

Ryback Returns

The youngster who put the PCT on the map in 1970 surfaces to pay homage at Monument 252, the obscure place where history was made

By Barney "Scout" Mann

The drive to return is strong. We yearn to go back, back to where we first met our mate, first camped overnight, back to the end of a 2,000-plus mile hike, to the iconic places that mark our lives, linking a time to a place, tattooing our neurons just as surely as if on our chest, marking one side Before and the other Ever After. The last acne may have vanished, but 20, 40, 60 years later, we fly cross-country to return to a high school reunion. Why? The drive to return is strong.

April 26, 2009. Thirty-nine years have passed. A slim, 18-year-old youth is now 56. **Eric Ryback** wants to return.

Monument 252. The obelisk is weighty, a thick-mortared pillar of irregular cut stones. It's tall, a full hiking stride higher than the Pacific Crest Trail's own southern monument. And like the PCT's end point, it sits sentinel over the U.S.-Mexican border. But this backwater marker lies 21 miles due west from Campo, a good day's hike even by thru-hiker standards. For years it's been inaccessible from the U.S. side. No PCT hiker ever finished at Monument 252. That is, none save one.

Journey's End. On October 16, 1970, Eric Ryback completed the first PCT thru-hike. Personal congratulations came by telegram. The Apollo astronauts received congratulations from the President, and Eric Ryback's greeting came from no less than **Edward P. Cliff**, Chief of the **U.S. Forest Service**. A TV crew was present, cameras rolling. The next day, Eric's photo graced the cover of the *San Diego Union*. It was reprinted nationwide. The photo captured Eric, posed next to Monument 252, the two bound together, cemented to the moment, as tight as the mortar gripping the pillar's stones.

Richard Barnes reported for the Union: "Hiker Eric Ryback sticks foot through fence into Mexico yesterday at boundary marker 252 after walking 2,313 miles in 132 days." Forest Service Chief "congratulated Ryback on being the first to accomplish the feat."

Barnes vividly captured Eric's final approach. "Ryback's father, **Ernest**, ... who has not seen his son since June 8, ran across several hundred yards of plowed field to welcome him." Not the child running to the parent, but parent to child. Ernest Ryback's sprint to his son marked the end of Eric's hike.

If that marked the end, where did it all begin? One beginning was the year before. Eric had no idea Monument 252 existed. It was 1969. That summer saw 400,000 make the trek to Woodstock, and that summer Eric Ryback made his own trek from Mount Katahdin

to Georgia. He was 17, about to enter 12th grade, and he became the 41st person to thru-hike the Appalachian Trail. At the end, upon meeting his parents, Eric's first words were, "Next summer I'm hiking the Pacific Crest Trail."

Eric kept his word. Wednesday, June 10, 1970, was his high school graduation. Eric was absent. He didn't walk with his classmates. Instead of walking across a stage, Eric set out from Canada's Manning Park. It was the first day of his PCT hike. Four months later, in leather boots resoled three times, Eric reached Monument 252. The camera shutter snapped.

Months passed, and all those newspapers photos of Eric at Monument 252 made their way to landfills or to neatly tied twine bales for school newspaper drives. In that same time, Eric wrote a book, *The High Adventure of Eric Ryback*. It was about his PCT hike. One hardback printing followed another. The bold type on the cover of the Bantam paperback, fifth printing, proclaimed it a "Breathtaking National Bestseller." Eric's book was translated into Norwegian and Japanese.

Eric Ryback was in demand. Groups paid his way to travel. Tell us about the hike. The Kelty Company came calling. May we please have your pack?

Eric had painstakingly sewn the flags of the United States, Mexico and Canada on his Kelty pack. Kelty hung the pack at company headquarters, on the Kelty Wall of Fame. The pack hung next to one that had accompanied the first American Everest expedition. *Backpacker Magazine* came calling. **William Kemsley, Jr.**, *Backpacker's* founder, came to Eric's house. Eric's story was the first feature article in *Backpacker*, Issue One.

