

Troop 128, McLean Virginia

Big Sky, Big Mountains, and Big Water

Our Trip to the Montana High Adventure Base (MOHAB)



Big Sky, Big Mountains, and Big Water – Our Trip to the Montana High Adventure Base



Troop 128 Scouts and a few new friends packrafted over 60 miles in the Bob Marshall Wilderness of Western Montana. They came back with so many stories that it's hard to believe that only five days passed. They survived earthquakes and wolves. They crossed the Western Continental Divide, rescued a dog, and cooked fresh, tasty trout over a campfire. They experienced Montana's "Big Sky Country" at its best! Thanks MOHAB!

In July of 2017, six Scouts from [T128](#), one from [T918](#) in Fairfax, VA, and one from [T101](#) of Greensboro, NC, attended the [Montana High Adventure Base \(MOHAB\)](#) to go "packrafting" in Montana's Bob Marshall Wilderness ("The Bob"). Planning began almost two years before, and little did we know at the time that the experience would be so incredible. Our adventure was a success because we followed the principles of Scouting. The Scout Motto is "Be Prepared," and the Scout Slogan is "Do a Good Turn Daily." In the Scout Oath we promise to be "physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight." It should not come as a surprise, but hindsight shows that applying these principles ultimately ensured our success.

BE PREPARED – The Months Leading Up to MOHAB



We knew, in theory at least, that packrafting is hard. It is a backpacking trip aimed at reaching and rafting headwaters of spectacular, pristine whitewater rivers that few people will ever navigate. While we were very familiar with the rigors of backpacking for a multiday trek, adding 15 pounds of gear – a helmet, floatation vest, paddles, and *a personal one-man inflatable boat* – would be an entirely new experience for all of us. We had to BE PREPARED.

Packrafters hike to headwaters in remote areas for an unparalleled wilderness backpacking and rafting experience.

Consistent with the advice from MOHAB, we set a six-month training schedule that encouraged extended daily walks and included a monthly “big event.” The daily training usually involved miles of walking, and progressively adding weight in a backpack. The big events often were regular troop events, but some months required special hikes and camping trips just for our MOHAB crew. For example, in March of 2017 most crew members participated in the Alonzo Stagg 50/20, a hike designed to challenge Scouts to walk 50 miles in 20 hours. While none of us achieved that rare goal, two hiked 39 miles, and three more lasted for 32. A month later found our crew hiking 8 miles with full backpacks up and over the summit of Sugarloaf Mountain in Maryland. In June, most of the crew spent a [weekend backpacking to Veach Gap](#) to ensure everyone had the backpacking and navigation skills we would need in The Bob.



T128 Scouts with Veach Gap in the background, June 2017.



Arrival in Helena, MT.

Our Scouts are thrifty too. They raised funds for this trip by selling “Camp Cards” and tagging along with another troop’s fundraising efforts to spread mulch for home owners. While they did not pay for the entire trip, these Scouts had a financial stake in the results.

Finally, one week before our flight, we met for a pizza dinner, cut our TYVEK sleeping sheets, and thoroughly checked each crew-member’s personal equipment. On Sunday, July 2, we were physically fit and well prepared as we boarded the plane from Dulles Airport to Salt Lake City, and ultimately, landing in Helena, MT.

EVEN MORE PREPARED – Training and Planning at the Teddy Roosevelt Memorial Ranch

In Helena we met Stephen and Eli from MOHAB, as well as Troop 128 Scouter Ted Koller from Laramie, WY. With Scouts in the vans, and gear in Mr. Koller’s truck, we set out for Dupuyer, MT and the [Teddy Roosevelt Memorial Ranch](#) (“TRMR”).

The TRMR is owned and operated by the [Boone and Crocket Club](#), which President Roosevelt helped start in 1887. The club provides its facilities in support of MOHAB to further the club’s conservation education program. Therefore, as one can imagine, the MOHAB staff does not just give you a map and a wave before releasing Scouts into The Bob. Instead, we spent a day and a half training to become even MORE PREPARED for our adventure.



The prairie meets the Rockies behind the TRMR, as viewed from the deck of the lodge.

Our two nights at the TRMR seemed like luxury! We slept in group bedrooms with bunks that are a great improvement over the typical walled-tents at most Scout camps. Since our focus was to prepare for the trek, excellent meals came from the kitchen at regular intervals. We did not expect this level of support, and it proved invaluable as it gave us the time to become “mentally awake” for our adventure into The Bob.



