

S.F.-to-D.C. hike turns cynics into patriots: 'People are great!'

By Tom Eastham

Examiner Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — What do you discover in 13 months and 4,300 miles of day-in, day-out walking across the U.S. mid-section?

Mostly, it seems, you learn about people, about Americans — including yourself.

And a number of the 40 hikers who reached Capitol Hill yesterday after a trek that began April 12, 1980, in Golden Gate Park say there's a good chance the experience will turn cynics into patriots.

"It has made me feel I have control of my life," said the oldest hiker, John Stout of Seattle — who is just short of 70. "There is a tremendous sense of satisfaction, of freedom, in knowing I could do this — through hot and cold, mountains and desert.

"It was seven days a week — and I haven't been sick a day ... I'm tired but exhilarated."

The purpose of the American Hiking Society Hike A Nation was publicizing the need for more hiking trails across the country.

"We've learned a lot about Americans," said the small, bearded Stout, a retired machinist. "You find fine people everywhere — Pacific to Atlantic — it's the same from one end of the country to the other. They're helpful and hospitable — and curious."

Many people just assumed that the hikers were on a protest march, but Stout said he always told the curious that the hikers were hoping, not protesting:

"Most Americans don't realize they are going to have to do more walking — just like us. I asked them what they are going to do when the gas is gone."

Philippe Vermeyer, a 29-year-old Coloradan who has hiked eight months, said that because the hikers chose back roads and trails, most people they met were grassroots rural.

"Country people understood us — they are close to the land, like we are," he said. "City people tended not to believe us or what we were doing. Some seemed to feel we must have a few screws loose."

Did he detect any general feelings among the Americans they met?

"If there could be said to be a mood among them it would be they are happy with their lives," he said. "They don't want interference. They don't understand what's going on in Washington and the government."

Toni Martinazi, 45, a Portland, Ore. librarian, reflected the same feeling. He, along with Stout and nine others walked every step of the 4,300 miles.

"It seemed to me most people are into whatever they are doing for a living," said Martinazi. "And they're doing fine. People are just going about the business of living."

Like others, she said the trek has made her feel closer to the country, more patriotic: "I'm so very proud of the people of this country. Basically, they are the same everywhere. Friendly, curious, helpful and so generous they can't give you enough."

The most frequent question, according to Martinazi and other women on

the long walk, was "Aren't you afraid?"

"Afraid of what?" Martinazi asked. "People aren't going to hurt you — they're not hostile."

Her tent-mate was Jerri Hudson, a Coloradan who joined the hike eight months ago after graduation from high school. Hudson said: "I've learned a lot more than I possibly could in college — more about myself, about others and about the country.

"Before this trip I had absolutely no idea about dairy farming or tobacco growing or things like that. Now I've stayed on a dairy farm, slept in a tobacco warehouse and been down a coal mine. When you talk about this country now, I know it from experience."

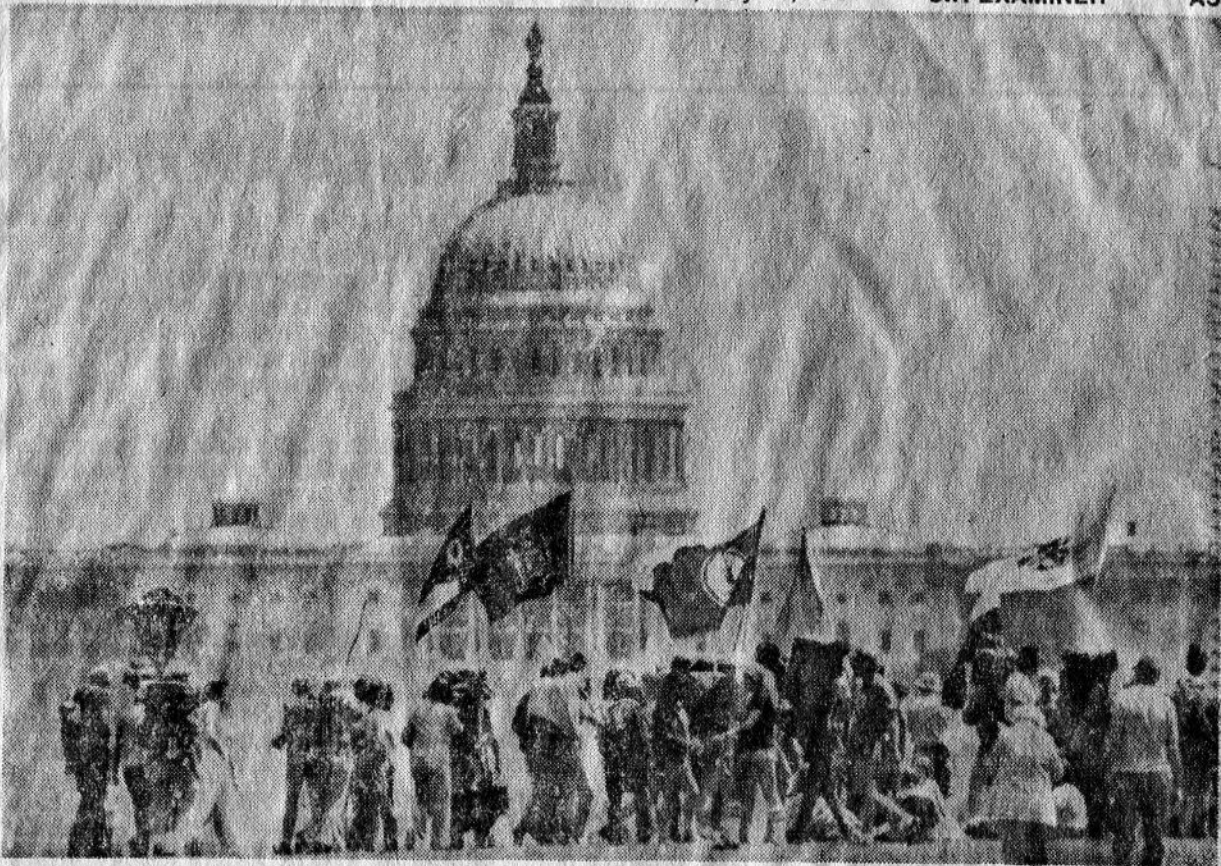
That doesn't compare with the Pyles — Dennis, 29, and Gayle, 33, who came the whole distance from San Francisco with daughter, Jaime, 6 months old when the trek began.

The Pyles stopped off to work in Illinois and fell 49 days behind the hike. It took a four-month walk to rejoin the others.

"Now we're just numb," said Gayle. "It was hard for all of us — especially Jaime — but we're stronger for it."

"The real lesson in this trip is that we could make it," said Dennis. "In some countries we might have been considered undesirables — hippies or Gypsies — and run out of places. That never happened. Instead, we've been met warmly everywhere.

"I was cynical about the American people before we left — but not anymore."



Associated Press

At the Capitol, one hiker conceded that people along the way sometimes thought they were protesters

Even after being nicked in the leg by a shotgun blast in the Virginia mountains, Shellie Newell, 29, of Nashville, Tenn., agrees.

The Virginia mountaineer with a shotgun was the only exception, she said. Hiking on a back road, she was hit in the leg and suffered a superficial wound.

"This guy had probably never seen anybody that didn't live on that old road," said Newell.

"What I have learned most is that America is a solid country. Good people, working hard and wanting to help. We're much more homogenized than I ever realized — really great

people all along the way."

Said Frank Nelson, 62, a retired San Franciscan: "You would not believe the loving experiences we have had along the way. Warm, friendly people want to feed you and bring you into their homes. Then they don't want to let you go."