

HikaNation 1980-1981

"FROM SEA TO SHINING SEA"

by Padraic P. Boyle (8/5/81)

As the sound of bagpipes faded, thirty-six backpackers formed a circle on the beach between dune and ocean, joined hands and sang "America the Beautiful". The circle broke, cheering filled the air like a Rebel Yell, and the Atlantic surf was charged, boots, bodies, backpacks and all. This was the finale of HikaNation 1980-1981, the first one, on the hot sunny afternoon of May 27, 1981 in Cape Henlopen State Park just east of Lewes, Delaware.

The choice of anthem was apt. They knew what was to be seen and felt "From sea to shining sea". They had learned the hard way, and the best way by walking 4289 miles during the 13½ months since they had started their hike April 13, 1980 on a beach of the Pacific Ocean west of San Francisco. Jeanie Harmon of Concord, California started them off, with bagpipes, on the route she had planned through her state. When HikaNation left California Jeanie left too and crossed the continent with them. Why? Maybe to make sure there were bagpipes at the Atlantic. Jeanie likes bagpipes.

American Hiking Society sponsored HikaNation to promote hiking and to demonstrate the need for more footpaths in the United States. Jim Kern, AHS President, had the idea and Monty Montgomery, with truck and camp trailer, followed the group across the country to Washington, D.C. When Monty rejoined the group in Delaware the gang greeted him like a

returning messiah. Meanwhile, Jim was suffering unseen for the sin of being the executive. These two men can be proud of their success.

Hiking was promoted by showing how unimportant age is for hikers, by introducing tyros to the sport and by demonstrating the consideration for property and the tidiness of responsible hikers.

There were hikers of all ages. John Stout began hiking at age 50 near his Seattle home. Years later he read about HikaNation, thought it sounded good, joined and finished the hike feeling better at age 69 than many of his juniors. The youngest hiker, Rob Burns of Benicia, California, was 15 when he reached Cape Henlopen as self-sufficient as any of his fellows. Then there was Jaimie, who tripled her age on the trip. She wasn't quite 7 when she started and a little over 20 when she finished - months, that is, not years. Her mother, Gayle, or her father, Dennis (Gomer) Pyle, carried her like a papoose or dumped her into the ingenious "wheelbarrow" Gomer made from plastic pipe, which also carried the family's luggage.

Terry Ernst had neither backpacked nor hiked until his kid brother, Tim in Arkansas, talked him into leaving his engineering job in Seattle, Washington and joining HikaNation. In Delaware Terry was no longer a tyro but leading the group and its governing committee.

My wife Kay and I never did learn details of how that governing committee worked, except that it was elected every month. What we do know is that it resulted in responsible camping at its best. Each morning after the HikaNation

group had left, we spoke to the farmer or the campsite manager where they had stayed the night. All were pleased to have been hosts. Not one beverage can zip-top was left on the ground. If trash containers were inadequate Terry would come to us for plastic bags we carried as a reserve.

How better demonstrate the scarcity of footpaths than by walking across the country? The longest continuous trail hiked was the AT from Tennessee to Harpers Ferry and the C & O Towpath. Only 10 to 15 percent of nearly 4300 miles were walked along ways meant for pedestrian use. In Delaware there were just roads for foot travel and of these only 4½ miles were dirt. Mason-Dixon Trail System plans to correct this in time with trails following the Mason-Dixon Lines that separate Maryland and Delaware.

Not many people have attempted to walk from the Pacific to the Atlantic. About half of those who started with HikaNation dropped out. Of the thirty-six who finished nearly half were women. All made up an intensely individualistic group. Some would break camp at 6:00AM, some not until early afternoon. They would walk alone or join up with half a dozen others. One might stop in the shade and play a recorder for half an hour. A couple might feel the urge to play Backgammon. In Delaware two of them did this. They set up their board on top of the water carboy on the tailgate of my truck, and shook their dice while listening to Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. A third was content to sit in the cab and enjoy the FM radio. There was no "sweep"; he'd go nuts with a crew that spread out along ten miles of road, or took off on side trips. They were

individualists, yet they had built up a strong sense of belonging to the HikaNation group. At a ceremony on the last day when the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service recognized Cape Henlopen's Pinelands Nature Trail as a National Recreation Trail (by order of Secretary of the Interior, James G. Watt), a bearded giant stood before his fellows and tried to say what the HikaNation experience meant to him. He did not quite make it. He broke down. His friends encouraged him, offered words to him, then gave him an ovation when he stepped down. When the strongest man weeps, and those with whom he has hiked and helped for 13 months weep with him - though the words be incomprehensible, there is no more lucid way to express the depth of feeling that is created by hiking companionship.

