



Bill cools his feet on a warm July day in the Sierra. Photos courtesy Phyllis Davies.

Supporting a PCT thru-hiker

By **Phyllis Davies**

My husband, **Bill Davies**, had just turned 66 a few days before he started thru-hiking the Pacific Crest Trail on April 28, 2001. I was in New York where our daughter, **Dawna**, was playing oboe and English horn at Carnegie Hall, so I didn't help Bill pack or start him on the trail. But I'd made lots of our homegrown beef into jerky and dried some of our fruits and veggies for him.

He had cobbled together some old backpacking equipment. His pack weighed more than 40 pounds. He thought his old farm boots would suffice. He pre-mailed packages of pasta bean soup, home dried veggies, finely flaked jerky and Snickers bars to the first suggested post offices. Bill had done a 12-mile hike when he was in **Boy Scouts** but had not hiked much since. We live on a small farm on the central coast of California, so he was used to hard work. But he weighed 206 pounds and at 5 feet, 11 inches tall, wasn't in the best shape.

My brother, **Wes Armstrong**, a dentist and pilot, lives just up the valley from us in San Luis Obispo. He flew Bill to Southern California and hiked the first day with him from the Mexican border. But Wes had to get back to his dental practice.

Bill was slow at first. It took him three weeks to get to Lake Arrowhead with his heavy, out-of-date gear. By then he was clear on what equipment changes he had to make if he was going to get to Canada.

I was in the barn talking to Wes that Saturday when Bill called. As we talked, he realized he'd better come home to rework his gear and supplies and take care of his feet. He had blisters from his old boots, which were too small because his feet had spread over the years. Wes flew to Lake Arrowhead to fetch Bill. In three weeks on the PCT, Bill had lost 20 pounds. It took five days for his feet to heal. He bought lighter gear, including a GoLite backpack and New Balance trail runners.

While we were driving in our small camper to the trailhead near Lake Arrowhead for Bill to continue his hike, I put an apple pie topped with mixed nuts in the camper's small oven as a send-off for him. After we arrived I was dishing up his pie with ice cream when two hikers came out of the trees. We invited them in for the rest of the pie before the three of them – Bill now with a pack weighing 21 pounds – headed up the trail that afternoon.

Two days later, 40 miles up the trail, we met at the trailhead above Wrightwood for dinner. We met again at the base of Mount Baden Powell for lunch. Then two days later we met in Agua Dulce, and there met **Donna** and **Jeff Saufley**, the well-known trail angels. I drove to Valencia to pick up some supplies she needed for hikers.

Driving up the highway after leaving Bill, I realized we could create some fun serendipity on the trail. Since I can't hike very far because of an old knee injury, by meeting Bill at designated trail-



Other hikers and a sheriff's deputy join Baritone Bill and Trail Mom for breakfast in a meadow above the Columbia River in Washington.

heads, we both could enjoy the journey and provide Trail Magic along the way.

I was scheduled to do a tour of the Pacific states, promoting my book: *Grief: Climb Toward Understanding*. I'd written about my struggle to rebuild my life after our 13-year-old son, **Derek**, was killed in a commercial midair collision while traveling to his uncle's Northern California ranch for a quick summer vacation.

The camper worked well for the book tour. I was making appearances and signing books in bookstores, meeting with support groups, giving classes and talks at hospices, and giving radio and TV interviews. With the book tour more or less following the small towns trail route as Bill's thru-hike, I was able to meet and resupply him often. My goal for the tour was to help families struggling with the loss of a loved one or life changes.

The tiny camper had a little kitchen with refrigerator, itty-bitty freezer and oven. The passenger seat swiveled to become part of the living area. Hikers could sit at the small table and have some hearty homemade fare – beans, soup, or veggie stew, garnished with finely flaked jerky if they wished, with coffee, tea, fruit juice or beer. Hikers refilled their water containers (the van carries 40 gallons of fresh water). Sometimes a rest and a visit were all they needed before heading up the trail. Boxes of my books provided welcome seating.

