



# The PCT's Third Bestseller

By **Barney Scout Mann**

The first bestseller about the Pacific Crest Trail, *The High Adventure of Eric Ryback*, was published in 1971. It sold 300,000 copies in seven printings and was translated into Finnish, Japanese and Braille. The most recent bestseller, **Cheryl Strayed's** *Wild*, is being made into a movie after almost two years on bookstore shelves. But there was a third PCT bestseller. And just like the other two, it changed the author's life.

"All I knew about was the Appalachian Trail," said author **William Gray**.

That was not unusual for an East Coast child of the 1950s. But what set Gray apart was his childhood goal. Barely lingering on dreams of becoming a fireman, policeman or president, young Will wanted to be a writer. In second grade he wrote a story about patriot Nathan Hale. Sixty years later, in a glowing voice, he recounts his parents' reaction: "This is really good. You have talent."

In June 1968, the 22-year-old English major graduated from Bucknell University in Lewisburg, Penn. – Appalachian Trail country – and five days later showed up for work at National Geographic where he had interned the year before.

"Growing up I always loved writing, travel and adventure," he said. He was a fledgling writer for Special Publications-National Geographic Books. "It was a dream come true."

Gray kept the dream job for seven months before the U.S. Army drafted him in January, 1969. When his two-year stint ended, he returned to National Geographic and hit the ground running.

By opportune timing, the cover story on the June 1971 issue of *National Geographic* magazine was "Mexico to Canada on the Pacific Crest Trail." Gray seized the moment and suggested that the society's next book be about the PCT. National Geographic sent out a reader survey with multiple book topics. The results returned with the PCT as top dog. Gray had his first book assignment.

He might not have realized how much "adventure" he'd bitten off. During 1973 and 1974, he spent seven months – two hiking seasons – hefting a 50- to 60-pound pack while trekking 1,600 PCT miles with photographer **Sam Abell**. That didn't include a score of side trips, such as a three-day crampon and ice axe climb of 14,411-foot Mount Rainier. Along the way a constant companion bent Gray's back: "We probably had an additional twenty pounds each of photographic equipment." It was the equivalent of carrying a third person's gear.

National Geographic published *The Pacific Crest Trail* by William Gray in early 1975. More than 320,000 copies sold. Gray still has the yellowed newsprint copies of glowing reviews: "One of the best fine book buys in America." "Well-written." "Written with feeling."



Previous page: *National Geographic* books by William Gray. Above: Gray taking notes in Central Oregon. Photo by Sam Abell.

One headline read: “National Geographic Book an Especially Good One.” Those in the know lauded it. A hand-typed letter from Northwest outdoor writer Harvey Manning: “Thanks to you and your compatriots for producing a book that – at last – does full justice to the trail.” **Warren Rogers**, a PCT founding father, wrote: “I want to congratulate you and Sam for doing a splendid job!”

Gray interviewed dozens across the trail spectrum, interspersing their stories like spicy morsels in a backpacker’s stew. **Lester Hook**, a third-generation rancher, was reluctant to let the PCT cross his Campo spread. Centenarian **Julio Ortega**, a Diegueño Indian chief, was living his last days at Warner Springs Ranch – free of charge – the reward for years of service as a faithful vaquero. **Marv Evens**, High Sierra McClure Meadow Ranger, announced “I’m getting married soon” and invited Gray to his Muir Trail Ranch wedding. **Doug Gosling**, a young college student who resupplied Gray and Abell in the Sierra, memorably toted in a bottle of wine and a whole German chocolate cake. After the feast, Gray slept 11 straight hours. He interviewed rangers, miners, ranch owners, mountaineers, climbers, loggers, firefighters, horsemen, cross-country ski instructors, a trail crew, two geologists, a smoke jumper, a plant pathologist and hikers of all stripes.

