

Sometime in the Fall of 1979 (Bill Kelsey and Jim Kern will remember the exact date) They both came from the East Coast to San Francisco to establish a Coordinating Committee of interested hikers and members of the newly formed American Hiking Society to start planning a cross-country hike the following Spring. The meeting was to be held at the North Face factory across the Bay in Berkeley in response to an announcement in that month's Backpacker Magazine and the AHS Newsletter. The announcement asked for volunteers who were interested in planning such an organized event which would be called "HikaNation", and gave the time and place of the meeting.

As an avid and experienced long distance backpacker concentrating on the U.S. and Canadian Northern Rockies, I answered the call. and dropping a line to Jim said I would be interested in volunteering to help out to some degree in the planning, but actually as it turned out not realizing what I was really getting myself into.

To my surprise I received a call at my office in Sa Francisco from either (or both) Bill Kemsley or Jim Kern when they arrived in California suggesting meeting for lunch on the day of the meeting. In my innocence I felt flattered and didn't realize I was being "played" by two experts. As I recall we had a very interesting lunch at the historic Garden Court of the Palace Hotel across Market Street from my office discussing hiking in general and the plans for HikaNation in specifics. After lunch I said I would see them later that evening at the North Face and went back to the office and continued dealing with client business.

As I recall there were about 50 potential volunteers that showed up at the meeting in Berkeley which both Jim and Bill ran from the front of the factory meeting room. I sat in the back listening. I was very impressed when Nobel Laureate Dr. Glen Seaborg (major name recognition in California) was introduced and told the group that he and his wife would trace out and establish a do-able route all the way from Berkeley to the Nevada border clear across California. "Wow!", I thought, "This thing could really come off!"

Then, in the next 15 seconds my life changed forever!

"...and Mike McReynolds has volunteered to get the Oakland Bay Bridge open for hikers...."

WHAT THE?????!!!!!!"

"Mike, introduce yourself."

In a moment of total surprise and shock, I stood up and with applause and all eyes turned to me in the back of the room, I mumbled something like ... "Well, I guess I'll have to give it my best shot...." I couldn't embarrass myself or Jim and Bill by declining the honor, so I gritted my teeth and kept quiet. They said later that they were unsure how or even if I would accept the "honor", and had I rejected it they had no one else to turn to.

(Oh, well-played, gentlemen!)

As the meeting came to a close Glen Seaborg came up to me (from that point on he was just "Glen") and quietly said something I'll never forget: "Mike, use my name (judiciously), it will definitely help open doors and clear some hurdles." He was really right about that, because without his help and use of his name, I doubt whether I could have ever "cleared those hurdles" and with the final result of putting 7,000 people on the top deck of the Bay Bridge on a Spring Sunday Morning at 5:45.

The problems of scheduling a hike several miles across a large busy bridge without a sidewalk seem to mount upon themselves. One thing led to another which then led to another, and still another. For example, CalTrans was adamant (repeat for emphasis) that there was no way, no how, no why the hell would they ever shut down the bridge. It had never been done before and it damn well ain't gonna happen for even a first time, My sense told me to back off from their negativity and take a different tack...namely by writing letters to every Assemblyman and senator in the California Legislature whose districts the proposed trail would pass through and that Glen Seaborg (GLEN SEABORG!!!) was currently mapping out. Plus, one of the three sponsors of the event was U.S. Government Department of Interior (well, a seldom heard of part, but still....) And the biggest plus of all was that the Speaker of the Assembly was Art Agnos who lived in San Francisco four blocks from my home on Potrero Hill, and the Leader of the Senate was Milton Marks also of San Francisco (referred to as "Uncle Milty" whom it was said would happily go to the opening of an envelope if he could attract a crowd). So to push a bill through the State Legislature authorizing the temporary closure of two lanes on the top deck of the Bay Bridge early on a Sunday Morning was seemingly a done deal. It also made it much easier to push permission through the Cities of San Francisco and Oakland who also had a say when it comes to the Bridge. And then there was the U.S. Army and the U.S. Navy and the U.S. Coast Guard who had major concerns that had to be dwelt with since the hikers were traversing some of their East Bay properties, and the Coast Guard needed to station boats under the bridge in case some hiker got pushed over the side.

Of course, then there was CalTrans. who threw up a number of hurdles. For example, we needed two school buses to sweep the bridge and pick up stragglers (the two lanes for hikers MUST be re-opened for traffic no later than 10 AM Sunday.) What if some hiker gets sick or has a heart attack during the crossing? There must be ambulances on station for emergency evacuation on both ends. Who owns the parking lots below the bridge on-ramps? And can we get permission to camp there overnight? Could we get a couple of Boy Scout troops to keep wayward hikers from stumbling across the empty safety lane and into on-coming traffic. What about coffee and donuts on both sides of the bridge. Porta-Potties? Crowd control so that an unknown number of hikers don't rush the Fremont Street off-ramp being used as an on-ramp to the top deck. Where do we get the rope and stanchions to insure orderly access? Questions, questions, problems, problems and solutions MUST be found. It had never been done before and has never been done since. And the major question which would remain unanswered until the morning of the event would be "How Many People would want to cross the Bridge?" And then there was the requirement of a Million Dollar insurance policy to protect the bridge from being dented or scratched by all the hikers. Luckily for me that was Jim Kern's problem. Solved with General Food's Postum coming on board on as our Corporate Sponsor. The list went on and on.

