

## All in a Sunday Afternoon

One fine Sunday in August past, I stopped at the Canadian border. I didn't have to stop. There were no Homeland Security folks to give me grief: there was no fence, no guard station- not even a stop sign. Yet there I was. And I stopped, if just for a bit.

My companion on this fastpack (one could hardly call it running) was a gentleman from Ashland by the name of Ric Sayre. And he took the obligatory photos of me standing, grinning foolishly, at the Northern Terminus of the Pacific Crest Trail. I was 2627 miles (or thereabouts) and a whole lot of lifetimes removed from the large concrete wall that stands behind the Southern Terminus at the Mexican border, near El Campo, Ca. It's a trail that connects extremes, a unifying path in our human need to simply get there, wherever there is, once in a while. And I was there, where I'd set out to be, finally.

We had started this final stretch of the trail's seemingly endlessly winding ribbon at Stevens Pass, over 185 miles to the south, just 5 days earlier. It was a run that almost didn't happen. A blown head gasket in Ric's faithful Tercel had stranded us in Centralia, Washington on the day we drove up to start the run. We'd hoped to arrive in time to get 10-12 miles under our belts that evening, therefore shortening each day's run a bit and making it less stressful finding a place to camp each night. Luckily, a phone call to Jerry Swartzley produced a phone number for Kenny White in Bellingham, who got his running buddies in Washington hustling to get us onto the trail. A shuttle to Tacoma by Kevin, brought us to a pickup we borrowed from Mike, and we were at the trailhead by midnight. We had to wait to start the next day, but at least we were moving.

The run (fastpack) would now average 32 mile days. It covered terrain not too unlike the High Sierras; in fact the guide book mentioned it was second only to the High Sierras in difficulty. Added to already tough going was a detour. A couple of major winter storms the previous winters had wiped out bridges and covered the trail in avalanche debris around the west side of Glacier Peak. We'd skirt the east side, adding an additional seven miles to the overall total. Furthermore, the new trails were not maintained nor even constructed to PCT standards, and a couple were little more than goat paths. Grades were steeper, maintenance in places was non-existent, and they had tossed in a couple of thousand extra feet of climbing, just for grins, we figured. The trail gods just weren't about to let us off the hook.

Suffice it to say, this run would test us sorely each day, running into the night to get in our miles and crashing restlessly along or in the trail, aching legs, feet, and hips unable to find that comfortable position to let us catch much sleep. We were well on our way to resemble the staggering deathlike wraiths of the Halloween movie genre. People on the trail began to shy away, afraid of that gaunt

hunger in our eyes that forewarned possible cannibalistic behaviour. How could they know that the yearning in our eyes was for a large rock to smash ourselves over the head? Or that the drunken lurch forward was not drug-induced, but rather the result of feet torn asunder by the rock filled gutters that pass for maintained trails in Washington state?

Our first day found us moving along on pace, a bit pokey in places, but overall, with a net gain of over 2000' in elevation, a good day. Not running anymore, that was for days without packs; for the days of yore when a fanny pack was enough to suffice for the run from trailhead to trailhead. Now, without available access to these natural breaks in the long wilderness stretches, we carried home and hearth on our backs to survive these 4 days, then two more, in the wilds of northern Washington state. Moving past the aquamarine jewels of Cascade lakes, crossing ridges and watershed meadows, we moved steadily toward Glacier Peak and the start of the detour. An unlikely patch of blueberries provided a delicious dessert after freeze-dried rations, and as the night grew dark, the full moon's rising disk found us bedding down along the trail at the Indian Creek junction, where we'd awaken and leave the comfortable conditions of the familiar PCT for secondary trails. Ah, that sleep could have been more blissful, but the tossing and turning of an anxiety-ridden night forebode only too well the events of the morrow.

It started off innocently enough. Oh, sure, the trail was head high in grasses and shrubs, the tread was a rocky gutter punctuated by marshy seeps and root stepoffs knee deep or higher, and the grade, though downhill, was punishingly steep. "Ah, another fine adventure to be in," I softly cursed as I ricocheted from root to boulder down the trail, wishing for the occasional timber stand to stride through as we crossed one avalanche track after another. The bottom couldn't, nor did, come too soon. And yet, surprisingly, I just couldn't find myself out of sorts- I was happy to be out, challenging my body to perform just this once more. Our conversation turned on observations of the general malaise that has beset our culture, the contentedness that lets too many of our folks be content to eat, drink, grow sedentary and bitter, and waste away into the general fog of quiet desperation- never challenged to reach out and strive forth. Ah, yes, we were alive and we were feeling it with every breath of mountain air and every wince of trail pain. How could we be anywhere else at this time? This was living, to proceed toward an attainable goal that at times seemed simply impossible, and yet each time we lifted our knee, we secured a victory.