Bill loves to sing; his trail name soon became **Baritone Bill**, and the hikers started calling me **Trail Mom**. It feels good to be called Mom. Those traveling south would often meet Bill and tell him there was a lady ahead who would feed hikers. He'd tell them he had heard of that lady.

Along the PCT and later the Appalachian, Continental Divide, Pyrenees GR 10, Compostela de Santiago and other trails across the world, I simply made a sign. It read, "Thru-Hiker Support Vehicle." Although there is an exhausting element to book tours, when I was up to it, I'd put the sign in the window. With Bill out on the trail several days at a time, I had plenty of time to do book-related events in nearby towns. Helping Bill and other hikers worked really well for me.

We soon discovered the hiking wasn't that hard on Bill. Though trips to town were fun, my being at the trailhead with supplies he needed eliminated many extra miles of walking. I'd have a good meal nearly ready for us. I often used my solar oven. Like a crock-pot dinner, it would be warm even if he came in after dark. The camper provided hot water, a shower and a bed. As we ate dinner we visited, catching up on the news of both worlds, checking the maps and planning the next meeting spot. He would tell me what resupply items he needed. He could start fresh the next morning after a good breakfast. I'd hand him his favorite trail treat, six salted boiled eggs, as he stepped out the door.

Saving him those off trail-days speeded up his hike. I also took many hikers to town, the store, the laundromat or even the hospital. I probably served 1,000 or more meals. A message book and hiker box I carried were well used. Those with supplies to discard could lighten their pack by leaving them for others.

One Saturday night near the Goat Rocks Wilderness, I had planned a salmon dinner for Bill when he came off the trail. I'd stopped at the store for salad greens and then on a walk, I'd stocked up with meadow greens before driving to the road crossing. While



sitting at the trailhead I noticed some hikers I knew setting up for the night. Recognizing the camper, they came over to say hello. By then I had learned to pick up extra beer and soft drinks. Other hikers I didn't know joined us.

I started cooking, improvising with whatever I had in the kitchen. Like most family cooks, I've learned to stretch food. I was in high gear and kept going as more hikers appeared. I fed 30 hikers seafood chowder, Fritos-laced salad and garlic bread. Bill eventually showed up and had some chowder while I prepared his salmon dinner.

Bill's thru-hike took 123 hiking days. He finished the trail weighing 160 pounds, down from 206. His longest day was 34 miles. He hiked with poles, he had no altitude problems or sickness, and once he traded those old boots for trail runners his foot problems ended. I drove more than 12,000 miles supporting him.

By the time we got to Canada. I had met and fed many section hikers and most of the 400 starters more than once. At last count we heard that 115 finished the trail that year.

Since then, if we know of hikers we want to support doing the PCT, we can easily intercept them from San Luis Obispo at Walker Pass. We leave in the morning and can be there for lunch. Then we stop at the Wool Growers in Bakersfield for our favorite Basque dinner on the way home and still have time to go dancing. Trail Magic

keeps happening. One time when we stopped at Walker, we found long-time trail angel **Meadow Ed** barbecuing.

An update on Bill's well-worn but still useable GoLite pack: he's carried it for more than 7,000 miles of hiking all over the world, as well as summiting 19,450-ft. Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania and exploring the Negev Desert in the Middle East. It came with us on the skirts of the sacred Mount Chimborazo in Ecuador and Mount Arenal in Costa Rica.

We still answer to Trail Mom and Baritone Bill. Gardening and fixing fence on our farm is where you will likely find Bill if he is not hiking the trails of the central coast. He just turned 80. Our daughter's birthday gift to him was a lunch party with long-time nurturing friends and a flight over the John Muir section of the Pacific Crest Trail.

Our trail adventures all started with Bill hiking the PCT, for us a trail of pushing ourselves, of helping others, of smiles and fond memories. It's the crown jewel of the trails of the world that now seem like home. 🍷

Information about author Phyllis Davies and her book is available at www.sunnybank.com.

Left: Bill Davies, right, and his brother-in-law, Wes Armstrong, at the Southern Terminus.

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