Much was written and much said about Eric's hike. He was not without detractors. Some disputed that Eric walked every step he claimed. Some said worse. But even one of his staunchest detractors, one of the loudest baying hounds, readily admitted what Eric did for the PCT: "He put it on the map." Eric's hike was mythic, and like Helen of Troy, whose visage set forth a thousand ships, Ryback launched a thousand backpacks. The backpacking wave continues to reverberate with trail footsteps today.

But the hounding took its toll. Dame Fame is a fleeting mistress. She gave Eric a bigger hug than most get in a hundred lifetimes, and then she fled. The hike soured for Eric.

As the 1970's passed, Eric graduated college, tried a stint teaching and spent a few seasons running a guide service. Then he turned to the world of finance. He married. He had three kids. He told his children next to nothing about his hike. They had no inkling of Eric's tie to Monument 252.

Eric got on with the rest of his life. He lived two time zones distant from the PCT. You could walk through his home and have no idea that here lived a once-famous author who at age 18 had hiked the PCT. Who's to say that moving on isn't as brave and admirable as setting out on a thru-hike? Eric Ryback became lost to the trail.

Though far away, Eric was never entirely forgotten. Any PCT history had his name, though often with a caveat. Wikipedia Entry: "In 1970, Eric Ryback, a 17-year-old student, was credited as the first thru-hiker on the trail.... The truth of Ryback's claim is still debated." The 300,000-plus copies of Eric's books circulated. Around many a campfire, as the coals winked into embers, hikers thought about who first set them off on the trail.

The year 2000 rolled by, the "Y2K" computer scare flopped, all with no disturbance in Eric's distance from the trail. Then, in 2007, the stars realigned. The annual Kickoff gathering at Lake Morena was one year shy of 10 years old. Since the beginning, the organizers had sought out living trail history. **Greg "Strider" Hummel**, a KO founder, recalls when they found and brought **Donald Rogers** in to speak.

Donald, already elderly, spoke of his father, **Warren Rogers**, the Warren Rogers who led the 1935-38 PCT Relays that first mapped the trail, who founded the **Pacific Crest Trail Conference** in 1977 and who was the prime tender of the PCT flame until his death in 1992, one year before the PCT's official completion. Like seeking that last elusive baseball card to complete a set, Strider for years had sought to locate Eric Ryback. Strider's internet searches, his email pleas to the PCT-L, all came up dry.

Then, in 2007, two brothers, **Ben** and **Gavin Gunderson**, a.k.a. "**Hammer**" and "**Diesel**," came west to hike the PCT. They came to

Captions: Page 23 – Monument 252 today. • Eric as he finished on Oct. 16, 1970. (U.S. Forest Service photo from the collection of Eric Ryback.) • Eric in April 2009 walking along a city street in Mexico toward Monument 252. **Page 24** – Eric at Monument 252 in April 2009. • San Diego Union cover page Oct. 17, 1970. **Page 25** – Photo of Monument 252 taken soon after it was erected during an 1892-1895 Boundary Commission monument survey. From a book published in 1896. **Page 27** – Photos taken when Eric completed his hike on Oct. 16, 1970. The man in uniform is Cleveland National Forest Supervisor Stanley Stevenson, and the backpacking adult on the extreme left is John Caragozian, lands officer of the Cleveland National Forest. Caragozian was given a long-awaited notice of a promotion by his supervisor, Stevenson, when he hiked in to Monument 252 with Eric. The man to the right is San Diego Union reporter Richard Barnes. The man kneeling is Eric's father, Ernest. Eric is wearing his backpack and standing in front of Monument 252. (U.S. Forest Service photos from the collection of Eric Ryback.)

Non-historical photos taken by Barney Mann.



the Kickoff and called their uncle. "Uncle Eric, you wouldn't believe what's happening here."

