

The Search for the PCT Relay Boys

By Barney "Scout" Mann

If any Relay Boys are alive they would be in their 90s. Today, the Pacific Crest Trail seems practically middle-aged, established and well defined. But when first conceived, the Trail was a wildly futuristic, Jules Verne conceit.

One event changed a crackpot dream into reality: the 1935-38 YMCA PCT Relays.

Proposed in the mid-1920s and promoted in the 1930s, the Trail was little more than a pencil line on a map. That changed over four summers. From June 1935 to August 1938, 40 teams of YMCA backpacking youths carried a logbook in a relay, passing it from one team to the next, completing a continuous 2,300-mile Mexico-to-Canada trek.

The **Boy Scouts** had first crack at the job. In April 1935, **Clinton C. Clarke**, the "Father of the PCT," proposed a full-trail, Boy Scout Relay as a way of publicizing scouting and proving the Trail concept. Chief Scouter, **James E. West**, put the idea "under study." Two months later, in Yosemite Valley, Clarke chaired the first PCT System Conference, where he met three YMCA leaders: **Blanchard R. "Chad" Evarts**, **Paul Somers** and **Charles G. Norman**.

Not a week later the first YMCA Relay leg left from Campo. From start to finish, West Coast newspapers lauded the feat. Thirty-one YMCAs - from San Diego to Wenatchee - sent boys to participate.

Was the Relay important? Thirty years later, in 1968, Congress designated the PCT a National Scenic Trail. Four trails were considered; two chosen. The Appalachian Trail was a sure bet. But the PCT faced long odds. What distinguished the PCT from the Continental Divide and the Potomac Heritage Trails? The study that birthed the legislation, the 1966 *Trails For America Report*, noted one difference: "By 1937 the Pacific Crest Trail was continuously passable" and "in existence" while "the other two ... are only ideas."

The PCT was "in existence" because of the Relay Boys.

They were 14- to 18-year-olds of the Depression era. Most carried wood and canvas Trapper Nelson packs, state of the art at the time. But when the first team departed June 15, 1935, they had bedrolls on their shoulders as if setting out for the Civil War. A photo preserves Team 1 mid-step, like in a museum diorama, leaving the whitewashed border-crossing customs house at Campo. The customs house closed in 1943. Today, 870 feet west of the PCT southern monument and south of the tall metal border fence, two rain-eroded remnant walls of the customs house still stand.

I often wondered what else remained of the YMCA Relay. Were any Relay Boys still alive? Did their dusty albums hold Relay photos? And where did the logbook go? Not long ago, I set out on the trail of these answers.

Dead ends, phones disconnected, addresses gone cold. "I'm sorry, Uncle Stephen died four years ago." Names crossed off and more as they showed up in the Social Security death index.

I placed a phone call to Sisters, Ore., and a woman answered. "I'm looking for **Gordon Petrie**. He hiked the Pacific Crest Trail in the 1930s with the Portland YMCA."

"I'm sorry ... Gordon is sleeping upstairs," said **Shirley Petrie**, Gordon's wife of 67 years. "But he talks about that trip. He said it was a real good time."

Gordon not only recalled the event, but he had an album with photos. And a puckish sense of humor. "I've got glasses, I got dentures, I got ear thingies, all I need is a toupee and my head will be fully equipped," he said.

Weeks shy of his 90th birthday, his beard, mustache and eyebrows are a matching thatch of white. Yet when Gordon flirts with Shirley or makes a quip, you see glimpses of a strapping 15-year-old hiker clad in dapper hat and aviator sunglasses.

In the Relay's third year, on July 15, 1937, in Central Oregon, Team 31 drove west on a then-gravel South

First to travel the entire Pacific Crest Trail - the 1930s Relay Logbook and its original weathered canvas cover, briefly out of fire-proof safe. Underneath the canvas cover is a 1928 passport photo of Clinton & Margaret Clarke. Photo by Barney Mann. Logbook and other items courtesy of Don Rogers.



Santiam Highway and turned onto a plank road to reach Big Lake. The team included Gordon, 23-year-old trip leader **Lloyd Craft** and three others. Arriving at the lake a day before they were to start hiking, Gordon and some of the others decided to swim across the lake, to the great alarm of Craft, who threatened to send them home.

“We were on a YMCA swim team, and so to swim a half mile across the lake wasn’t all that big a deal. But Lloyd Craft ... he was really up in arms,” Gordon says.

They swam it anyway.

A copy of the team’s packing list made by Gordon’s close friend **Bob Morrison** still exists: 1 small hatchet, 1 can boot grease, 1 small knife, 1 large knife, 1 bar lifebuoy soap, turpentine.

Morrison has since passed away.

“He came and woke me up at night at Olallie Lake and it was a calm cloudless moonlight night and he woke me up and whispered to keep quiet and we went and swam out on the moonbeam, which I’ve always remembered,” Gordon said of his friend. “That was one big event for me, swimming out on this moonbeam.”

