



## Gigglebytes: Once is Too Much

Professional Surveyors Magazine - April 2006

There are certain experiences in surveying that we know are once in a lifetime. Most of those we cherish when they occur. Many times we aren't even aware of them until they are actually happening to us, like sitting on top of a high cliff or ledge after setting a monument, taking the time to look out over a series of peaks, maybe even the continental divide, while the setting sun transforms the azure sky to a beautiful crimson. You do this knowing that you'll be hiking back to the truck, picking your way slowly and carefully down the draw in the half light, but also knowing it's completely worth it. Unfortunately, this is a different kind of once in a lifetime surveying story.

Now that it's completely over, and I do mean completely over, because I've been told by people other than my family that there are no more "remnants" of the experience accompanying my presence, I can say that I'm glad. Glad of course that it's over, but also glad because I know that this can only be a once in a lifetime occurrence. It's just not possible that this could happen to someone more than once. God wouldn't and couldn't allow that. If you are aware that skunks stand on their heads when they spray, you can probably identify with this story. I had wanted to get an early start because I knew there was a lot to accomplish that day. I had other projects scheduled and clients waiting. I would have to do some scouting and recon to find the corner monuments in question first. Then I'd have to complete the boundary traverse started about a week before. And then I wanted to do some calculations and determinations while still on site so I could set the monuments before leaving for the day. The site was far enough of a drive away that it wouldn't be cost-effective to return another time just to set the monuments. I'm sure this is a song and dance that you've all heard and/or felt before and probably on more than one occasion.

The property is up in the mountains. I drove along a trail that could hardly even be called a Jeep trail to where I could resume my traverse work. Once there I spent about 15 minutes getting my ideas together and organizing the plats and records prior to starting my recon. Besides, I wanted to wait until there was enough light to see where I was going. After getting out of the truck and grabbing the requisite equipment I started up the mountainside.

I'm sure that the skunk was as start-led to see me as I was to see it. Obviously, if that were not the case, then we would have just avoided each other and I wouldn't be writing this now. I've seen plenty of skunks from a distance and have had no serious encounters with them. He, and I'm sure it was a "he" because a "she" would not have acted in such a cold and antagonistic fashion, was about 25 feet above me on the slope. As I came around a large ponderosa pine, he came into view. If I had been able to recognize it immediately as a skunk, I think I may have been able to duck back behind that pine, thus being blocked from the direct hit. But it was the first time, and as I've said I'm sure it was also the last time, that I have seen a skunk standing on its head. His position caused me to be momentarily stupefied about what exactly I was peering upon so that there was just enough time to make a direct hit unavoidable. Of course by the time I was able to identify this unusually shaped animal in front of me as a skunk, I didn't even need my sense of sight to do so.

After distributing his aromatic essence on and around me, I was again startled to see him slowly and calmly strut away with a seeming pride in his pace, glancing back once in disdain. This is how I can be sure that it was a he skunk and not a she skunk. I think a she skunk would have been more apologetic in her exit strategy, having done such a deed out of surprise without being directly threatened. I was able to witness his exodus because I was holding my breath while trying to formulate a plan of action for when the inevitable need to inhale would finally overcome me.

I am a former free diver. Free diving is simply holding your breath with only snorkeling gear and diving under water to a depth no deeper than that from which you can hopefully return without first passing out. I mention this because there's a technique that free divers learn in order to stay under water for longer periods of time that I was trying to incorporate into my plan. A person's brain reacts, not to a lack of oxygen, but to an increase in carbon dioxide when it sends the signal that you need to take in more air. If you train yourself not to respond to the initial signal from your brain, you can get a sort of "second wind" and hold your breath for a considerably longer period of time because there is still plenty of oxygen in your lungs. It takes some effort and training, but having done it before, albeit some years ago, I was attempting to use this technique to my benefit. I knew it was a delay tactic, but I needed time to determine a course of action.

I'm not sure if it was the lack of oxygen or increase in carbon dioxide, but I was totally unable to formulate any conceivable plan, while standing dumb-founded on that mountainside holding my breath, that was going to in any way lessen the impact of the simple act of breathing. I didn't, during that time, seriously consider holding my breath until I actually passed out, but I wish I had. At the least it would have delayed the total sensual bombardment.

Later I thought that at best I may have fallen on something sharp and just died on the spot. Death would certainly have been less humiliating and it would have also given me a chance to ask the Supreme Being about my theory—assuming I headed that direction of course.

The sheer power of the stench is beyond description. I spent a full week not being permitted in my own house, eating my meals on the back porch, and sleeping in my old pup tent in the backyard. We eventually decided to burn all the materials I came in direct contact with in a semi-religious ceremony. For several days I was made extremely nauseous by the aroma. The truck will never be the same, even though it has been professionally cleaned THREE TIMES! I am extremely grateful to all of our well-wishing friends and colleagues who have provided a multitude of recipes for extinguishing this persistent intoxicant. I think they all worked a little, but none worked completely. Eventually you think it has gone away, but then someone makes a remark within earshot and you realize that even though the event of a lifetime occurred THREE WEEKS AGO, it persists. Eventually though, it does fade and it IS gone for good. And even though eventually has finally come, I can't yet laugh about it.

No longer does rising early in the morning and arriving on site to see the sun rise hold the same pleasure for me. After all, an ounce of prevention is far better than 15gallons of tomato juice. The thrill seeker in me still lives, but doesn't want to live through that again at any cost.

This kind of experience is so horrible that it should make up for the karma of all previous lifetimes. Is it not natural for me to question the very existence of a Supreme Being after such an experience? And although I still firmly believe in that Being (after all, this was only a temporary inconvenience and maybe He was just sending me a reminder or hint or something), were it to be permitted by such a Being that this happen to me a second time, then would I be justified in becoming an atheist? I consider my faith strong but still I'd rather not face that ... question ... again.

If there exists an omniscient, all-powerful, forgiving, loving, and charitable Supreme Being who has created and manages this universe, then is there a possible way that that Being could ever allow for an experience like this to happen to me again in this lifetime? Could it be grounds for dismissal?

Do you smell something?

### About the Author



**Earl F. Henderson, PLS**

*Earl is owner of Zenith Land Surveying, Inc. in Boulder, Colorado. He has been surveying in various states since 1989.*