Eric Ryback had hiked alone. A gathering of a dozen thru-hikers, much less a gathering of hundreds, was something unfathomable. He couldn't believe the bustling Kickoff scene his nephews described.

In 2007, Strider tried one more time. He sent out another email plea on the PCT-L. The message posted the night before Hammer and Diesel were to start their hike. In San Diego, Diesel glanced at a computer. He called Strider right away. "Eric Ryback is my uncle." Strider muses now, "If I'd waited one more day, they'd never have seen it."

In 2008, Eric Ryback came to Kickoff. Over the Saturday noon hour he was part of a Legends of the Trail panel, joining **Billy Goat**, **Jerry Goller** and **Teddi Boston**. And Saturday night before a field packed with 600, Eric dusted off his old slide trays and spoke about his hike. It had been an age since the last time.

Coming to Lake Morena, Eric had a goal in mind. He wanted to see the point where his hike ended. They took him to PCT's southern monument. That didn't look right. On Sunday, Eric followed **Lawrence "The Spring Guy" Peabody**, driving miles west on Highway 94 and then dipping south to Otay Mesa. Lawrence said he knew the monument's location. They slowed and approached a no-man's land marked by two looming, parallel steel fences. The Border Patrol stopped them. Go back. Eric was thwarted.

The next year, two weeks before Kickoff, Eric sent me an email. "I intend to try my hardest to get my photo in front of the monument ... this time."

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VIEWS OF THE MONUMENTS
AND
CHARACTERISTIC SCENES
ALONG THE
BOUNDARY BETWEEN THE
UNITED STATES AND MEXICO
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Entering stage right, I played my small part in the story. Like Strider, my first Internet searches came to naught, but then I stumbled upon a geo-caching site.

"Parsa9" listed the longitude and latitude coordinates for a few border monuments, not Monument 252. I had to join the site-group to contact him, and in a late-night email, Parsa9 replied, "I think it's here: N 32 33.182 W 116 54.291." Punch those coordinates into Google maps and blow it up large. Monument 252 stands just north of a green tractor-trailer truck.

"Eric, bring your passport. We're walking into Mexico."

At Kickoff, Eric came packing his own surprise. He brought his old Kelty pack, the one that had been hanging on the Kelty Wall of Fame. Kelty mailed it to him, including a none-too-subtle return mailing label, postage pre-paid. Hikers rarely gawk, but a group did, snapping photos of the pack as Eric took it out of its box. The American flag was tattered, the Canadian flag torn.

That Sunday after Kickoff, April 26, 2009, Eric drove and I navigated. Near the Otay Mesa border crossing, we parked in a dingy dirt lot. Before walking off, Eric caught me up short. He opened his rental-car trunk, pulled out his old Kelty pack and he set it on his back. I watched, incredulous. He's actually going to hike with it. It's

an icon, a museum piece. But part of Eric's vision was to return to Monument 252 wearing his pack.

We set out, Eric setting a brisk, strong pace passing the border turnstile and smiling at a clutch of bored Mexican soldiers sweating in heavy fatigues, heavily armed. On the busy Boulevard de las Belles Artes, Eric repeated often as traffic whisked by, "There was nothing here then. Nothing at all."

He told me the story of why he'd had to finish so far west. "There was a fire in the Lagunas."

What an understatement. Starting near the PCT at Kitchen Creek, the Laguna Fire consumed 175,425 acres, at its time the largest fire in California history.

The traffic thinned and the pavement became packed dirt. The moment drew close. Then Eric saw it. What was he thinking? Monument 252 stood next to a rusting, corrugated steel fence, amid trash and discarded tires. The wind's shift brought the smell of a nearby dead dog. But it's of no moment.

We spoke little. Took photos. I stood silent next to this obviously moved man. I thought of Eric's father, who died some time ago, and I couldn't help but wonder if, in Eric's mind's eye, he was watching his dad come run out to greet him across the open plowed field. Eric had returned. 🍷🍷

