

# The PCT Across a Lifetime



By Carolyn "Ravensong" Burkhart

**My** first memory of the Pacific Crest Trail was when I was 3 years old, walking a path surrounded by blue flowers. I love the lupine to this day. I was near Chinook Pass on what was then known as the Cascade Crest Trail, and 17 years later I would retrace those steps as I made my way from Mexico to Canada.

When my mother, **Dorothy**, was young, she and her dad would sing together, "the bear went over the mountain, to see what he could see." As a young adult, she set off to see "the other side of the mountain," launching a family tradition of backpacking.

From the time I was 6, my mother would take me, my brothers and our friends backpacking for a week each summer. On one trip, we encountered extensive snow during an absolute downpour. She remembers me looking up at her and asking: "Mommy, are we in the rainforest yet?" At that moment, she realized that she was the only adult with seven children in the mountains in bad weather and wondered just how foolish she had been.

I grew to cherish our summers on the trails. When I was 13, we backpacked into Snowgrass Flats on the PCT and I resolved to learn how to go into the mountains on my own. My mother,



Clockwise, from top left: Carolyn and her mother, Dorothy Burkhart, on the PCT south of Chinook Pass, 1976. Carolyn with her daughter Leanne near McKenzie Pass, 1985. Three-year-old Carolyn at Chinook Pass.

understandably apprehensive, told me that I would need to complete the Mountaineers Basic Climbing Course first. She may have thought this would deter me, especially when I learned that I had to be 14 and would need to find a sponsor. But I waited another year, found a sponsor and took the course. I learned how to navigate and how to climb on rock and snow. I climbed Mount St. Helens pre-eruption, and learned about proper layering the hard way. I had started to get hypothermic, but fortunately another climber noticed and loaned me his down jacket and gave me food. I warmed up enough to complete the climb and glissade down, which I thought was the best part.

When I turned 16 and learned to drive, I began trekking on my own. On one solo snowshoeing trip on Mount Rainier, a winter storm blew in just as I was about to set up camp. This time, concerned about hypothermia, I used my navigation skills to snowshoe to safety through a blizzard.

In 1974, I landed my first job: seasonal ranger in North Cascades National Park in Stehekin. I led nature hikes and evening programs on the wonders of the Cascades. On my days off, I backpacked alone on the PCT and other trails. As part of my college education, I spent the winter of 1975 in Leavenworth, Wash., as an apprentice with **Peg** and **Bill Stark** at their Family Adventure Chalet, helping with cross-country skiing excursions into the Central Cascades.

I decided to take a break from college to hike the PCT. I gathered the book, maps, food and gear and headed south to California. On March 30, 1976, my brother's friend dropped me off at the PCT trailhead on the Mexican border. I was 20. My external frame backpack weighed 50 pounds. I wore heavy mountaineering boots, had a winter sleeping bag and planned to sleep under a tarp. My mother shipped my food to post offices or ranger stations. Back then, there were no trail angels and no one had a trail name. According to the postmaster at Cabazon, Calif., around 90 backpackers signed the trail register that year. Yet when I signed the register in Manning Park, I saw only a dozen other names.

I typically traveled alone for days at a time, but I also hiked with others. I enjoyed the solitude and the company, especially those rare times when I met other women. For a week, I hiked with Jeannie Smith, aka **Jean Ella**, and **Cynthia Stockwell** of Oregon, the only hikers who had made it safely up and over Mt. San Jacinto during an April snowstorm. Just north of Mojave in Cantil, I met two other young women, and then in Northern California just south of Burney Falls, I met **Teddi Boston**, who was heading south. Female trekkers were few and far between back then.

The dangers of being a solo young woman on the trail are significant, and they stretch well beyond the hazards typically associated with wilderness travel. My journal reflects the tension I felt after several encounters with a fellow hiker who caught up with me when I went ahead and hung around when I stayed behind. His threatening presence heightened my safety concerns. My friendship with other supportive hikers was key to renewing my sense of trust and safety, giving me the courage to continue. Over time, I learned to more closely follow my intuition, whether it concerned other hikers, impending weather or river crossings.



I began hiking in the high Sierras on May 12. The route was mostly snow covered and often dangerous. On warm afternoons, I would sink up to my waist. At other times, the snow was hard, making descents precarious, even with an ice axe. My pace slowed as I spent more time route finding. Consequently, my food supply ran low. At one point, I added a quart of water to a cup of soup mix and called it dinner.

In the mountains, I learned new skills about trekking, such as the greater caloric needs at high altitude. When I got to lower altitudes I returned to a faster pace and lighter meals. My journey continued in the summer heat through Northern California, into the mosquitoes of Oregon and finally across the Columbia River at Cascade Locks to my home state of Washington. Hiking northward in my own terrain, I met my family and friends at White Pass. My mother hiked with me from there to Chinook Pass, the place where I had first hiked when I was 3. I felt proud to be on a journey that she had inspired in me on family backpacking trips.

