

The Trail Home



Along the Pacific Crest



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with A. James Wohlpart

The Trail Home: Along the Pacific Crest

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Dedicated to my parents, Kaspar and Rosa Wohlpert, who inspired me to walk through the forests and the fields of this precious earth contemplating the delicate hand of God that caresses all.

And to my children, David, Heidi, Jim, Bridgett, and Kahti, and to my grandchildren, Michael, Zach, Kat, Mark, Jenna, Maggie, and Ethan, may they love the earth as much as I love them.

And, lastly and most profoundly, to my wife, Pam, who has supported me beyond the measure that a man deserves when he walks the face of this earth.

So, the man cried out in despair

“Touch me God, and let me know you are here.”

Whereupon, God reached down and touched the man.

But the man brushed away the butterfly and walked on.

(Author unknown)

Table of Contents

Introduction

Two Beginnings	3
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Part One: Southern California

Chapter One: The Laguna Mountains and the San Felipe Hills	
April 20 to April 26	17
Chapter Two: San Jacinto and San Bernardino Mountains	
April 27 to May 11	40
Chapter Three: The San Gabriel Mountains	
May 12 to May 19	68
Chapter Four: The Mojave Desert and the Tehachapi Mountains	
May 20 to May 25	91

Part Two: Central and Northern California

Chapter Five: Sierra Nevada, Piute, and Scodie Mountains, and Kennedy Meadows	
May 26 to June 1	111
Chapter Six: The High Sierras South	
June 3 to July 3	130
Chapter Seven: The High Sierras North	
July 7 to July 24	162
Chapter Eight: Northern California/The Cascades	
July 24 to August 19	185

Part Three: Oregon and Washington

Chapter Nine: Southern Oregon Forests and Volcanoes August 20 to August 30	213
Chapter Ten: Northern Oregon Forests and Volcanoes September 1 to September 12	241
Chapter Eleven: Southern Washington Forests, Volcanoes, and Snow September 13 to September 25	267
Chapter Twelve: Northern Washington Forests, Volcanoes, and Snow September 26 to October 10	290

Conclusion

Beginnings and Endings October 10 to October 13	313
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Introduction

Two Beginnings

*Casting off,
Leaving familiar shores,
Heading for the unknown.
Lord, bless this journey!*

October 10, 1999

As I plunge down the rocky trail cluttered with forlorn patches of crusty snow, a razor-sharp and ruler-straight treeless groove in the solid carpet of trees on the next ridge electrifies me. A swath some twenty to thirty feet wide creates a denuded corridor through the dense forest. I stop abruptly.

My hiking partner, Jozsi, head genuflected, plows into me. He stares at me, annoyed.

“What’s up?”

“Do you see that line without trees over there?”

“You mean that firebreak?”

“Yes. But I don’t think it’s a firebreak. I think it’s the border.”

“*Tue mich nicht verarschen!*” (Don’t make a fool of me!), he replies testily.

“No. I really think it is the border.”

He pushes past me, clawing the trail with his trekking poles. He thinks I’m playing a trick on him. And he is justified in questioning my sincerity. Too often throughout our journey, I have taken advantage of his naïveté and unfamiliarity with the American language. At the beginning of our journey, he took every one of my utterances as gospel truth, even when I thought they were too outrageous to believe. Too often I had to backtrack and tell him that I had exaggerated or—worse—told a lie. I am now reaping what I had sown. I charge after him, cranking my neck to peer

around bends in the trail. Then, suddenly, without warning, without fanfare, without the clashing of cymbals, we arrive; we glare at the familiar five posts marking the end of the trail wondering if they are a mirage.

Jozsi, speechless, stares in bewilderment.

The end of the trail—an end for which we are not ready. We drop our packs, congratulate each other awkwardly, uncertain of the meaning of arriving at the Canadian border and completing our trek. Over the last five and a half months and 2600 miles, we had grown like a vine into the trail, spreading roots deep and wide, connecting with the landscape and with the people who supported us.

The stillness of the forest swallows our uncertainty. I leave Jozsi and sit down in the wet grass, leaning against an enormous, decaying tree stump. Rusty pine needles, angular rocks and wet grass stretch out a welcoming hand. I scoop up a handful of pine needles and let their fragrance intoxicate and delight me. A rock, the size of a baseball, sits perfectly in my hand. Its rough and fractured edges press gently into my toughened flesh, its pulse and mine becoming one. I softly caress the wet grass and let its life-force flow into and mingle with my streaming blood. Time pauses. Past and future coalesce into the present and the universe shrinks to this moment, this place.