Not all our time involved work. Games in the lodge and horseshoes outside were popular.

The training began by formal staff introductions of Trek Directors Eli, Seth, and Stephen, plus Program Director Luke and staff-candidate Gabe. They taught us how to safely prevent grizzly bear encounters and we practiced shooting bear spray. They refamiliarized us with lightening safety, a topic that is particularly important in the unfamiliar, wide-open prairie of Montana. We saw videos to introduce us to pack rafts, and held discussions on crew leadership and decision-making. We planned our meals, assembled the ingredients, and distributed the weight among three cooking groups. We also distributed the group equipment (stoves, bear ropes, pots, and shelters), and packed our packs. On Monday, we took a two-hour hike with our fully loaded packs, and then reexamined our gear lists to discard any nonessential items that added too much weight.

On Tuesday morning, with packs loaded into the vans, we headed for our final training session at the [Nilan Reservoir](#). There we inflated our new best friends – our pack rafts – and learned the performance characteristics of the boats. In all honestly, these keel-less boats impressed us as nothing more than semi-controllable bobbers instead of rugged craft suitable to risking one’s life on a raging river. Fishtailing with each paddle, we waggled our way to the middle of the lake. We then had the joy of flipping boats in the cold, snow-melt water, and surfacing to right the craft and haul ourselves back into the seat. Some of us also practiced an aggressive swimming technique that used the paddle to propel the swimmer swiftly to his boat. A few waggles later found us back on shore to dry the boats and eat lunch. Packing the dried boats into our backpacks took a little more time, but soon we were on the road again, heading for the trailhead at Benchmark, in the Lewis and Clark National Forest.

The training – video, discussion, and hands-on – ensured that we were “mentally awake” for the trial-on-the-trail that we had planned.



This crew selected one of the most challenging packrafting trips feasible for a five-day trek.



After all the planning and preparation, the crew tested their load on a three-mile hike.

INTO THE BOB VIA THE SCAPEGOAT

With guidance from the Trek Directors, the Scouts themselves had planned our trek. It could be no other way. Had the adult leadership chosen the route, T128 would not be a “boy-led” troop, and enthusiasm would have waned. Instead, the boys chose a very challenging route, and just waited to see if the old men could keep the pace for over sixty miles. Thankfully, the old men returned without any cardiac incidents. *(To be fair, the adults ranged from a youngster of 27 to the old man, who is only 53!)*

Day One – Benchmark to Hoadley Creek Crossing on the Fourth of July

Benchmark is a trailhead parking area in the Lewis and Clark National Forest, just outside the Scapegoat Wilderness Area. The Scapegoat is one of three designated Wilderness Areas that form the Bob Marshal Wilderness Complex. According to our Scouts’ plan, we started our trek by from Benchmark on Trail 202, which is part of the Continental Divide Trail and runs parallel to the South Fork of the Sun River.



Departure from Benchmark and Sun River.

We followed the Sun River for about three miles before taking our first significant break. This break, had a purpose: fly fishing! For weeks the Scouts had been planning to fish, and finally we were in Montana within reach of a small trout stream. Yes, it was the middle of the afternoon, and yes, it was not the ideal location. But the Scouts knew that our next opportunity would not be until the end of the next day when we reached Danaher Creek, so it was now or never for the day. This was mostly a learning opportunity. We had a few strikes, but the more important aspect was that the Scouts became familiar with their tackle and knots as Mr. Koller taught the basics of fly fishing.

A little over an hour later, the crew turned due west on Trail 226, which followed Hoadley Creek upstream toward Grizzly Basin and Hoadley Reef. This was our first exposure to a burned forest. Unlike a national park or a managed forest, the US Forest Service does not attempt to extinguish natural forest fires in a wilderness area because fire is a natural part of the life cycle of a forest. Many plants depend on fire to either germinate seeds, or create open space for growth.

After a full day of travel, learning to raft, fishing, and hiking for six miles, we arrived at our intended campsite. Situated just before the crossing of Hoadley Creek, our campsite was in a wooded hollow with steep mountain slopes rising from the stream banks. Following “Leave No Trace” principles, we used an established fire ring and sleeping areas. After dinner, we gathered around the fire, told stories, and shared our thoughts about the day in a “thorns, buds, and roses” session. And although we lacked fireworks, we remembered our nation’s birthday by singing God Bless America at the top of our lungs as we stood around the fire. It echoed up the mountain walls as we dosed the fire and went to bed.