It was barely September when my mother and I parted, but it was snowing hard. Fortunately, the snow let up the next day and the freeze killed most of the mosquitoes and turned the larches golden for my final days in the North Cascades. I crossed the border into Canada on September 29, 1976, age 21. My parents met me at Manning Park Lodge the next day to celebrate the completion of my trek my coming-of-age journey into adulthood. As far as I know, I am the first woman to solo thru-hike the PCT.

I had some difficult times on the trail, but I so loved the wonders of this journey that I promised myself I would return. I was strong and planning for my future, yet the challenges on the trail did not fully prepare me for what I faced ahead.

As a young woman, I ended up in a marriage marred by domestic violence. Each summer, during my breaks from nursing school, I managed to get away by myself with my children for a few weeks on the trail. Returning to the PCT year after year has held me together through hard times. It was my survival.

As my children grew, I took them out for longer hikes, as my mother had done with me. I hiked from Canada to California on the PCT with my eldest daughter. We celebrated her seventh birthday at Diamond Lake, Ore., in August 1985. For our hike, I developed a “tail” – a rope tied to the end of my backpack – that she could hang onto. Three of my other children hiked with me through Washington when they were between 7 and 9 years old, carrying nothing but a whistle and a snack until they were 8 or 9. One hiked the John Muir Trail with me when she was 10 and the following summer the Tahoe-Yosemite section of the PCT. Although one of my five children is severely developmentally disabled, I figured out ways to backpack short distances with her. She still loves to hike. She cannot speak or care for herself, yet she has one phrase, “Let’s go!” which means she wants to hit the trail.

The PCT was there for me in another way as an adult, helping me to recover from brain surgery. My brain bled during childbirth, and I ended up needing brain surgery for the stroke, which had led to uncontrolled epilepsy. Following the surgery, I had double vision that did not resolve immediately, yet I returned to hiking on the PCT that summer, first on day trips and then overnight. I often tripped on rocks and roots in the trail and had difficulties crossing streams, but gradually my health and my eyesight improved. Trekking on the PCT was my form of vision therapy. My eyes had to dart back and forth repeatedly as I watched the trail, to the extent that my brain rewired itself.

As I regained my strength, I listened to my inner voice and set my children and myself free from my abusive relationship. I was able to face my husband as I did a cougar I once encountered in the North Cascades. I was alone on the Boundary Trail early in the season when I came face to face with a magnificent cinnamon-colored cat. Shouting loudly didn’t faze it. It stood still on the trail staring with mesmerizing eyes. My children flashed through my mind, “They need their mother,” I whispered to myself. I stood tall, and asserted my dominance by spraying pepper spray toward the cougar until it leapt from the trail into the brush. I kept the spray ready and trudged through a storm of pelting rain and snow. Further up the trail I saw grizzly scat and began banging my pot with my spoon to be as loud as I could and keep them all at bay.

Hiking gave me the power and courage to move on. After my divorce, I moved to Winthrop with my youngest children to live on the edge of the Pasayten Wilderness and returned to the PCT over and over. The beauty of the Trail helped me heal and feel its exquisite sense of simply being.

I now have genuine love in my life. I met her in a snowstorm on the PCT in the Goat Rocks 12 years ago. My partner, **Judith Moore**, and I love to backpack and I am eager to share the magnificence of the Sierras with her. Now that my children are grown, I often hike alone or with my brother **Dick ‘Old Goat’ Burkhart**. The Northern California section of the trail has changed significantly since 1976 and I am planning to hike it soon to complete my second thru-hike of the PCT, this time section hiking over many years.

Two summers ago, my 85-year-old mother returned to the trail with my brother **Perry** and his family. Using packgoats, they hiked out of Chinook Pass, just as she had done each year since I was a child. I am looking forward to passing on my love of the Trail to my own grandchildren. I don’t know how my experiences might influence them, but I can see what backpacking trips have given to me.

The Trail I tottered on as little girl has offered me a path for my journey through life. It has given me adventures with my own children that I will always cherish, and the balance and inner wisdom to reach for my dreams. By requiring me to be outwardly strong, the Trail allowed me to regain my inner strength. I have found solace, spiritual connection and the joy of living in the moment on the Trail.

The Pacific Crest Trail has brought me home. 🐾

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*Carolyn Burkhart, 56, lives in Lakebay, Wash. She is scheduled to speak about Backpacking the PCT with Children Oct. 19 at the Seattle REI.*

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*Carolyn (r) with her partner, Judith Moore, at Crater Lake.*