

Decades of volunteering.



35 years later ...

By **Steve Queen**

In 1981, standing next to my tent in Campo, I looked north and tried to visualize the entire Pacific Crest Trail in my mind all at once. It was the black silhouette of a mountain range in stark contrast against a pale sky. I was 18, and since that day, my life has never been the same. The PCT saw to that.

In the years that followed, I hiked other long-distance trails including the Appalachian and Continental Divide trails. After returning to Portland following graduate school, I contacted then Pacific Crest Trail Association president **Larry Cash** so as to make good on my promise to give back to the trail that had given so much to me. The PCTA was trying to find its way at that time and so was I. Eventually, in 1994, I founded the Mount Hood Chapter of the PCTA, which succeeded beyond any realistic goals I had at the time. The seeds of a second trip, a bookend of sorts, had been growing for many years until one day at home I stopped in my tracks with sudden certainty that I would once again turn musing into action.

In 2016 there was no black silhouette. The thousands of hiking miles and years of volunteer work made the road ahead quite real. However, the reality of a PCT hike 35 years later made that road so much different.

The changes were apparent long before taking my second first step. As I prepared for this journey, I was confronted with a radically different world of gear. Together, my backpack, tent, sleeping bag, and air mattress weighed less than my original Kelty Tioga backpack alone. In the Sierra, Microspikes replaced onerous crampons and aluminum replaced the hickory of my grandfather's ice axe. Not all 21st century changes amounted to less though. The 2-pound, unwieldy bear canister I was forced to carry from Kennedy Meadows to Sonora Pass was a daily source of frustration. And even by the

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standards of the millennials out there, I was over the top with my digital technology. It started with an iPhone and probably could have stopped there, but it didn't. I used a Canon GX7 camera, a DeLorme inReach satellite communicator, a Garmin 62stc for geocaching (I found about 400 geocaches during my trip), a battery charger to keep these beasts going in the backcountry, and a 4-port USB wall charger so I could do it all over again. In 1981, I had a camera that was even lighter than my Canon and a dime for phone calls (okay, I had a calling card, but a dime sounds funnier).

The Mexican border even looked different. In 1981, I autographed a sign placed there by 1976 PCT thru-hiker **Jerry Smith**. My life-changing adventure started by putting a heavy leather boot through the barbed wire fence near the white shell of a building on the other side. In 2016, I stood near the second iteration of a monument that would have dwarfed Jerry's and south of that was an actively patrolled no-man's-land road, and beyond that was a huge metal wall reminding me of graffitied rail cars. I wondered if that building still stood on the other side of the wall or if it had been plowed over to make way for this brave new world. I searched for a patch of ground to place my trail runners that would qualify as Mexican soil, but I had to settle for an illusion that wouldn't raise the eyebrows of a nearby border patrol agent.

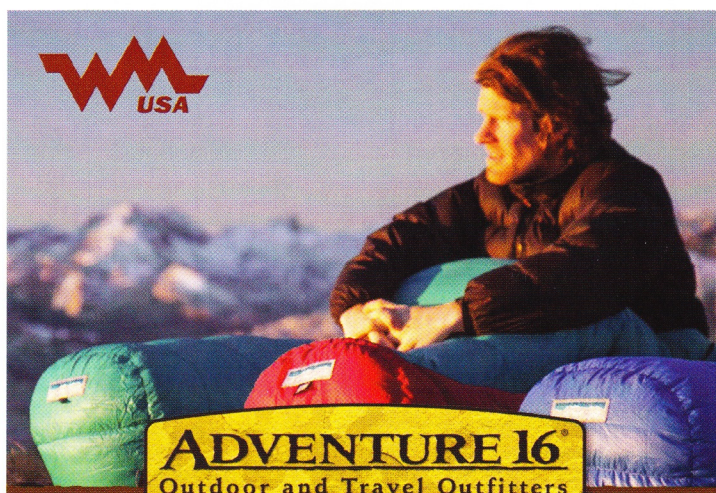
According to the PCTA's website, 34 people completed the PCT in 1981. In the *Wild* world of 2016, the PCTA has recorded 685 completions (and counting). In fact, the deluge of aspiring thru-hikers has prompted the **U.S. Forest Service** to limit the number of PCT long-distance permits issued so that only 50 people start at the Mexican border each day. (As an aside, I will note with pride that the long-distance permit started in the mid-1990s as the brainchild of Mount Hood Chapter's **Lesya Struz**.)

In 1981, I met only three other thru-hikers during the first few days, but in 2016 every day was a game of leapfrog, and I would occasionally let out a long, loud "MOOOO!" to advertise my place in the herd. Attrition was far less than I expected; even in northern Washington, trail angels reported about 25 thru-hikers passing through each day. I would see a thru-hiker that I'd never met before, almost daily. In fact, one of these never-before-seen-or-heard-of thru-hikers showed up 10 minutes after I arrived at the Canadian border.

