

MY WILD PIG ESCORT

By Chuck Gillet

As an up-hill runner I had been eyeing the top of Sonoma mountain with anticipation ever since I moved in 1977 to my new Glen Ellen "estate" nestled near the bottom of the Valley of the Moon. It was the fall of 1979 and I had my fill of jigsawing wood patterns for my new "temple" fence, and with a good night's sleep under my belt the time seemed right to go for it.

I left my piles of sawdust and curved wood cuttings forthwith and hoofed up through Jack London Park past the vineyards and London's "innovative" circular stone piggery, and plunged into the moist, shaded Redwood forest above them. Further up I dashed past the stone wall that still dams up Jack's old swimming hole, fairly certain by my reckoning I was on the road that would take me all the way up to the peak. After steadily gaining altitude as expected, the rough, four-wheeler dirt road started to take a very long arc right back down on the eastern face I was supposed to be going up. I was really getting frustrated. As the road continued to go even further back down I decided, why not, I'm in shape, I'll just run straight up the mountain.

The slope seemed ^{well} beyond 45 degrees, but had excellent footing courtesy of dry leaves and pliable soil. I churned toward the top like a 4-16-4 steam locomotive in low gear, totally, and I mean absolutely engrossed in the effort. About half way up something strange happened. Sweating like a racehorse, I had been maintaining my intensive pace for about twenty minutes when I became vaguely aware of the sound of rustling leaves off to the right and behind me. By this time I was in a semi-hypnotic state from the exhausting effort. Without breaking step, I eased up on my concentration just enough to get off a glance in the direction of the unexpected sound.

Just as I did so a medium-sized, four-legged creature with black and white markings pulled up beside me and playfully loped along on my right (and comfortable) side right up the mountain, effortlessly matching me step for step. Being, by this time, in a deep running trance and in the middle of "nowhere," I remember dimly but emphatically wondering, "What the hell is a dog doing up here!" I was just not prepared to see who my impromptu running companion really was. I heard some other fainter rustling sounds further off to the side and then after a bit my "guide" finally peeled off to the north on my right and I was left to continue plowing up the mountain on my own, or so I thought.

About a quarter mile or so short of the summit I came up over the edge of a small patio-sized level area studded with three slender

Live Oak trees arranged in a fairly tight triangular pattern. I decided this would be a good place to take a break and check out the view that I had definitely earned.

Shazam!! The next thing I knew I was eight to ten feet up in those trees silently looking down. It was as though I had literally "fallen up" the tree and the exact opposite of my experience as a child when I suddenly found myself flat on my back looking up at a high branch where I should have still been perched.

As I now looked down from on high with great curiosity I saw that my guide had suddenly reappeared with a bunch of his family and friends in tow, all wandering about wondering where I had gone. My escort and his entourage, it turned out, had been a pack of "friendly" wild pigs who couldn't resist trying to check out this strange creature who was well off the beaten path, chugging right straight up the mountain, and who had now just disappeared into thin air.

Years later my brother Jeffrey told me about the night he was on a moonlight run in the same vicinity of Sonoma Mountain when a pack of boisterous wild pigs came crashing out of the forest about twenty yards off the road just ahead of him. I mused over whether this other member of "my family" had also been "greeted" by my escort and his clan. Jeffrey had also heard from an old timer that some of the porcine detainees at Jack London's estate had opted for the feral life on the mountain over catching pneumonia in the domesticated confines of Jack's "state-of-the-art," dank, cold stone piggery. Could it be that my escort's playful and nonferal readiness to lope up the mountain with me and share his friends traced back to eons of direct and continuous human contact which ended at Jack's?

I have no memory of how I got up those trees and for some reason, I didn't seem to experience the slightest fear. This was probably because there was no time for it. After the micro-second when I should have been jolted by a heavy surge of adrenaline, I was already safely ensconced up in those Live Oaks getting a kick out of watching my new mountain "friends" shuffling and poking around below me. My imprinted primordial respect for the "wild boar" just automatically clicked in. I was very grateful that my lightning reaction had also graciously left ample room for me to quietly appreciate the fascination of what was taking place.

What happened that memorable Fall afternoon somehow permanently pierced the armor of my desensitized urban and civilized veneer. I began to be irresistibly drawn more and more to solo runs in the wooded hills and wilderness around me, and when it happened, to experience new encounters with the wild ones who appear where I happen to roam. These meetings have always been expectedly unexpected and delightful moments to be savored and remembered. One such later encounter in the Wyoming Rockies with a family of

Pronghorns has left a particularly powerful and lasting afterglow in my heart. In retrospect I now think my wild pig escort up Sonoma Mountain was the dramatic commencement for me of a new and unspoken apprenticeship and oneness with nature which still happily continues to this day.

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