They took six days to walk to Olallie Lake. But only one boy showed up to hike the next leg, so Gordon continued to Swim (an old resort near Mt. Hood). In total, he hiked more than 100 miles.

At the end, Gordon’s team presented the mayor of Portland with a letter from the mayor of Sacramento. They’d carried it along with the logbook. What Gordon recalls best was how they stuffed their packs full of paper so they’d look good for the newspaper photo.

The next Relay Boy found me. A typed note accompanied a new PCTA member’s dues. **Blake Bevill** identified himself as part of YMCA Relay Team 2. He had a question: Where is the logbook? The fingers that tapped out that note were 97 years old.

I found Blake in his well-kept northern California home. I told him that the logbook had been kept in a fireproof safe in the Southern California home of **Don Rogers**, son of PCT pioneer **Warren Rogers**. Warren died in 1992. Since then, the book has left the house only once, Don said. But I showed Blake a photograph of it and a transcript of the four pages covering his Relay leg.

When Blake last saw the logbook, the pebbled black leather cover was new and embossed with gold letters: Pacific Crest Relay Log – 1935-36. The photo showed a scuffed, aged leather cover. Staring at the picture, Blake grew quiet. They’re similarly changed, I thought.

On June 19, 1935, Blake’s Orange County YMCA Team 2 accepted the logbook at Oak Grove Campground, north of Warner Springs Resort. They had a short two-day leg, just over 25 miles to Pines-to-Palms Highway, where Team 3 was waiting to tackle the San Jacinto Mountains above Palm Springs.

In a voice graveled with age, Blake recalled that it was his first time sleeping under the stars. He saw a rattlesnake sunning itself next to the trail and remembers **J.B. Wilbur**, the team’s leader, telling him to leave it alone. Wilbur even recorded the incident in the logbook: “Narrow escape from rattlesnake at 8:30.”

Clockwise, from top left: Gordon Petrie leads PCT Relay Team 31 across a meadow near Mowich Lake, Mt. Jefferson Wilderness, Ore., July 17, 1937. (From the collection of Gordon Petrie)

PCT Relay Team 1 crossing the Mexican border into California. The Mexican customs house at Campo is in the background. (Courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley)

*Gordon and Shirley Petrie at home in Sisters, Ore.
Blake Bevill in his backyard in Northern California.
(Photos by Barney Mann)*

Today it is not unusual to see hikers’ drawings in trail registers. On Blake’s leg, **Albert Clarke** made two drawings in the logbook, the first known examples of PCT hiker art. The first shows the team trudging in heat, the path leading to endless hills. J.B. carries a 50-pound load, bedrolls are draped around their packs, and comic sweat droplets pour off Blake, who’s smiling. Clarke’s second drawing shows the team happily cavorting in the Cahuilla hot springs under a crescent moon.

Blake had never been interviewed about the Relay.

Eugene Farnham’s trail was all but cold – two old addresses and two phone numbers “no longer in service.” With as much hope as hitching a ride at Sonora Pass, I mailed letters. The first came back. The second was answered with a phone call from Tucson, Arizona. The 91-year-old and I tripped over each other’s words, each so happy to speak to the other.

In 1936, Farnham’s team marched the logbook from Beswick, Calif., to Four Mile Lake, Ore. I sent Eugene a transcript for Team 26’s logbook pages. The entry began somberly, but then it turned cheery: “YMCA had abandoned the following boys to their fate: **Steve Babson, John Botsford**, Eugene Farnham. We left Beswick – a post office on a farmer’s sun porch – with a can of Mrs. Spannaus’ best wild cherry jam and started out at an easy pace.”

Eugene recalled getting lost multiple times, having to backtrack for miles and then “hike by the light of the moon” to keep on schedule. On one off-trail jaunt, the logbook recounts: “we got a ride back to the right road on a horse and wagon.”

The logbook: “Lunch was a queer, harassing affair. A positively delicious stew made of noodles, beans, ham and corned beef hash we nearly gobbled up, but when we were ready for seconds, we found that the yellow jackets had beaten us to it. Talk about pests!

“...After lunch we started up the beginning of the Oregon Skyline Trail. What a relief! After having ‘pounded’ hard dirt roads for three days, a trail, well blazed and signed, was a welcome sight.

“...We can see the silhouette of Mt. McLoughlin to the west and as we wait patiently at 8:15 p.m. for the incoming relay, we realize that despite all the hardships undergone we have had an experience never to be duplicated, an experience that will leave lasting impressions. Adieu!”

Like Gordon, Eugene got his picture in the paper. The August 1936 photo shows Farnham lanky and lean, in an open-collar shirt, looking earnest and ready to hike. The caption begins: “In relays, the boys are planning to prove they can hike from the Mexican to the Canadian borders via a trail along the Pacific coast.”

And prove it they did. Leaving only footprints, they made a huge impact on the Trail.

I paid Gordon a second visit to show him a photo of the logbook. He jerked, surprised to see it after 75 years. Then a large smile grew. In it I saw a boy still swimming, his arms churning, chasing a moonbeam across Olallie Lake. 🐾

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