The many hardships, the many fears, the tiredness of being on the trail evaporate like an early morning mist with the rise of the sun, leaving me with a deep and quiet stillness that spreads out from my soul into the forest. The many miles and days and the physical hardships have become part of me, transforming my very being. My stomach is tight, my legs and arms taut, my eyes bright. My soul has expanded.

Atomic particles, more vapor than fluid, float in the air coating all surfaces with a sheer glaze. Discrete specks fuse, then fuse again, finally swelling into fat drops that bead down my face and clothes and splash from leaves and grass blades. Like those tiny droplets seeking out one another

and clinging to each other in an ineluctable embrace, I sit here one with the forests, the mountains, the deserts, the wind, with the rain and sun through which we have come.

I am at the end of the trail, yet I know it is only the beginning. A new life, a new day, a new trail awaits me.

~ ~ ~

April 19, 1999

Mid-afternoon. We stand in the searing sun near the Mexican border ready to begin our trek, oblivious of what to expect and what lay in store for us. My nephew Edwin cranks down the window of his car and yells over the roar of the engine, "If you guys need to be picked up, just give me a call. I'll be glad to come and get you. Anytime. Anywhere."

With a big grin on his face, he takes off down the rutted track toward Campo, California—a billowing cloud of white dust chasing him, settling on us and the surrounding vegetation like freshly falling snow. I know full well that his mischievous smile means "when" you need to be picked up—not "if." Edwin had met us the day before at the Los Angeles airport and driven us to the southern end of the Pacific Crest Trail, the PCT as hikers know it, at the Mexican border, about two miles south of Campo, California, and fifty miles east of San Diego.

With the sound of Edwin's car slowly evaporating in the distance, we linger on a small knoll overlooking Campo. Unlike the undifferentiated hills that sway like billows across the land, this knoll is crowned with a set of five whitish-gray posts marking the beginning of the trail for those hiking north on the PCT—and the end of the trail for those who begin in Canada. Behind the rise, the dusty border road runs east-west, straight as a ruler, losing itself in a chalky haze. A tall metal fence on the southern shoulder of the road serves as a barrier against illegal crossings.

The trail marker on top of the knoll consists of five interconnected square wooden posts of unequal height with the tallest extending about six inches above our heads and the shortest knee-high. The tallest post holds the Pacific Crest Trail emblem, a rounded triangle with a tall, black, pointed conifer and a white mountain range in the center, both against a dark green background. A white border with black lettering wraps around the central image of tree and mountain range. "Pacific Crest Trail" is imprinted at the top and sides, and "National Scenic Trail" at the bottom. The inscriptions on the other three posts, starting with the shortest, read: "Elevation: 2915 Ft."; "Mexico to Canada—2627 Miles, 1988 A.D."; and "Southern Terminus, Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail, Established by Act of Congress on October 2, 1968." The guidebook indicates a mileage of 2651.5 to the U.S.-Canadian border and 2658.7 miles to Manning Park, Canada—our final destination. The discrepancy between the mileage on the post and the guidebook is due to changes in the route of the trail since 1988. The fifth post is bare.

We know that a similar set of posts with the same PCT emblem awaits us at the trail's northern terminus, yet we cannot imagine what we will face in the intervening miles. Between these two sets of posts, the PCT emblem would serve as our guide. Made of a variety of materials and fastened to an assortment of support structures, the trail marker would sometimes appear at regular, almost predictable intervals along the trail, and at other times long sections of the trail would be without it. In these cases our anxiety would always be at its highest level. More often than not, the emblem would be riddled with bullet holes of various sizes and defaced with scratches. In some places, posts bearing the emblem would be ripped out of the ground and smashed against rocks.

The Pacific Crest Trail hugs the crest of western mountain ranges, starting with the Laguna Mountains in the South and ending in the Siskiyou Mountains in the

North. It traverses a number of National Forests and Parks, State Parks and Recreation Areas, Wilderness Areas, an Indian Reservation, Bureau of Land Management lands, as well as privately owned lands. On our hike, we would pass through different ecosystems and geologic areas. In the south, we would hike through deserts and arid regions covered with chaparral; in the central section, we would traverse colorful alpine meadows and lofty mountain ranges with glacier-sculpted granite peaks encased in snow and ice; and finally, in the north, we would find ourselves in deep forests and major lava fields, below volcanic peaks clad in extensive glaciers. The trail would take us the length of the states of California, Oregon, and Washington from the Mexican to the Canadian border.