Soon after crossing the Snow River on a bridge and arriving at a trailhead, we began the slow steady ascent up through the Boulder Creek drainage and Boulder Basin to Boulder Pass 3500' above us. The trail grew progressively steeper. Southbound hikers told us that the trail wouldn't be too rough for a bit, and that we

could rest assured that the detour was indeed passable, though dicey in areas. (Earlier scanty reports from the Forest Service had demonstrated once again that the people in the office writing the website updates have little actual knowledge of what's real in the actual forest.) Interestingly enough, many of these hikers were flip-floppers- they had completed the PCT from Campo at the southern terminus up into the Sierras, where snow had forced them out, about 750 miles of travel, then were hiking south from Canada, trying to make it through Washington and Oregon before retackling the Sierras. Most were in their early twenties, though we occasionally found one who was a solo hiker considerably more experienced; i.e. older. 'Butterfly Lady', her trail name, was in her 40s and was solo hiking the trail south through the Glacier Peak Wilderness when we passed her, 15-20 miles a day, headed for Ashland, Oregon.

The climb out of Boulder Basin was just another in a long series of such climbs, though the biting flies and thick brush kept us cussing continuously, with no chance to stop to rest and still expect to retain any blood in the clouds of repellent ignorant insects. We hit the ridge top, where the biting wind outbit and laid down the biting bugs and enjoyed a bit of rest in the afternoon sun, before plunging down the winding serpentine switchbacks into the Napeequa Valley 2500' below.

Arriving at the glacial stream with no bridge, a stout stick was needed for a wading staff for the icy crossing. The chill waters cooled our overheated legs and allowed us some numbing relief before we began our final climb of the day. A long glacial valley, this Napeequa River area could have been in the Alps or Alaska as easily as in Northern Washington. Fireweed lined the willow shrouded banks and the days waning sunlight slanted across the upper end of the valley, warming the glacially carved rocky peaks in its warm glow. After shooting a couple of calendar page pictures, we started the ascent of the north wall, knowing that sunlight would be fleeting and dark would soon overtake us.

We'd seen traces of switchback from the far side of the valley, but they all appeared to lead no where. As we climbed, we soon found out why- the trail generally degraded to a mad scramble as it wound in and out of alder and willow thickets along the seeps of the mountain's face. It was four-wheeled drive time- on hands and feet we clawed, pulled and huffed our way up the hill, finally collapsing on the ridgeback at dark, a rising full moon already up in the sky. Cold windy conditions made us anxious to move on, but if the trail down the other side was anything like the trail up, we knew we'd be better off where we were. Another uncomfortable night, squeezed between two rocks to keep from rolling off the ridge was our reward for the hard climb. We had lost ground on our expected pace, we were anxious about how the trail might degrade even more, and yet I remained surprisingly optimistic. I had been here before, it seemed, and it had worked out then. I found myself smiling in spite of my uncomfortable sleeping arrangement. Dawn would come soon enough

and with it, enough light to scramble down off of this hill.

Day three started as the moon set over the ridge we'd scrambled over on our way out of Boulder Basin the previous day. Looking back across the nether depths of Napeequa River Valley, we quickly packed and got moving to ward off the morning chill. Today promised another long downhill then a long climb up the Chiwawa River over Suiattle Pass into Agnes Creek. Oh sure, I simplify- there'd be other 800-1000' climbs and drops, but all in all, just another fine day of trail 'running' in the North Cascades.

By now, hot spots were forming in trouble areas on our feet and shoulders and hips chafed under the constant load. I'd stubbed a toe early on and now the toenail had the unmistakable color of a casualty of the run. In two days we'd meet Phyllis and the car with reinforcements of supplies and the promise of one night away from the trail.

The Chiwawa R. had a downed spruce log to cross and soon we were moving easily at a lope up a 3.5 mile stretch of gravel road that made up this part of the detour. Another climb out of the watershed was uneventful; the major avalanches had been cleared and we had but a brief bit of scrambling fully laden over downfall timber before we left the valley and headed down steeply to cross Miners Creek before climbing sharply to head back down again to another branch of Miners Creek. Here we crossed the Suiattle River watershed and headed uphill through its pass, crossing into the east Cascades valley of Agnes Creek, a major tributary of Lake Chelan.

