

A Double-Digit Day

In the morning we had a steep climb in glorious sunshine up to ME 17. I relaxed on a bench on the near side of the highway, drinking in the 180° distant views to the northwest. Mountains to the left and Mooselookmeguntic Lake to the right dominated the scene. Out of sight, off to the right, lay the town of Rangeley on the northeast end of Rangeley Lake.

We had climbs from ME 17 north, but nothing dramatic on this sunny, warm day with a little breeze. The trail went past Long Pond and then Sabbath Day Pond, where I stopped for lunch at a small picnic table right on the narrow beach looking out over the shallow water. I thought I'd risk a skinny dip. I wasn't worried about being embarrassed. I was sure that if any thru-hikers came by, no matter their gender, they wouldn't be either. Other hikers, maybe. But thru-hikers, no. I dipped, dried, ate, and left.

We had not hiked 10 miles or more per day since August 29th, 23 days ago. The terrain today did not have a lot of ups and downs, and I felt we could pick up speed. Invigorated from my swim, I was ready to make tracks.

I got my stride and moved right along, confident that this was going to be a double-digit day. It was a cheer, a motivating fly-wheel driving my rapid pace:

A DOUBLE-DIGIT DAY!
A DOUBLE-DIGIT DAY!
A DOUBLE-DIGIT DAY!

I was repeating those syllables like the punctuations of a powerful piston driving me forward, and then—WHAM!

I was eating a large tree root before I knew what happened. I rose slowly and realized I had hurt myself. Now on my feet, I noted that my lower front teeth were butting up against my left incisor, which

had been pushed in. I took a napkin from my pocket and patted my mouth. Blood. Both my upper and lower lips were cut.

I had tripped over something in the trail with my right foot, and I went down. I was moving forward at such a pace that I couldn't stop myself. No stumbling forward; no getting my feet under me. I was face down in an instant.

I'm sure my right arm broke my fall. The involuntary action of my reflexes had acted without me thinking. I'm sure that without those reflexes, I would have been hurt more; worse still if I'd hit a rock.

I was not in pain. Something significant happened, so we'd deal with it. I got up and kept hiking. The usual routine—keep going.

My best bet would have been to get into Rangeley by nightfall and tend to the tooth in the morning. But in an hour or so, Theo and I came to a campsite on a pond where someone had cut a lot of wood and piled it. It was a little after 5:00. We could get water from a piped spring, so we stayed the night there.

I texted my oral-maxillofacial-surgeon brother-in-law in Reading, Pennsylvania, and attached some pictures of my mouth. I thought I had fractured the jaw bone at the left incisor's root and asked if he could recommend a dentist in Rangeley, Maine.

Coverage was spotty, but we were able to communicate briefly. He said I'd be fine with a general dentist, but he didn't know any in Rangeley.

It wasn't a problem. I'd sleep and deal with the dentist issue in the morning. We were 4.8 miles from the highway that went into Rangeley. We could probably get into town before lunch.

It was not a double-digit day.



Little Swift River Pond, 4.8 miles from the road to Rangeley

Rangeley

At 6:42 on September 22, the sun shone brightly through my translucent tent. I felt compelled to go to the water's edge to capture the black silhouette of shoreline trees rising up into the shimmering sky above and sinking into their reflections below. They looked like feathers on two arrows merging at the far end of the lake in a vanishing bull's-eye.

At breakfast, as on the night before, I managed to chew carefully, never fully occluding my molars. After eating, I searched "dentist in Rangeley, Maine." There was one. I put the phone on Speaker and held it as far over my head as possible to reach a signal. When the dentist answered, I told him what happened and asked, "Is there any chance you'd be able to see me today?"

"Well, if you can get here by 2:00 I can. I'll be closing then."

I arranged for a shuttle pickup at 12:00 noon, explaining my need. The driver said he'd be there. Theo and I boogied, but not enough to trip again!

The driver knew where the dentist's office was and took me right there. It looked deserted. I asked the driver to hold while I checked. The receptionist and dentist were in with no one waiting. All was well.

While I waited, I found the magazine of the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association. The dentist and I had something in common.

He came to take me back. I mentioned the magazine.

"Oh, yeah. You a pilot?"

"Yes, but I don't fly anymore," I told him.

An X-ray of my tooth showed it was dislodged from the bone. He gave me a local anesthetic, then stood behind me, wrapping both his forearms around my neck. He stuck the gloved index fingers of

both hands in my mouth, with one finger on the tooth, and the other helping to push the top finger up into my skull. It was so hard to accomplish, that he took a breath and repositioned his fingers. His whole upper body was hell-bent on forcing the tooth back into its socket.

Pop! In it went! I guess it took about as much force to get it back in as it did to knock it out.

Once the tooth was in place, the dentist squeezed the upper jaw in around the tooth to reduce the fracture. He told me not to bite on it for several weeks. I asked if pain would be my guide. He said yes.

I was imagining a charge anywhere from \$500 to \$1,500. I thanked the dentist, who, by the way, appreciated that looking at acoustical ceiling tiles is not the most entertaining view when you're spending time in a dentist's chair. Since his office sat on a hill overlooking Rangeley Lake, he had mounted a long mirror on the ceiling so a patient could see the lake behind him. Beautiful!

