



**Meeting
the Neighbors**
BJ Leckbee

**Marceline Guerrein
From Pacific To Atlantic In 15 Months—
On Foot**

As a member of a hiking club in Virginia, Marceline Guerrein typically hiked nine or 10 miles each week. Her life changed when she saw a sign at a hiking supply store announcing that the American Hiking Society was planning HikaNation, a walk across America to promote interest in hiking and the building of hiking trails. At that time, Marceline was in her late 50s. Standing nearby when she noticed the sign was Cindy, a woman in her mid-20s. Both were immediately intrigued and decided to join the cross-country walk. "They didn't want to accept me because of my age," Marceline remembers. "But they did. I was the oldest woman on the trail."



**Marceline Guerrein with mementos of
her hike today ...**

As the hike was scheduled to begin in April of 1980, she had more than a year to get ready. When the time came, she gave two weeks' notice at her banking job, said goodbye to her husband, and, along with her son and her young friend, Cindy, headed for San Francisco where the hike was to begin. There she realized the magnitude of the adventure that was about to start. Jim Kern, a professional wildlife photographer, was president of the National Hiking Society. He had spent much of his free time getting permission from the Department of the Interior and from each of the states to be crossed, as well as arranging for sponsorship from General Foods, and for financing for the insurance that was required before any of the hikers could cross the Bay Bridge.



**... and in 1980, backpacking across
America.**

More than 100 hiking enthusiasts had answered the call. Each carried a backpack that weighed 35 to 40 pounds; it held food, a tent, sleeping bag, portable stove and fuel, rain gear and clothing for the day. Cindy became Marceline's tent mate for the entire trip, and despite the age difference, a strong bond formed between the two women. Twenty-five years later they still keep in touch.

At the beginning, the group set guidelines of things not permitted, such as hitchhiking, stealing and drugs. Violators were subject to immediate dismissal. An elected board of five hikers mediated and helped to resolve problems, and periodic elections were held to rotate other hikers through this position of authority.

The support truck that followed the group carried 300 gallons of water, extra food and the hikers' out-of-season clothing. The truck driver, Monty Montgomery, picked up mail at certain places, offered advice and sympathy, and served as wagon master, barber and nurse's aide. "We were like a little city of our own," Marceline says. "We had the same kind of problems as everyone has." Monty also took them to a nearby town each week to replenish supplies.

Glamour took a holiday for 15 months. "We wore the same thing every day and we walked six days a week," Marceline recalls. "On the seventh day we did laundry and shopped for food and medical needs."

Keeping their hiking boots waterproof was of paramount importance. They walked through streams and storms. On the coldest nights, which meant temperatures below zero, they put their hiking boots in the bottoms of their sleeping bags so the boots wouldn't freeze during the night. On the hottest days, when the temperature was over 100 degrees, they dressed accordingly and continued walking. "There was never a day that we didn't walk because of the weather," Marceline states proudly. "We

ate a lot of freeze-dried food, but we also cooked hot meals. I had oatmeal for breakfast every day."

A representative of each state who had previously scouted the route in that state would lead them on established trails. More than once the group participated in the dedication of new trails. As they passed near towns along the route, schools were let out so children could come to see the procession. Sometimes people would take hikers into their houses so they could take showers. At other times, schools and armories would give the hikers permission to shower in their facilities. When the route of travel allowed, the hikers stayed overnight in national parks free of charge.

One couple met on the trail and married before the hike was over. Another couple brought their baby with them for part of the trip, and their companions enjoyed the sight of the baby riding in a wheelbarrow while diapers hung from the sides of the wheelbarrow to dry. This couple was among many who joined the group along the trail for a week or two and then went back to their jobs.

The planned route of the hike was the middle corridor of the continental United States. Beginning in California, they crossed the Sierra Nevada Mountains and the deserts of Utah, the high mountains of Colorado, the plains of Kansas and Oklahoma, and the Ozark hills of Arkansas and Missouri. Ferried across the Mississippi, they tromped through snow in Illinois and Kentucky and headed up the Appalachian Trail through Virginia, then down the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal towpath toward the nation's capitol. They planned to end the hike with a triumphant procession down Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C.

Did she ever get bored? "Absolutely not!" While crossing the Kansas prairie, Guerrein read a book while hiking. She'd walk right behind Cindy, get Cindy's feet in her peripheral vision, and read while Cindy listened to her radio.

In Arkansas, they toured underground caverns. In Oklahoma they took the time to shop for new sleeping bags. "They had good prices there," Marceline recalls.

When the group reached Washington D.C., they expected to be greeted by senators from the states they'd crossed, but they arrived the day the pope was shot, so only one senator was there to greet them. It didn't matter. They had accomplished their goal. While many ended the hike there as planned, 35 hardy souls elected to continue across Delaware to the Atlantic Ocean. They arrived at Cape Henlopen State Park in July, 15 months after they began in California. Happy to have accomplished this amazing feat, all the hikers celebrated by jumping into the ocean fully clothed.

Of the 35 who stayed the course, some had to ride instead of walk for a day or two due to problems with their feet. Nine people walked every step of the 4,286 miles. Marceline, the woman who was considered "too old for the trip," was the only woman to achieve this feat. "It was a once in a lifetime thing for all of us," Marceline states emphatically.

HikaNation was also the beginning of more long hikes for her. She followed this accomplishment by hiking the Ozark Trail and the entire Appalachian Trail (no short-cuts) and has the white blazer to prove it. Hikes in Europe (three months), Nepal and Africa followed.

"I even hiked through storms," Marceline says, adding, "I don't think it was the smartest thing to do." After 17,000 miles of backpacking, she wishes she were still doing it. But she's retired from that activity now, and, by the way, she never went back to her banking job. ☺

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