The night before the event we held a group meeting at Glide Memorial Methodist Church in downtown San Francisco (right in the middle of the Tenderloin..a somewhat sleazy part of the City). Since a large number of people were coming from all over the country, and for many of them having quit their jobs funds were very tight, we had to arrange decidedly less expensive accommodations than luxury levels found on nearby Nob Hill. Luckily, the main branch of the YMCA was right across the street from Glide Memorial, so that solved that problem. (Clean, cheap and convenient)

As the meeting got underway in a church classroom we counted over 90 people who were planning on hiking the entire distance. Some were very experienced hikers, others not so much and still a few who had never walked any great distance with a pack on their back. I remember this young lady came up to me at the meeting with a brand new box containing brand new never-used hiking boots, and with a brightness typical of innocence, opened the box brought out the shiny new boots and asked "I'm going to hike across the country...These are my new boots...what do you think about them? I answered as gently as I could, "I hope

you have moleskin.” “What’s that” she replied. Frankly I doubt that she made it over the East Bay Hills. (Actually I understand that a number of new hikers wound up in the hospital for a few days with bad cases of blisters.)

The next morning we all met at the Polo Grounds in the western end of Golden Gate Park for Opening Ceremonies (and Uncle Milties’ envelope). Governor Brown’s representative guest speaker was one of the original astronauts, Rusty Schweikart, Jim and Bill addressed the crowd and the Black Raven Pipe Band wheezed up and piped us to the Pacific Ocean. At this point I left to attack my final list of To-Dos, along with the major help of Monty and Norman Gee (my right-hand man and major problem solver...thanks, Norman wherever you are, I couldn’t have done it without your help.)

That night was sleepless with all the traffic sounds roaring on the bridge overhead. In fact I don’t see how anyone got any sleep on that hard concrete being so jazzed about the coming days, weeks and months.

Finally at dawn the next morning at 5:45, the CalTrans Representative came down the access ramp and said: “Mike, we’re done coning off the two lanes, traffic has cleared and **The Bridge is Yours!**...ending with “Congratulations, we didn’t think you could pull it off, good job and enjoy it because you’ll never do it again!” And, frankly, I won’t want to.

Grabbing a megaphone I announced to the more than 7,000 people primed for a unique experience that we were ready to start and please don’t rush up the ramp.

Unfortunately, Monty, Norman and I had to stay behind with a few others to clean up our overnight campsite. Once they left, Monty and I finished up, he took off after the last few late comers arrived. I grabbed a ride with the second school bus to drag the bridge for stragglers. When I got to the Oakland side the majority of hikers were well underway into Berkeley and now under Glen Seaborg’s wing.

The great irony for me was for all those months of sleepless nights, planning and writing notes to myself by the side of the bed I never got to walk across “my” Bridge. Once the last arrival off the bridge checked in on the Oakland side, traffic resumed and I took BART home to San Francisco, collapsed in bed and spent the rest of Sunday sound asleep.”

I did join the group two weekends later in the Folsom area, then later on caught up with them at Strawberry Lodge and made the Sierra Crossing at Echo Summit and then down to Sorenson’s Resort on the other side of Luther Pass. An entire year had passed when I rejoined every one at Harper’s Ferry and along the C&O Canal into DC. The hikers continued on to the Delaware Coast and later I headed north to the Canadian Rockies for further adventures.

Looking back now over the years, I realize that I was extremely lucky in being able to create a major one-time event and being forced to come up with solutions and ideas to cover some very tricky unique problems that no one had ever faced. In many ways it changed my life and the comment by the CalTrans representative at the foot of our on-ramp will remain with me with a sense of pride and wonder for the rest of my time.

Down through the years while I still lived in the Bay Area, I would cross the Bridge back into San Francisco by staying in the hiker’s lane...the Far Western lane on the top deck (MY LANE!). Things change. The original cantilevered portion from the Yerba Buena Island tunnel across to the Oakland shore has been replaced with a stronger, earthquake-proof section, and with it the lane the hikers trod.

I'm now living in a small town on the Central Oregon Coast and reliving a life full of memories. Hiking days are long over, but I still take walks on the beach with my dog. HikaNation remains one of the greatest of all my life's accomplishments and memories.

Thank you Bill and Jim for playing me! It was certainly worth it,