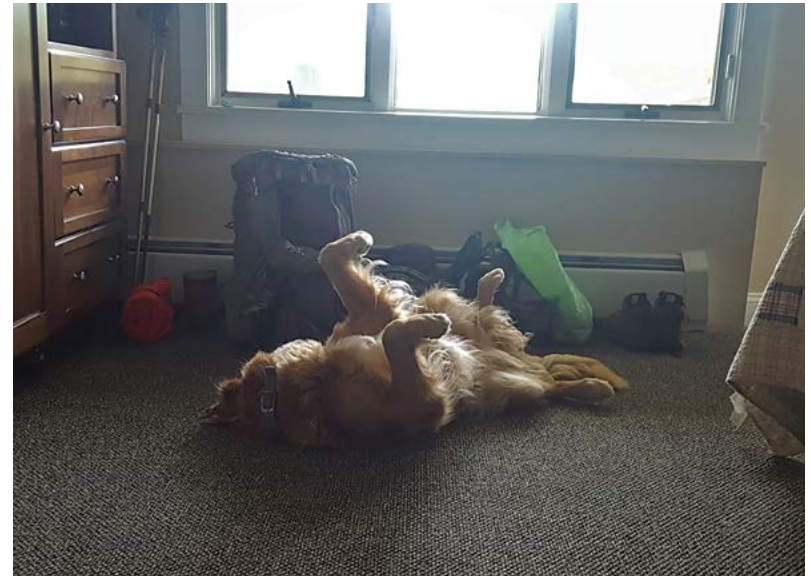
The pleasant receptionist texted me a digital image of the X-ray at my request and presented me with the office bill: \$99.00!

Something that could have been so very bad was entirely tolerable. I had no pain to speak of in my mouth, tooth, jaw, or wallet. The tooth area was sensitive for over a month afterward but, hey, that was not a problem.

From the side porch of the dentist's office, where I had tied up Theo, I called the Rangeley Inn just down the hill. They had a place in an annex building out back for Theo and me. It wasn't cheap, but I decided to treat myself.

Our room was luxurious with a sliding glass door out to a small deck in the back, overlooking a large lawn and Haley Pond. Theo was quick to adapt, rolling on his back, chest and legs in the air.

I stopped at a laundromat a short way back up the hill, visited an outfitter, and decided to try Sarge's Sports Pub and Grub right across from the Inn for supper. Theo was an instant hit with my fellow patrons. I ordered soup and a sandwich and, of course, a beer or two.



Theo chillin'

As I sat eating, a woman I had met at the top of Bemis Mountain came over to talk. I loved reconnecting with hikers I'd seen earlier on the trail. I told her about my fall the day before. She pointed to two big eggs on her forehead and remarked, "We all fall."

Her trail name was Prov for Providence. She told me that our meeting on Bemis meant a lot to her. She'd been feeling down and a little sorry for herself and, when she saw me, many years older than she, with Theo, making our way, it gave her a boost. It was good to see her again.

Back in the room, I repaired gaping holes in Theo's saddlebags. Between our shakedown hikes and the AT, they had lasted through many scrapes in over 2,400 miles. I used several big safety pins in my repair kit to fasten thick, black duct tape over the holes. The fix got us through and is still holding strong.

With my chores done and dinner in my belly, I fed Theo on the back deck and relaxed there for a while before turning in.

The Inn and Farmhouse

September 23rd. I went to the Inn for breakfast in the dining room with the other house guests. It was a nice spread with plenty of everything. I sat at a table by myself and noted a handsome couple at a corner table by the window. They each seemed to be in their own worlds, reading and just being quiet. The woman was tall and attractive; the gentleman probably her height but not extra tall for a man. He had a grey beard. Both of them seemed a little reserved.

Our paths didn't cross, and I didn't force them to. We were all enjoying the quiet.

One pricey night at the Inn was enough, so I arranged to stay at The Farmhouse, a hostel up the hill. I would call for a ride when I was ready. Meanwhile, I had some things to do online, so I got permission to occupy a corner of the room by the fireplace and come and go as I needed for a few hours.

After lunch at Sarge's, I worked until 5:30, then called The Farmhouse for a ride. The hostel was full. I was invited to hang out with the family around the large kitchen if I wanted, and then sit at the dining room table for supper. It was pasta, served from a large pot in the kitchen. These were laid-back folks. A little messy. A little dirt under the fingernails. So what's not to love?

Theo and I had adequate private quarters in the basement where we slept well.

Lost

Next morning we were back on the trail by 10:15. A sign read:

1.8 MILES TO PIAZZA ROCK.

Another for Saddleback Mountain read:

DO NOT BEGIN FROM THIS POINT LATER THAN NOON. THE ROUND TRIP TO THE SUMMIT IS 7.8 ROUGH MILES.

These were signs for day-hikers. Thru-hikers just kept going.

Back in Georgia on Day 4, I had met Andrea and Optimistic Dreamer. OD was a Yo-Yo, one who hikes one direction and turns around to hike back. He had started at Katahdin and was almost finished with the return trip, hiking in memory of his dad, son, and two little brothers. He got as far as Piazza Rock where he twisted his ankle and had to quit. These so-close and so-sad stories broke my heart.



Optimistic Dreamer (OD), hiking with a purpose

We passed three ponds on the way to the 2,500-foot summit of Saddleback where we could see several lakes—Rangeley, Mooselookmeguntic, and Saddleback—in the sun with clouds gathered overhead. Nature was almost overwhelming my spirit. It bombarded my soul with gut-wrenching views, while hinting of certain bleakness farther north. A subtle sadness was settling in. I was paying a price but none too great for the gain. I would persist through the darkening, colder days that were in the offing.