If "America the Beautiful" is not HikaNation's theme song, it should be. "Oh! Beautiful for spacious skies" - They saw them. They also saw thunderheads with lightning and dreary gray clouds that dripped on them for days. "Thy purple mountains majesty" - They climbed them and the snowbound Kentucky ridges where they came down with the flu. They crossed the "fruited plains", saw Washington's "alabaster city('s) gleam" and felt that "America (did crown its) good with brotherhood From sea to shining sea".

Ed Deschene of Mancato, Minnesota says, "America is beautiful, and Americans are as beautiful as this country". Mike Halm of Peru, Illinois tells of becoming so sick he lay down in a ditch in the "Hole-in-the Wall" country of Colorado east of the Rockies. A pickup truck came along. The driver

stopped, put him in his truck, took him home, nursed him until he was well, then drove him ahead to join the HikaNation group which had been hiking for days without him. Another hiker joined HikaNation because it sounded interesting and to see some scenery. "Now", he says, "What is important to me is that I learned America is a good country, and its people are good." Everyone in HikaNation has a personal tale to tell of America's goodness, friendliness and Hospitality.

Kay and I encountered this goodness near Denton, Maryland where we met HikaNation during their two day stopover May 22nd and 23rd. Ted Sanderson of the Mountain Club of Maryland had guided them to Camp Mardella from the Chesapeake's eastern shore. The Rev. Brian Burkey of the Church of the Brethern unobtrusively made hospitality as much a part of the camp as the trees that shaded it and the air which rustled their branches with its soft breeze.

On Sunday, May 24th the first line surveyed by Mason and Dixon was crossed by HikaNation, taking them into their last state - Delaware, "The First State". It was a humid and hot day (85+ degrees). Water and ice, soda and beer were given by kindly Sussex County citizens along the way. But, the greatest enthusiasm was aroused by their host. Bill Vanderwende of Dutch Ayr Farm decided to locate the campsite on a smooth grass lawn alongside the SWIMMING POOL!

Monday the 25th had similar weather, only the temperature rose into the 90s. The roads led through farmland, nice and green, but HOT. Again the hikers were cheered as the day's walk neared its end.. Monty Montgomery returned, honking the

horn of a little black bug as he overtook his walking faithful. Then they reached the cool shade of Redden State Forest which surrounds Redden Lodge. Stacey Waring of Springfield, Virginia has written about Redden Forest being "mosquito infested". Little does she realize that Delaware is the prep school for New Jersey mosquitoes. After they grow up and graduate, they cross over into such places as Cape May or Atlantic City where you really get stung.

From Redden, notable among other things for a convenient Deli, HikaNation traveled along Delaware's longest stretch of dirt roads, within the State Forest and as they headed for the town of Milton - biggest attraction for the group - a super hoagy shop. (So how many days have YOU hiked on a diet of backpackers dehydrated food?) From Milton on the roads got busier although still flanked by farms. Rapidly the ocean resort areas were getting closer. Camp for the night was an acre of grass lawn, half of it shaded by huge trees around the dis-used farmhouse of the William Hopkins family. Boy previous arrangement, the makings were ready for a campfire to celebrate HikaNation's last night as a complete group. When Walt Hopkins, Bill's elder son, was phoned from Camp Mardella about the campfire he readily agreed then asked, "Would there be any objections if the Hopkinses supplied a keg of beer when you come?" A vote was taken. Three of twenty-two hikers demurred and fourteen abstained. Most of the abstainers were away, keeping in trim by running in a ten mile cross-country race twenty-five miles to the northwest near Chestertown, Maryland. Anyway, on the night of May 26th there was a campfire at the campsite and there was

a party with snacks and beer at the home of Bill's younger son, Joe! Don't ask me who attended which, or both. It was good beer! All the Hikers liked Green Acres Farm.

The last day, May 27th, was an unusual one for HikaNation. Twice the hikers joined together as one group! At 10:00 AM everyone piled into DiLeo's Restaurant for a briefing on the final ceremony. (DiLeo's opened two hours early to accommodate them.) At 2:00 PM they gathered at the entrance to Cape Henlopen State Park. From there they marched four abreast behind the bagpipes, listened as Pinelands Nature Trail was dedicated, then with the pipers ahead, inaugurated the newly-created National Recreation Trail. They crossed the dunes, where the pipers stopped playing, and filed down onto the beach. As the sound of the bagpipes faded, thirty-six backpackers formed a circle on the beach between dune and ocean, joined hands and sang "America the Beautiful".

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