The hot afternoon sun bathes everything in a bright and unbroken light. Undulating hills roll like giant, frozen ocean swells northward until they fuse with the distant horizon. Phantom-like, they scintillate in the quivering air. Their desiccated, reddish, sandy soil is barely hidden beneath a sparse canopy of low, leathery, bristly shrubs. As we look at the winding trail before us, the heat makes it vibrate and heave and crack into discontinuous fragments. The trail looks unreal—much like the miles that lie between the five posts at the beginning and at the end of the trail.

“This is a dry, hot, hostile, and alien land,” I whisper to Jozsi my boyhood friend from Germany and companion of this trek.

“But beautiful,” he adds.

I heave my anvil-heavy pack onto my bent right knee, swing it with one quick thrust onto my back while simultaneously slipping my right arm, and then my left, through the shoulder straps. The pack now rests on my back with its full weight bearing down on my shoulders like two heavy barbells. Tightening my hip belt, I transfer some of the weight to my hips. Finally, I pull my shoulder and sternum straps taut. Jozsi follows my lead, although with a little less grace and more difficulty since his pack is heavier

than mine. We would undertake this maneuver several times a day, innumerable times during the next six months. After a few days it becomes a routine exercise but is always punctuated by heavy grunts. Taking hold of our trekking poles, we head North toward Canada and our unseen goal—nearly 2650 miles away.

We descend the knoll along the road my nephew had taken a few minutes earlier and make our way around a harrow-like implement that we guess is used by the Border Patrol to smooth the border road in order to detect footprints of illegal immigrants. A simple wooden sign near some shrubs points us to the trail which snakes around scattered, waist-high, green, leathery bushes and, paralleling the road to Campo, heads north. We are on our way—taking the first steps on a trek that will last nearly six months and lead us through some of the wildest, most untouched and grandiose regions of the western United States.

Realizing that, in our excitement to embark, we had forgotten to sign the Trail Register, we trudge back up to the knoll and find a tattered notebook in a rusty first-aid box strapped to the back of the tallest pole. I carefully unfurl the curled, brittle pages with hiker names, hometowns and destinations. Scanning the log, I note that a large group of individuals started within the past two weeks. I add my information with a small stub of a pencil: *4/19/1999; Al Wohlpart; Oak Ridge, TN*. I pause and then complete the register with our destination: *Canada*. Jozsi enters below mine: *19/4/1999; Josef Piller; Freising, Germany; Canada*. Jozsi and I shake hands for the second time and once again head down the knoll toward Campo. As we descend, a Border Patrol vehicle rolls up the slope. The driver looks at us, at first suspiciously, then a little friendlier. He waves and drives off without saying a word.

We head down the trail toward Campo once again. On the outskirts of town we pass a huge motor pool of Border Patrol vehicles baking in the sun like heavily armored

beetles. Just beyond the motor pool, the trail veers sharply away from the road. Here, we leave the trail and continue on the road to the Trading Post, which sits at the junction where the road we are on feeds into a major highway.

Squatting in the shade of the Trading Post, a cross between a supermarket and a gas station convenience store, we suck on a couple of cold drinks as we listen to an elderly man. His face is crisscrossed by deep furrows which are camouflaged by a week-old, gray stubble. I see in his face the trenches and barbed wire of a World War One battlefield. A dingy cowboy straw hat rides regally and squarely on his shiny head. He tells us that this is “the year” for rattlesnakes and that we would encounter an unbelievable number of the critters. Adding this good news to our other fears of poison oak, dehydration, bears, hypothermia, steep icy slopes, and hazardous stream crossings—dangers we had already gleaned from our extensive research about the trail—we watch as the bus from Los Angeles discharges a man and a woman with backpacks similar to ours—obvious PCT hikers. They come over to greet us. He is from Maine, she from Spain; we notice quickly that both are considerably younger and seem less prepared than us.