No tents! 11 oz. shelters saved pack weight for boats!

Day Two – Up and Over the Continental Divide

This July morning greeted us with 37° F, but the temperature rose quickly as sunshine reached over the ridges into our hollow. After a not-so-quick breakfast, we departed our camp at about 9 AM and began a two-mile, 1,300 ft. climb up and over the Continental Divide at 7,200 ft.

Although a tough hike with 45 lb. packs, the Scouts set a good pace and were at the top well before 11 AM. The cold of the early morning had given way to temperatures in the 80s that made for hot work. Just shy of the top, we drank from the smallest of streams that will eventually reach the Gulf of Mexico via the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers. The last snow of the year, hiding in a shaded ravine, fed our rivulet with its icy pure water. No water ever tasted better or was more welcome!



Last of the snow.

After taking a group picture (*front cover*), we began a five-mile descent through alpine meadows below Scarlet Mountain. The area is in or near the “Flathead Alps,” where the peaks near us soared to almost 8,700 ft. (Sugarloaf Mountain, for example, reaches 8,698 ft.) The distant mountains had more snowy patches, while the lower elevations were filled with green pine forests for as far as the eye could see. The meadows revealed thousands white bear flowers filled with yellow pollen that dusted our hiking pants.



Crossing the Continental Divide brought the crew to vast alpine meadows filled with bear flowers under Scarlet Mountain.

This trail was relatively easy compared with most of the rocky Appalachian paths that are more familiar to our crew. Although the trail was gentle, two crew members took spills that hampered our progress just a bit. In five miles we descended to about 5,000 ft. in elevation, and crossed the Stadler Creek as it flowed toward our goal – the Danaher Creek. Although our Scouts successfully navigated to their planned campsite on the Stadler, they decided that it would be worth the effort to hike a further mile or so to camp directly on the Danaher. Though weary, they pressed ahead, and unwittingly set the stage for a canine rescue.

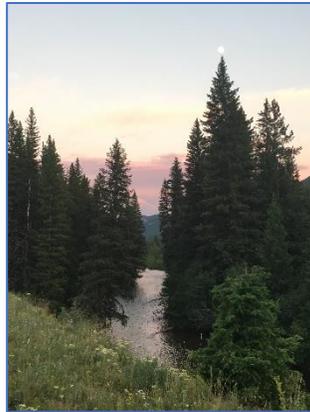
After crossing an open field, the crew took time for “a toast” (a water break) just before crossing another small stream. Much to our alarm, we heard a rustling coming from the bushes near the stream. Looking up, we saw the happiest black and white dog with the most relieved look on his face rush into our group. He muzzled everyone, accepting belly rubs and ear scratches with enthusiasm. He had a tag telling us that

his name was “Riker,” from Anaconda, Montana, a town that is six hours away by car. We naturally expected a group of hikers or horsemen to follow shortly, but none arrived. When we were ready to go, so was Riker. Apparently, we had been adopted.

Riker padded along with us. We expected at any moment to find his people, but we were alone in this part of the Bob. About a half mile later, we finally arrived at the banks of the Danaher and made camp. It had been a rough day of hiking 11 miles very heavy packs, but we had responsibilities before we could rest. While some started cooking dinner, others set up shelters. Still others gathered firewood and water.



Crew member Sixteen - Riker



Danaher Creek at dusk.



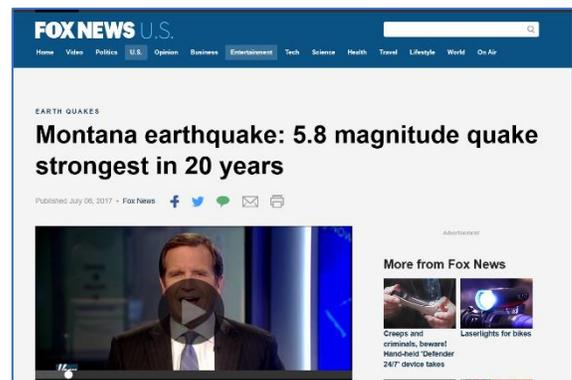
Mr. Koller with an 18-in. cutthroat!