Sunset found us climbing again as we wound DOWN the valley, this time to be inspired by the ramparts above icefields lying in glacial cirques. The setting sun set the ominous clouds rolling down our side, splattering us briefly with rain. Losing the trail off and on in the snow and outwash areas as it got dark, we soon bedded down in timber, our first really nice camp. We were almost back on schedule and tomorrow's trail promised a long down and a long up. We were moving forward.

It was on day four that I hit my frustration point. After awakening at about 5000' in elevation, we ran a pretty good trail down along Agnes Creek, stopping for breakfast in a stand of good-sized red cedar. The trail continued with a few uphills around steep-sided canyons, but for the most part, a good steady drop, and we were making our best time of the trip, even getting in a shuffling run when the trail allowed. As we approached the 1500' elevation and the environs of Lake Chelan National Recreation Area and North Cascades National Park, the day had heated appreciably. The canyon structure was reminiscent of the Illinois River Canyon, with steep metamorphic rock walls and a decidedly rougher trail tread.

We stopped for a breather at Stehekin Guard Station, where tour buses run

most PCT through-hikers down to the long ferry ride across Lake Chelan. They spend a night or two lodging in fine luxury before being delivered to Rainy Pass, thereby skipping 18 miles of the hottest, rockiest trail in Washington state. We should have emulated them rather than envy them. The guide suggests skipping this bit of trail, but having a certain foolish sense of integrity, if not common sense, Ric and I began a steep 500' climb, only to drop back down 400', and we soon learned that this would be the pattern for the next 17 miles.

After crossing Bridge Creek on a horse bridge- it's always horse bridges in National Parks, it seems, for horseback tours seem to be a popular concession- we faced another hot, rocky climb along the north slope of the canyon. This way we could enjoy the afternoon sun more directly. Soon, we came to a series of avalanche chutes and their brushy trails that had been reconstructed many times (or not).

In just such a chute, hearing noise in the thick brush to my left, I paused. And none too soon. A young grizzly tumbled into the trail in front of me, and like so many cartoon characters, spun his legs like wheels in gravel, attempting a purchase on the trail to carry him to parts yon and hither. We were both a bit amazed; I could only stand and gawk at his golden mane as he fled down the trail. I waited for Ric because I heard more crackling brush above me, and didn't want him to jump another while I was between it and the first one. No other bear showed however.

We struggled along, hopefully watching the mileage shrink to Rainy Pass. Our shuttle driver, Phyllis, would meet us there and we'd spend a night at a motel, if possible, or at least at a real campground. And we hoped she might hike down the trail some to lift our spirits for the last bit of what was becoming a death march.

As we left North Cascades National Park, and re-entered Wenatchee National Forest (or maybe it was Okanagan by now), we got the royal Forest Service trail experience- the grade suddenly pitched up at 20% or better right into more avalanche brush. What a demoralizer! The closer we got, the worse the trail got. And we were getting quite bushed by this point (no pun intended). Anyhow, onwards and upwards, they say, so it was what it was, and we continued, one foot in front of the other, over and over, until, crossing Bridge Creek for the last time, we met Phyllis and her bright, winning smile, happy to see us where and when we expected to be. She even offered to shoulder my pack for a bit and I made no argument. I long ago lost any false pride in this endeavor and welcomed the relief. Less than a mile and we were at the trailhead. Getting into the car quickly, we headed to Winthrop for accommodations, finding that Friday night in this wannabe Sisters did not bode well. So we backtracked to a campground and after a delicious pasta dinner, laid back to enjoy the black bliss of closed eyelids.

It was with a sense of excitement that I awoke on day 5 even though it was dark and I hadn't slept so well with painful muscles and joints. I didn't want to

wake Ric, but I also wanted to be done. We were on the trail in good time and had but three more major climbs between us and Canada. We would tackle two today, splitting the last 70 miles roughly in half. The early going was hopeful, a good grade and excellent trail, on a morning of low cloud to keep us cool. Passing through Daredevil Pass, we emerged into a world of stark, steep mountains- jagged teeth from movies about Mordor, orcs, and Sauron. But the trail remained steady, with a quick descent down a sharp hogback before leveling out on a long traverse across the slopes. I expectantly watched for mountain goats, for this had to be their territory, yet I saw none.

However, the wildflowers were in stunning glory, and the biting flies of the last few days were absent. My spirits remained high, as we dropped down to cross the Methow River and began the penultimate (boy, I've been writing about the PCT for a lot of years and I finally get to use that word- what a nice word, what a nice feel as it rolls off my tongue, penultimate) climb, back up to 6500 feet and a low spot in the ridge called Windy Pass and a spot to sleep one more time under the stars.