A car pulls up to our little group. A middle-aged lady emerges and explains that she is the PCT coordinator, here to offer us a place to stay for the night. Concerned that we may not be able to leave at the crack of dawn as planned, we thank her, decline her offer, and head toward the Railroad Museum, a mile across the road from the store. Through one of many e-mail messages posted on a web site devoted to PCT hikers, we had been informed that the Railroad Museum in Campo would provide shelter for PCT hikers.

We search the abandoned railroad yard for anyone, hollering “Hello” every few steps. Finally, just as we are about to give up our search, a tall, gaunt man in bib-

overalls with a railroad cap jauntily pushed to the back of his head emerges from a trailer.

“Howdy. We’re PCT hikers, looking for a place to stay.” I get right to the point.

“Well,” he takes his hat off and scratches his head. “You could stay in that Pullman over there, or the machine shop back there, or you can sleep on the platform next to the train.” His right index finger, straight as a rod, stabs the air and points to our three choices.

“We’ll stay on the platform.”

“Had a fellow come through here not too long ago. Came back after a week on the trail. Couldn’t take it. Hope you guys have better luck.” He turns and disappears into the trailer.

I make a final call to my wife and tell her that we would start our trek early the next morning. “Remember, I love you and will miss you and pray for you daily,” she ends our conversation in a tearful voice. I hang up and prepare for what I hope will be a quiet night’s sleep. As we settle in our sleeping bags, the couple we had met earlier that afternoon joins us on the platform.

A black, boundless vault punctuated by sharp, scintillating points of light stretches endlessly above us, so vast it seems to swallow the earth. The stars are bright, distinct; they have a sharpness, a clarity that seems to offer the key to the universe. Yet they throb and pulsate to the beat of an ancient rhythm heard only by them. The vastness above me and the unknown future ahead of me create a sense of unease and uncertainty. Will I be able to complete the trail? Am I really prepared for this? Why am I here? How have I gotten here?

For as long as I can remember, I have been in love with deep, silent forests, towering mountains encased in snow and ice, meadows teeming with wildflowers and rivers roaring to the ocean—places untouched by human hands. I have been fortunate that my need for these places has always been honored and understood by those in my life.

Unfortunately, my own drive to succeed and make the American dream a reality for myself and for my family obscured this love, particularly at my last job in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, where my life became fragmented and sterile like the desiccated landscape that surrounds me. Prior to that, as a faculty member at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, my love for wilderness and my joy in teaching made for a rich and rewarding life, albeit with meager monetary compensation. The seeds for my love of and connection to nature, I had begun to understand, had been sown in my childhood and youth in Germany, where I spent endless days playing in the hills, streams, and lakes. From this new perspective, looking backwards on the trail of my life, I wondered if the dislocation I experienced as a result of my professional aspirations could be overcome; I wondered if I could reconnect with the simple, profound yet ineffable joy that I felt in my youth when my life was tied closely to nature.

Because of the unhinging of my life, gradually and over a long period of time, my love for wilderness blossomed into a desire to make an extensive trek in the wilderness, a kind of retaliation against the materialistic nightmare that I was living. Like the trail before me, my dream had many ups and downs and had taken some strange twists and turns. I had shared my dream freely with my family and had repeatedly declared, in jest, that I would leave “in five years.” The five years had come and gone many times over. Career aspirations and responsibility for my family had held me in their grip and tied me to a certain lifestyle like a ship to a pier. But like the ship, I was yearning for the open sea, yearning to be tossed by the wind and the waves.

My initial inclination had been to take a solo trek in accord with Thoreau’s dictum that “no companion is as companionable as oneself.” Although most of my ventures into the backcountry had been with my children, close friends, or students, I had taken a handful of one-week solo trips in Tennessee’s Smoky Mountains and Wyoming’s Wind

River Range while at Kenyon College. My diaries of those trips expose a dichotomy of emotions. Daylight gave birth to euphoria and elation at being alone in the wilderness, while dusk and darkness bred fear and loneliness. The age-old fracture between “being part of” and “with someone” or “apart from” and “alone” cracked wide open as the sun exited the sky. Those ancient centrifugal and centripetal forces of integration and separation, of union and aloneness, brought me daily tears and laughter.

After some thoughtful soul searching, I had invited Josef (Jozsi) Piller to join me when I observed how excited and fascinated he became when I first told him about my dream in late 1998. At age 65, he had stayed in excellent physical condition by bicycling and cross-country skiing. I knew that he would make a good companion. When I first invited him to join me, I told him about my desire to spend as much time as possible alone on the trail. And so we agreed to hike separately during the day, meet for lunch, and then camp together at night.