This night’s dinner was a little less of a group effort than the previous night because many of the crew had an evening mission – fly fishing. In fact, this evening was by far the most perfect fishing opportunity we had. Several boys caught their first fish on a fly rod. Others finished Fly Fishing Merit Badge. But Mr. Koller outdid everyone by catching 20 cutthroat trout in less than two hours. He let them all go, but one was a whopping 18 inches long! We did not release all the trout, however. Our counselor in training – Gabe - also had a successful night, so we supplemented our dehydrated dinners with absolutely the most fresh and tasty campfire trout imaginable. Cooked in ghee and seasoning, even self-proclaimed “fish-haters” grudgingly found it “not-that-bad.” But we know ... they loved it!

We again closed the day with thorns, buds, and roses. Thorns were few, roses plentiful, and buds abundant as we would begin phase II of our adventure in the morning – RAFTING!!

While this would be the natural transition in the story ... it gets better. At 12:30 AM, ASM Herbert woke the others in the adult shelter by asking if anybody had felt an earthquake. SM Dietrich, fast asleep, replied, “Maybe ... zzzzz, snorrre, zzz.” ASM Miller, more coherently, confirmed that he felt one. Indeed, apparently the [biggest earthquake in the area in 20 years](#) hit with an epicenter in Lincoln, MT, registering 5.8 on the Richter Scale. Aftershocks at 3 and 4 on the scale soon followed.

It isn’t a real high adventure trip without an earthquake!



Day Three – Rafting, Fishing, and Portaging

We awoke to find that Riker was still with us. Some crew members tried some early morning fishing, while others savored coffee. But soon we had packed our gear, and inflated our boats for a day on the Danaher. We knew it would be a very physical journey. At this time of year, the Creek probably averages about 25 feet across, and at places was very shallow. But our pint-sized boats were designed to float in an inch of water and we were ready to paddle after hiking 17 miles in the first part of our trip.



The big question was whether Riker would ride in a raft for the next three days and 43 miles. Not only did we anticipate whitewater, but a pack raft is not very big. It has an inflatable seat, and just enough room for a paddler's legs to stretch under the backpack that is lashed to the bow. With very little coaxing, however, Riker rode with either Eli or Seth without significant anxiety.

We launched from the banks in numbered order. Harkening to Star Wars, everyone wanted to be "Red Five," from the Rogue Squadron. Throughout the coming days we would try to maintain our order and remain separated by about 40 ft. as a safety measure in rapids. But on this morning, we quickly found ourselves exiting the boats around the bend because fallen timber had created a log dam full of sweepers and strainers. We beached the boats and carried them around. Throughout the day we repeated the process and believe that we portaged about 12 times. On one occasion, a boat grazed a log, resulting in a long gashing puncture. This could have been serious, as we had no spare boat with us, and half of the boat was absolutely deflated. But the miracle of Tenacious Tape saved the day, and in five minutes, the boat was fixed.

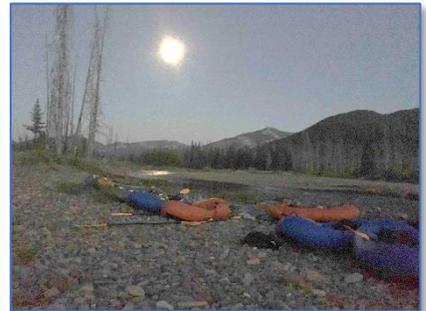


Our first day of rafting familiarized us with the boats. Lunchtime provided an opportunity to fish for cutthroat trout.

We stopped for lunch near a deep pool shaded by a tall rock face. Several folks took the opportunity to go fishing, and were well-rewarded with more cutthroats. Riker, ever ready to share somebody's beef jerky, nosed his way from crew member to crew member, often with success. By 2 PM, we were ready to raft and had a wonderful four-mile stretch free of log jams.

Paddling on the Danaher is an intimate experience. Close banks and shallow rock gardens lead to slow pools. Kingfishers swoop to the water for prey, and swallows skim the surface for drinks of water. Cutthroat and bull trout beg to jump into your boat.