We toiled along into the late afternoon as our packs began to take their toll on tired backs and shoulders. Cresting out, we thought, we began a long traverse into Summit Prairie along knife-blade ridges, and around plump, steep-sided peaks. A tempting shortcut on the Slate Peak Lookout Road beckoned, but we stayed true to our calling, then cursed every step around another mountain that tripled the length of the bypass. Then we began another climb and a series of traverses to finally arrive, as it grew dark, in Windy Pass. Too tired to cook dinner, Ric bedded down under the small spruces of this high pass. We expected rain- the pass was cloudy, but strangely, windless. Just one more night on the trail. And all we wanted was sleep and an early start.

The good news? We got an early start. The penalty? Little sleep. Were we restless from the anxiety over the morrow? Were we too sore to sleep? At this point, it really didn't matter. We were on the trail before 5 am, headlamps shining, making progress along the ridge and then gradually down into Holcomb Pass, where we'd start the last, the ultimate climb before reaching Canada.

Arriving in the pass after daybreak, I prepared some breakfast as Ric grabbed a little necessary shut-eye. I sensed we were down to our last remnants of adrenaline, and a long day was in store. I reminded myself how important patience was at this point, and we proceeded at what pace we could muster. I knew that Ric was really starting to bog down, and being surprisingly calm after being at this state of affairs far too often in the past, I focused on what needed to happen.

Another disappointment waited as we regained ridge height- because of too many landslides and avalanches, the trail had been rerouted off the summit, down a

series of long switchbacks to the valley below, then up another set of switchbacks to regain our elevation and pass through yet another gap in the ridge. It was beginning to seem that Northern Washington was just one set of switchbacks after another, and I began to hope that Canadian trailbuilders had never heard of such a thing. Climbing through that last (ultimate) pass, and traversing that last gentle climb, we arrived atop Washington's highest point on the PCT, a windy, unnamed ridge near Three Clowns Peak, at about 7127 feet. It was all downhill to Canada, steep switchbacks at first, then a long trail down another valley, Castle Creek this time. A too short rest preceded our long descent, but soon we were underway.

I really have little recollection of that last bit of trail before the border. It was downhill; it was uneventful. One steep set of, guess what?, switchbacks, around the corner, and I froze- there was the sign, Welcome to Canada.

What to feel? I was here. So many who'd helped me on my way began to flood my thoughts. Waiting till Ric stepped up beside me, I grabbed his hand, and we stepped across the border together. We shot a few pictures of the monument, of the official PCT terminus, of the border sign, of me standing by each. And we sat down, he in the US, I in Canada, without our packs. We would rest a bit.

I suppose that I need a few pages of fluff right about here to tell what it all meant, what it's all really about. Yet I was strangely emotionless- just another task almost completed (I'll explain in a bit). I took time to spill a bit of water for Marcus Mayfield, with a heartfelt thanks for all the miles we'd shared on this trail together, even if we did lose our minds one day over a PowerBar (malt nut I think, still my favorite). I couldn't help but think that this terminus was a point we both shared. And I spilled a bit for Byron Evans, who wanted also to run trails again.

We talked for awhile to a young fellow and his son, who were hiking to Rainy Pass, 62 miles away, in 6-7 days, and told them to have fun. They talked of maybe doing the whole trail some day and I recommended it, but I told them to start young. Then we stood to go. I offered to take Ric's picture at the border- he declined. I threatened to Photoshop one in anyway. Oh well.

Now for the metric part-All runners know that we can't have a 3 mile or a 6 mile race because of the metric system. The events come out at 3.1 and 6.2. Well, Canada is a metric country. And 2627 miles isn't good enough- they have to tack on more just to reach the trailhead. So here we were, at the terminus of the PCT, but the end of the run was still 8.1 miles away. And for good measure, the first 4 miles of trail were also bicycle single track with little maintenance, and uphill, with a surprising set of poorly constructed switchbacks. Well, as Ric says, "It is what it is", and we were for it. Late in the day we arrived along the Simalkeen River, where the last mile of trail in Manning Provincial Park seemed 5 miles long, but at last, the road, the trailhead, Phyllis- it was time to shower, eat, and head for the states, and a nice bed in Kenny White's fine house in Bellingham.

"All in a Sunday Afternoon"? My trail shirt and hat are both Sunday Afternoon products, manufactured in Talent, Oregon. And home, after all, is what it's all about.