I had met Jozsi in Germany in the early fifties. We had spent several years together in the Boy Scouts. In the mid-fifties, I came to the United States. And, for the next forty-four years, we kept in touch by mail and occasional visits. Our paths had diverged and now had come together again. Would our past association be enough of a bond to make us a good team during this trek? Selection of a companion for a trip of this extent and difficulty is very important. Each individual’s interests, priorities, and idiosyncrasies must somehow be meshed with those of the other and, in some circumstances, subordinated for the good of the team. We would be together for the next six months—sleeping sandwiched in a small tent, cooking and eating together, making decisions on when and where to camp every night, choosing routes in the absence of a trail, and exposing to each other ingrained habits that may not be accepted as graciously by the other as they were by our families.

The origin of my love for nature and my longing to be in the wilderness for an extensive period had long puzzled me. Why was I such an oddball wanting to go off into the wilderness on my own—leaving my family, friends, and all the comforts and distractions of modern life? None of my friends had such outlandish ideas. I responded to and nurtured this desire by reading everything that had to do with living and traveling for long periods in the wilderness, especially in the Arctic and Antarctic, Alaska and Northern Canada, as well as by hiking and trekking as much as my time allowed. Reading and hiking had not, however, satisfied this inner urge nor answered the question of its origin. Was this urge ingrained in and part of my very being—in my core? How had it gotten there? Who had put it there? Why was it there? Was there embedded in each of us a natural inclination to “wander” in remote and wild places, a “wanderlust” gene, which had mutated in the majority of people to a form that somehow depressed this inclination? Our ancestors’ fanning out into and exploring all corners of the world hint at such a possibility.

Why was I undertaking this trek? Was it in response to this inner urge? Was I running away from something—or was I running toward something? What did I hope to accomplish and what insights did I expect to gain? Was I fulfilling something deep within me? I wonder if I will find answers to any of these questions on my trek.

On one level, I had a pretty good idea of why I was here, though I didn’t fully understand the implications of the questions battering my mind. I wanted to get away from the familiar and stifling world of corporate, homogenized America. I wanted to separate myself from a culture that divests us of our humanity, that forces us to be consumed by the illusions of the past and the future, that does not allow us to experience the fullness of the present. A culture that instills within our minds an endless cacophony like a tape player locked into continuous play; a culture that does not allow us the stillness and quiet to hear the harmony

between the hawk and the wind as she soars into the light. I longed to experience the forgotten wilderness of my past. I craved being alone and steeping myself in solitude.

After many years of caring for and supporting others, I ached to do something for myself. And then there was this sense of just maybe recapturing a part of myself that had been buried by years of succumbing to the American dream of making money and, if not getting ahead, at least keeping up. My life, to a large extent, had been under the domination of forces alien to my very being. This was my chance to banish those forces, to break away, to shape the course of my life, to be free of the shackles of society.

I drift off to sleep. And, as on some of my earlier hikes, my first night's sleep is restless, interrupted by dreams and images which vanish upon waking—but whose presence is felt in the apprehensive mood and cautious disposition which engulf me upon awakening.

Part One

Southern California

Chapter One

The Laguna Mountains and the San Felipe Hills

April 20 to April 26

*Sun ascending the mountains,
Coyotes howl,
Rejoicing at the day's end
Greeting the coming of the
night.*

In the pre-dawn cold and darkness of April 20, 1999, our trek begins in earnest. Our intention is to return to the point where we left the trail the day before, which we find nearly impossible to do in the early morning darkness. We are looking for three concrete steps leading from the street to the trail. After some searching, we find the stairs in the headlight beam of a border patrol vehicle. Our first day will be a challenge—we will have to hike about 19 miles to Lake Morena County Park. The most we have ever hiked with our heavy packs during our training period was about 14 miles. The border patrol has advised all hikers to avoid camping between the border and Lake Morena because of possible conflict with illegal immigrants. Although we never heard of anyone being molested, we decide to take the border patrol's advice.

The early morning chill grabs us with frigid fingers and pushes us along the trail at a breath-choking, muscle-aching pace. Behind us, just the hint of a glow delineates the sharp edge of where earth and sky meet. Imperceptibly