One challenge facing the Scouts was knowing when we had arrived at our camp, whether we were hiking or rafting. We knew we wanted to camp in “Big Prairie,” but from a small boat sitting below the bank, it was not easy to know when you arrived. We relied on our maps and compasses. On this day, Waleed was our “Navi-guesser.” At one stop, he learned how to compare the lay of the mountains to the map, and then he figured out that our camp would be west-southwest of the easily identifiable Brown Sandstone Peak. Late in the day, at about 6 PM, with a little bit of discussion, we arrived and hauled the boats onto a cobble stone bank.



At Big Prairie, we found clear evidence of bears on many trees. A full moon and cool evening made us appreciate our fire.

We set up camp about a 100 ft. from shore even though the nearby trees had bear-scratches telling us that we were in grizzly country. Undeterred, we hung our bear bags far from our shelters. We also cooked near the river, knowing that our fire ring would be swept away with the next high water. The moon was full, and after dinner, so were we. We joked around for a while and reviewed the day as usual, but we were tired. By 11 PM, nearly everyone was in their shelter and sleeping bag. *And that is when we heard the wolves, howling and replying across the river.* It did not matter; the best thing we could do about wolves was go to sleep. Let the grizzlies take care of the wolves!

Day Four – Twenty-Three Miles of Fast Water

Having survived the wolves, we awoke to another spectacular day. We were now on the South Fork of the Flathead River, a very fast river formed by the confluence of the Danaher with the Young’s Creek and Gordon Creek. Our plan was to use the increased water volume and speed to our advantage, so we aimed for a campsite twenty-three miles downstream.

This day promised bigger whitewater than what we had experienced the day before. In fact, soon after we departed our campsite we turned a bend and promptly hit the first significant rapid. It flipped one of our boats. Taking the opportunity as the boat was put back in order, several Scouts went swimming and others practiced throw-bag rescues in anticipation of the big rapids to come.



Throw-bag practice.

Whitewater rafting and canoeing are similar, but are different in one particular way. While a canoeist wants to avoid a shallow rock that creates a pillow and downstream hole, rafters live for them. Unlike a rigid canoe, the raft will conform to the water stream and ride the pillow to delight the paddler. Eli encouraged the crew to prepare for day five by hitting pillows head on, and trying to surf the hole.



The Flathead is much wider than the Danaher, with more water for “surfing” behind pillows.

The joy of paddling on this day is hard to convey. It was a day of glorious river views, few portages, and lots of big pillows. The river moved at a 3 to 5 mph clip. Towering peaks flowed by to reveal stunning forests or sheer rock walls. Eagles and ospreys were perched above, and fish jumped around us. Large streams came from port and starboard throughout the day, increasing the volume and speed of our river. Line after line of standing waves invited us to hit them head-on, sometimes in a rhythmic dance and other times in a rollicking splash-fest. Truly, an unparalleled joy for twenty-three stunning miles.

By late afternoon, we were tired, and we gratefully came ashore near a horse bridge at Black Bear ranger cabin. The only threatening thunderhead of the trip appeared, but a storm never materialized. We were experts by now at setting up our camp with ease. At night, we hung the bear bags on the bridge itself. With no earthquakes or wolves, sleep came swiftly to everyone.

Day Five – Afoot and Afloat

The crew had some vans to meet in the afternoon, so moving out early was important. After pictures on the bridge, we hopped in the boats for a morning of big water, an afternoon of backpacking to Meadow Creek parking area, and a much-needed car stop for Montana’s famous huckleberry ice cream.

The river this day had a remarkably saltier attitude than on the previous days. It had tired of us, and did its best to show us that it was the boss. It challenged us the whole morning, but really made its best efforts with three big rapids.



Last day - departing from Black Bear Bridge

The first major rapid had the reputation of frequently flipping pack rafts. We scouted it in advance, and identified the culprit waves that formed a nasty V, which, if hit sideways, would flip any boat. Fortunately, we had developed so much skill that nobody flipped on this day – at this rapid at least.

The next big rapid tricked many of us. We should have scouted it, but did not. Scouting it would have revealed that the initial series of big standing waves meet a sneaky cross current that came in from the left below the wave train. Taking the wave train to the right would allow the paddler to flow smoothly into the cross current from the left, but we had been hitting wave trains for miles and the left side just promised to be bigger and better. We blissfully paddled to our fate. The joy of riding the waves ended as the cross currents lifted the port bows to flip several boats. Not to be thwarted, four or five Scouts carried their rafts back up stream to repeat the rapid and teach the river to stop messing with ‘em.



