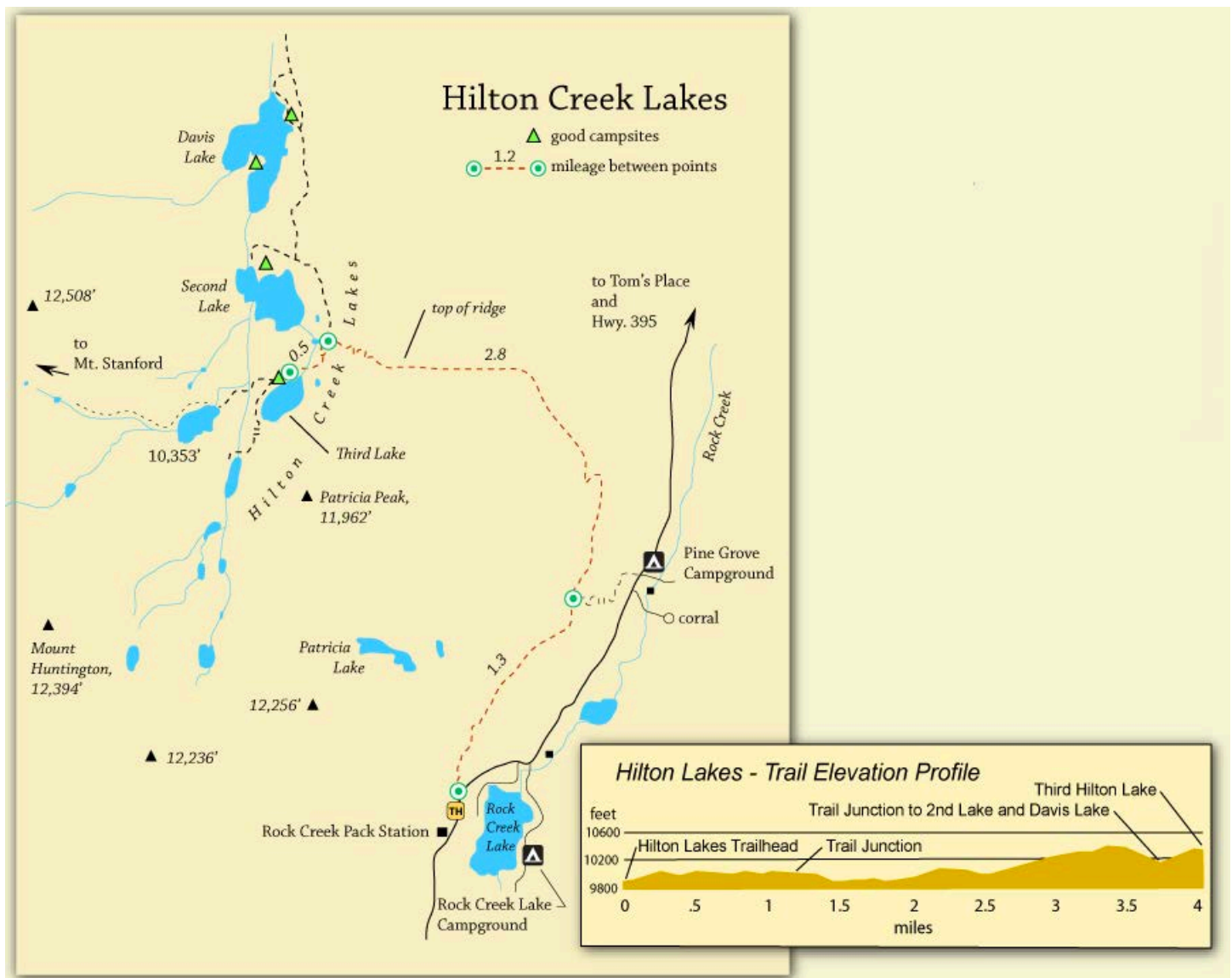


For 30 years a camp with lodge and cabins was located here, every board, keg of nails, and cook stove brought in on mule back. But when the High Sierra Primitive Area was established in 1932, Hilton Camp was one of the areas affected and a program of amortization was worked out, terminating the lease in 1961. Now all signs of the old camp are gone.

High upper lakes are easily reached by one-day hikes from this base-camp. A steep hike of one-mile brings you to the first of the high lakes (3) with a magnificent view of the valley and the canyon below. Upper lakes may also be reached by foot-trail or pack-train from Rock Creek resorts.

We climbed over glacial rocks to the south end of the lake where the water was blue-green against snowbanks which still stood under the warm summer sun. Here, an hour or two of concentration will yield amateur, as well as expert, a good catch of Rainbows.

The eastern face of the Sierra is one of ruggedness and power. A few pines cling tenaciously to rocky crevices, gnarled, twisted, and bent almost double by the wind. In contrast, along the stream grow tiny White Heather bells and on a rocky ledge, a marmot may be sunning itself. On the ridge above the lake, Nutcrackers nest in the Western Hemlock, piercing the stillness with their incessant cries. The trail to other lakes (5, 7, and 9) follows this ridge and in the distance you can see another (4) lying in a glacial cirque at the foot of Mt. Hamilton, one of the major peaks of the Sierra Crest.



Streams from all the upper lakes traverse the meadow below this lake, winding through knee-high grasses, and providing excellent stream fishing. Talus slides and two deep, emerald bays edged with willows form the east side of the lake. On the west, cliffs come down to the water's edge. A few scattered hemlock are so dwarfed by the cold and snow of this 10,400-foot elevation they form a dense, low thicket of branches.

Eastern Brook trout are plentiful. Climbing to a sand bar near the inlet, we fished the deep water just off the shelf with good results. Ardent fishermen can find Golden Trout in the still higher lakes, but it's rugged hiking.

After eight glorious days, we joined a group for the trip "down the hill," more convinced than ever that a vacation spent in the untrampled solitude of a designated Wilderness can give a family renewed strength and confidence.

Where the trail skirts the Big Meadow, we turned from the trail for a last spectacular view of the Crest. These granite peaks stand eternal in the sun and cast their image of beauty on the soul. An awareness of that beauty makes all the hardship worthwhile.