As I walked that first mile, I literally and figuratively jumped for joy. My last thru-hike had been 25 years earlier on the Continental Divide Trail, and I was giddy at the prospect of spending the next five and a half months immersed in a world that I knew so well but had experienced from the perspective of youth. During the first 700 miles, I tried to become a part of the community, but it just didn't seem to work. In fact, I felt ostracized by some groups. A thru-hike often represents a transition from one phase of life to another, and I think many looked to others like themselves and I was just too far out of their demographic. I wish I could say that it didn't bother me, but it did.

Arriving at Kennedy Meadows I received an ovation, which is the norm as hikers approach the patio, but this welcome held a bit more for me. I was joyously greeted by **Mia** and **Savannah**, the two people with whom I'd formed the closest connection of anyone and hadn't seen in hundreds of miles. The depth of their embrace assuaged an aching emptiness. Over my many years of hiking, I'd never had a trail name, nor could I imagine accepting one, but on that patio in Kennedy Meadows Savannah said that she had been waiting to give me the trail name **OG (Original Gangster)**. It was an homage to my past and an unexpected gift, which really are the best gifts of all. That day moved me more than any other on my trek, even more so than arriving at the Oregon/California border, followed by the Canadian border (weird, right?). From that moment on I didn't feel like such an outsider; I think this was due both to having a great trail name and the fact that time and the Sierra really helps you grow into the trail. Despite that, on the rare occasion I did enter a group's orbit, I would quickly spin off back into solo space. Despite the number of other hikers, or maybe because of it, I felt more solo in 2016 than I ever did in 1981.

Digital technology has dramatically changed backcountry navigation. Most thru-hikers don't even carry paper maps, relying solely on phone apps to navigate. I used the Wilderness Press guidebooks in 1981, which forced me to have an intimate relationship with my environment. I had to constantly reconcile what I was seeing with what I was reading and be keenly aware of where I was in relation to everything else. Apps allow you to easily become out of touch with



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Left, top: Tarn near Thousand Island Lake, 2016.

Left, bottom: Mount Adams and undercast, 2016.

the world around you because you know without question where you are at any moment and it's expressed as a point on a line. You can literally ignore your surroundings. In 1981, our common terminology for communicating involved natural and political landmarks; today the trail is framed primarily in terms of Halfmile mileages. Me: "I camped on the ridge after that exhausting climb out of Spanish Needles Creek." Him: "What? Where?" Me (digging into my Guthook app): "I camped at 672.8." Him: "Oh yeah, I remember that." I even had a mantra: "Read the maps; stow the apps."

As for trail angels and trail magic, I'd never experienced anything like the established selflessness of **Scout** and **Frodo, Ziggy and the Bear, Papa Smurf** and **Mountain Mama**, the **Saufleys**, the **Andersons**, or the **Dinsmores** (just to name a few). In 1981, trail angels and trail magic exclusively involved spontaneous, unpredicted acts of kindness like those of **Mrs. Davidson** on the aqueduct and **Milton Kinney** in Castella. Still, in 2016 I encountered many such surprises, like le Bistro near Brown Mountain shelter where **One Track** (host), **Jolly Llama** (waiter), and **Veggie Gourmet** (chef) set up shop to provide hikers with the most incredible backcountry dining experience imaginable. The terms trail angel and trail magic have morphed a bit in 35 years, and I see some thru-hikers taking these amazing acts of generosity for granted or even feeling entitled to them. Thankfully those still seem to be the exceptions rather than the rule.

Thru-hikers are asked the same questions over and over. Likewise, I'm usually asked this question: "How is (was) this trip different from your last one?" Interestingly, the most vexing question was posed by **Little Spoon**: "What is the same that has surprised you the most?" Wow ... I spent weeks puzzling on that one. So many things had changed. The technology, the flood of hikers and the improvements of trail continuity and tread itself always stood out. Wrightwood was the first true "hiker town" on the PCT, and I was shocked at how little this had changed in 35 years. But as I worked my way to Canada, I was struck by something more personal that hadn't changed. The salience of my own memories remained constant. My varied experiences remained as moving and heartfelt as they ever were. The PCT managed to bring life to every breath, whether it was labored or effortless.

Before I started I wondered how this experience might change my life. Honestly, I didn't think it would. I didn't think it could. But it has. I had forgotten how damn long this trail is, but given this was my fourth 2,000+ mile thru-hike, I figured re-entry would be predictable. I was wrong. I have only been back from the trail for a few months, and I still don't have my balance. I watched with detached amusement at the disgusting 2016 presidential primaries, but the general election debacle coincided with my re-entry and produced profound depression that I'm still suffering from.

I feel the change as sure as I breathe, but its precise nature is still opaque to me; I'm still a work-in-progress. 🙌



Above: Steve Queen at the Mexico border, April 3, 1981.

Below: PCTA volunteers Steve Queen (Mount Hood Chapter), Dave Fleischman (Trail Gorillas) and Charles Williams (Pounder's Promise) meet in Agua Dulce during their 2016 hikes.