The last day on the river featured the three biggest rapids of the trip.

The penultimate rapid was class three, which is very big for semi-controllable bobbers top-loaded with backpacks. Having learned our lesson, we scouted the rapid and set up the throw bags. One-by-one we shot the big rapid, danced in its following wave train, and passed through its narrow boulders. While we had a few close calls, nobody flipped and everyone left with respect for this rapid.

We avoided the last big rapid that started just before the red-lettered sign warning, “**DANGEROUS WATER AHEAD. REMOVE BOATS HERE.**” Well, to be precise, most of us avoided it. One Scout missed the easy, shallow exit on the right bank. This created a genuine emergency as the water speed increased exponentially over huge standing waves. At the excited encouragement of those on shore, he properly abandoned his run-away boat to scramble to safety. Although we were prepared to lose the replaceable boat and all the gear, the capricious river-god spun the boat into an eddy on our side of the river, a short way downstream. Jumping in the water quickly, Eli grabbed the boat and hauled it to shore with all the strength and adrenaline that he had. Boat and boy were safe.



Beyond the take-out lay deadly rapids, which began as a wave train that one Scout barely escaped.



Too dangerous! View of the South Fork of the Flathead from trail above.

Once everyone had exited the river, it was time for lunch as we set up the boats to dry before packing them away. This was a perfect place to exit the river and transition back into backpackers. We were on an exposed river bed that had been baking in the sun for hours. We laid out our wet clothes and shoes on the hot rocks, and soon they were dry or nearly dry. This would be particularly important given that our last three miles of loaded hiking lay ahead, and dry feet are far less likely to blister than feet in wet shoes and socks.

Riker enjoyed the hike back. He finally was in control again, and led the crew along the trails as if he knew the way. Sometimes he got so far ahead that we understood how he got lost in the first place! The return trail took the high road while the river took the low road, and we had several glimpses of the treacherous rapids we had avoided. Beautiful from above, but deadly otherwise, we were glad to be hiking rather than paddling.

When we finally came close to the parking lot, we had a few surprises. First, Gabe's dad was waiting for him, and he came up the trail to meet us. Next, Riker's owner greeted us with cold Coca-Colas, much to the pleasure of the Scouts and to utter tail-wagging excitement for Riker. We had done a Good Turn by helping this dog, so we had expected no reward and Scoutmaster Dietrich almost pulled out the [Unknown Scout](#) story to decline compensation. But giving a gift of thanks is often as important to the giver as it is to the recipient, so we graciously accepted the sodas and said our fond farewell to our sixteenth crew member. After taking a few pictures and loading the vans, we set off out of The Bob.



Riker reunited!!

The return trip included a stop at [the Huckleberry Patch](#) for huckleberry ice cream and then wound its way through the southern part of Glacier National Park. It was a long ride, and many fell into a well-earned sleep. The staff at the lodge held dinner for us. We ate after everyone showered, and nobody complained about going to sleep in a nice, soft bed.

OUR FINAL DAY

Our late arrival on Saturday left no time that night to do the usual post-trek procedures. Accordingly, we cleaned our stoves and pots, repacked the rafts, and turned in the shelters on Sunday morning. After another wonderful breakfast, we had a close-out meeting to share our overall impressions and our final thorns, buds, and roses. Everyone agreed that the trip was flawless.

At 11:20 AM outside Helena Airport, we said good-bye to Mr. Koller and thanked him for his support, fishing-knowledge, and companionship. We boarded the plane for long flight home. In Salt Lake, we bid farewell to Mr. Miller and his son. At 11:30 PM, six young men in Class A uniforms greeted their parents in the baggage area at Dulles International Airport. Each parent saw that their son – once a little Cub Scout in a cute blue uniform – had returned taller, stronger, and quite a bit more confident.



Parting ways in Salt Lake City.

EPILOGUE



Click to enlarge the map.

The Scouts and Scouters in our crew prepared for months for this adventure, and the hard work paid off. The crew traversed a total of 20 miles on foot, and 43 afloat. We saved a wonderful dog, survived an earthquake, and experienced as pristine a wilderness as any in the United States. We have stayed in touch by sharing the many wonderful photos shown in these pages.

We thank everyone who made this trip possible!



Big Sky, Big Water, and Big Mountains! Thanks, MOHAB!!