Mysterious Maverick Range

The Uinta Mountains stretch in a long line; high peaks thrust into the sky, and snow fields glittering like lakes of molten silver; and pine forests in somber green; and rosy clouds playing around the borders of huge, black masses; and heights and clouds, and mountains and snow fields, and forests and rocklands, are blended into one grand view.

— John Wesley Powell, 1869

Since the spring of 1951 the Uintas have never been far from my mind. That was the year of my first crossing. Soon afterwards my job would be to study the basin south of the mountains. But one must understand the mountains in order to understand the basin. They go together yoked in a marriage that will last until the mountains wear away.

I’ve crossed the Uintas or traversed their length perhaps 40 times, each trip different. The mountains never look the same, and the little I learn each time accumulates slowly. The mountains hold their secrets tightly, locked in crystals and grains. Unlike most other ranges, the Uintas run east–west. To further confound the world, they’ve moved north 12 miles into the northern basin — maverick mountains loose in the crust.

A few days ago we — Bruhn, Picard, Beck — finished a manuscript on the history of the Uintas and on the ancient geography of the southern basin. Printed on an Apple computer in a corner of Bruhn’s basement, the words are black and blocky, the tables sharp and clear, and the figures glossy and substantial with confident, thin, dark lines that trace the evolution of mountains and basins. Are we close at all to the actual history? The manuscript is on the editor’s desk. Its absence leaves me both apprehensive and relieved. It’s too late to do anything more with the words. I want it back and I don’t want it back.
On this bright February morning I decide to look again at the Uintas. My friend, McBride, is in town and wants to see the range. His nerves are unsteady from administration duties; mine are just unsteady. There is a chance that on the summit or on one of the flanks, nerves will quiet. Geologists have always gone to mountains for sanity and safety.

McBride has been up since 6 o’clock, sitting in the hotel lobby reading a whimsical piece about the bestowal of professional glory in Lafayette. He rises early, has high energy, and is always ready for a field trip. He is short and trim, has a prominent Adam’s apple, and has brown curly hair that further softens an already boyish face. The first time I saw him, he was standing in a hotel lobby in St. Louis, talking to a student about a thesis. A crowd of listeners gathered around him. Some of them were joking about his bolo tie whose center piece was a scorpion encased in plastic. About 20 years ago he owned a single club tie. Bolo ties were his trademark then. Now he wears club ties and dark blue suits. Geology is his business and, except for an occasional movie, geology is his recreation. His specialties are sandstone, West Texas formations, and chert. These have been enough to fashion an illustrious research and teaching career. His bibbed overalls, red flannel shirt, and pink sweater take him a long way this morning from club ties and blue pinstripes.

We set out late. My fault; I overslept. To get to the north side of the Uintas we cut through the Wasatch Range east of Salt Lake City, cross young, 30-million-year-old volcanic rocks, and turn northeast between the orange conglomerate walls of Echo Canyon — Interstate 80 to Evanston in southwestern Wyoming. Drifting wood smoke, gray dirty clouds, and oil derricks hang above Evanston. The light snow during the night has melted, and the hilly streets above the Bear River are wet and slippery. Evanston resembles other large towns along the Union Pacific railroad — Green River, Rock Springs, Rawlins, Laramie. Evanston is the county seat of Uinta County, the 14th most populous county of the 23 in Wyoming, a state of few counties and few people. People in Wyoming like it that way.

McBride wants to grab a sandwich. I hesitate. I scan my memory and find nothing on edible sandwiches in Evanston. From