The book delved into history. How did Theodore Solomons name the Evolution Valley peaks in 1895? “I felt that here was a fraternity of Titans,” Solomons said. The “Titans” Solomons envisioned were

the “great evolutionists,” and he enshrined them in stone, giving us Darwin, Huxley, Spencer and Wallace peaks. Moving north to Oregon and farther back in time, in June 1853, young prospector John Wesley Hillman was drowsing in his saddle when “his mule jerked to a halt, almost pitching him down a steep thousand-foot slope.” Hillman had discovered Crater Lake. And more: the Butterfield Express, mountaineer Norman Clyde, writer Joaquin Miller, mountain men Kit Carson and Tom (“Broken Hand”) Fitzpatrick, and to no one’s surprise, large doses of John Muir.

And he brought home the magic of trail life and nature’s glory. The reader knows Gray was there. In Southern California he wrote: “The city-soft condition of my feet combined to produce blisters the size of half-dollars on my heels. I would hobble with pain the next three weeks while these wounds gradually healed into calluses as tough as rawhide.” Dropping from the Sierra’s Donahue Pass into Lyell Canyon and Tuolumne Meadows, Gray captured the moment like a fly in amber: “At dawn we made our way down to the gently sloping canyon. Dewy grass glistened in the sun, and I could smell the thick rich earth. As we descended, the growth of summer was luxuriant around us, and we walked into Yosemite on a carpet of green.” In northern California, Gray marveled at the “mammoth” cones of the sugar pine. “Despite the sharp scales, Sam and I played a game of football with one.” Gray carried out four foot-and-a-half-long cones as souvenirs.

For years afterward, Gray received letters and calls. The book affected many deeply, including resupplier Doug Gosling. “I learned what it was like to be on a real adventure,” Gosling says, looking back on the weeks and hundreds of trail miles he shared with Gray and Abell. Today an acclaimed photographer in his own right, Gosling’s first published photos were in the PCT book. He tells one story not in the book: “Sam wanted to photograph Will on the summit of Mount Rainier.” They chartered a small plane. Before takeoff, Gosling and Abell loaded aboard a bag of still-warm hot cross buns. Gosling: “I remember the pilot dove into the crater of Mount Rainier. We saw them and they were running after us. Sam was hanging out of the airplane photographing. Then we dumped those breakfast goodies.” Gray had hot cross buns for breakfast.

The book spiked Gray’s confidence and launched him on the arc of his 33-year National Geographic career. “It had a profound impact both personally and professionally,” he said. “You’re a different person after that experience. It set the course for me professionally.”

After the PCT book, Gray became a globetrotting writer and Geographic exec. His next book was *Voyages to Paradise – Exploring in the Wake of Captain Cook*. In 1990, Gray achieved a professional pinnacle with a promotion to society vice president and director of the

Book Division. The first book published on his watch was *Inside the Vatican*. In 1991, the once-scruffy hiker donned an immaculate suit for a private audience with Pope John Paul II.

In 2002, Gray retired early after heading the Book Division for a dozen years. In 2007, he became a full-time member of the English faculty at San Juan College in New Mexico, teaching creative writing.

Gray’s book has been out of print for decades, but copies remain readily available on Amazon and eBay. And his life is still dotted with remnants of the book. His home sits high on a mesa above Durango, Colo. Every Christmas a large arrangement crowned by a red bow assumes a place of honor. Reaching out from the velvet bow, pointing to the four corners of the earth, are four relics gathered 40 years ago on the PCT. Still spiky, still ready to serve as footballs, are four mammoth pinecones. 🌲

Go to the PCTA blog at:

<http://www.pcta.org/2013/the-pcts-third-best-seller-15072/>  
for a photo of William Gray with Pope John Paul II.

Left: Gray savors a breakfast of granola and fresh-picked huckleberries along the Pacific Crest Trail in northern Washington. Photo by Sam Abell.

Below: Gray at home in Colorado with those prized mammoth pinecones from the PCT in northern California. Photo by Margie Deane Gray.

