

The mountains are molehills

At a recent meeting of the Sierra Club in New Orleans, there were for sale official Sierra Club tee shirts imprinted with a quotation from our founder, John Muir: "Go to the mountains and get their good tidings." Bear in mind that this garment was being peddled in a geographic locale that geologists have scientifically identified as The Flattest Place on Earth.

New Orleans is so flat that even laser-beam instruments are unable to sense even the slightest curvature of the surface of the earth. As all New Orleanians know, the city leaders created Monkey Hill in Audubon Park 100 years ago just to show people what a hill looks like.

As I read John Muir's exhortation on a Sierra Club member's shirt, I began to wonder if this wasn't Ol' John's polite and elegant way of telling us, as a sheriff of the old west might have, to get out of town.

Throughout history mountains have been revered as place of beauty, spiritual retreat, and religious experience. Nineteenth century British writer John Ruskin said that "Mountains are the beginning and the end of all natural scenery." Mystic and poet William Blake wrote that "Great things are done when men and mountains meet."

And the British writer and ahead-of-his-time hippie, Lord Byron, said that "To me the mountains are a feeling, but the hum of human cities torture." Check out the Bible and you find that Noah ran the ark aground on Mount Ararat, Moses got the ten commandments on Mount Sinai, and other important events happened on Mount Olivet, Mount Carmel, and Mount Hebron. The most important speech in the new testament was a sermon given on a mountain.

Does all this mean that we delta dwellers are spiritually and psychically wanting? Where are these mountains whose tidings we have to get? The nearest are at least a hard day's drive away; to the north (the Ozarks), the east (the Smokies), or the west (Big Bend Park).

The highest point in Louisiana is Mount Driskill, somewhere near Arcadia in Bienville Parish. I have not seen this geologic wonder, and I am told that not many others have either. This is because one has to know just where to look when gazing at a rather nondescript ridge of hills in a thick forest.

John Muir's mellifluous words notwithstanding, Mount Driskill is little more than a geologic zit on the bearded face of north Louisiana.

The Delta Chapter of the Sierra Club is therefore caught in some sort of semantic

conundrum. How can we be "delta" (flat alluvial plain) and still be part of the "Sierra" (mountains) Club? How can we follow our founder's advice without ceasing to exist?

If a national conservation organization had started in south Louisiana a hundred years ago and had called itself The Estuary Society or The Coastal Club, there might be today an Ozark Chapter or a Donner Pass Chapter or a Great Smokies Chapter. Would our founder have charged his followers with "Go to the swamp and get its good tidings."?

The mountain mystique is a deeply ingrained part of our culture. As I look out of my office window in the central business district of New Orleans, I see a police officer riding a bicycle past a parked car with a bumper sticker that proclaims "We Support N.O.P.D. Mountain Bike Patrol."


Putting cops on bikes is probably a good idea, but do New Orleans cops really need bikes that are supposed to be used in mountains to get around in the Flattest Place on Earth? Are they better law enforcement officers and are we better protected because they are riding mountain bikes instead of non-mountain bikes?

Meanwhile, as I write this, I have to peer over a mountain of work on my desk, so I think I'll break for coffee. The label on the coffee bag says the stuff is "mountain grown," snobbishly implying that it's better than anything that might grow in the low, flat delta. Δ

— Earl Higgins

Legacy

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