

From the HikaNation journal of Marce Guerrein

(At 58 years old, she was the oldest female thruhiker on HikaNation covering 4,286 miles across America in 1980-81 with a core group of nearly 40 backpackers. Thousands of people joined or welcomed the hikers in the cities, towns, forests and plains as they made their way from San Francisco, CA, to Cape Henlopen, DE.

Journal entries...

December 13, 1980 Mountain View, Ozark Folk Center and Billy Joe Tatum party. You are not going to believe this weekend! I hardly do myself. So very much packed into 2 days.

Billy Joe is a legend in these parts. Her expertise is in the pluralities. She's an especially noted hostess, and her parties are famous. Like Perle Mesta, an invitation from Billy Joe is sought after.

Her home is a conglomerate of interesting nooks and crannies with fascinating wall hangings and pictures given by her fans. Every room has a story to tell. The kitchen is probably the most notable for out of it comes:

FOOD, that which tops all of her other specialties. She is a gourmet cook of the woods. Much of her hiking is done collecting wild herbs and these dry from the ceilings of several rooms. Jars upon jars hold weeds most of us never hear about.

Well, HikaNation was invited along with 100 other guests. People were coming out of the woodwork. There were university instructors, writers, dance teachers, representatives (Governor could not make this one), musicians, young people, new and old friends. The list goes on.

We had sassafras tea – plain or spiked, and wine – white or red. There were dips – wild onion, wild mushroom, etc. But the menu for dinner was something else.

Venison donated to her that she butchers herself. Hunters Pie – at least four wild animals are used in this dish (our combo was squirrel, possum, quail and pheasant). mulberry pie, pecan pie, walnut pie, artichoke (wild of course) relish and wild strawberries.

We piled our plates and came back for more. We heard musicians and took part, if able. I learned to play the spoons. Shellie sang. Bruce D. let go on bongo drums. On her new porch we counted 40 or 50 people clogging. It held us all, though the railing was not yet built and there was some concern of someone going over the edge to the rocks below. I quit after an hour.

The house overlooks a beautiful canyon. I guess the party lasted till 4am. I climbed into my sack at 1am. We stayed overnight. All those who did (and that was just about everyone) brought a sleeping bag and toothbrush.

Billy Joe was up at 5am, myself at 7am. She cooked, with help from a number of young women guests, 600 eggs plus bacon, toast, juice, coffee and tea. We were supposed to leave by 8am for we had an excursion into Blanchard Springs Caverns.

I have been most inept in describing an unusual party weekend. Some who keep diaries did not try. There was so very much to tell.

Her husband is a doctor in Mountain View. They raised five children – four girls and one boy. She wrote a couple of cookbooks. She always wears a feather in her hair.

December 14, 1980

The caverns are lovely. The guides sing their praises loudly. These are the largest LIVING caverns in the US. Living means that the caverns are still forming because water is still seeping. It seems that though these caves have been around for some time, they were not discovered until recently, like the 1950s. There are four national parks that have visitor centers that are show places. This is one of them.

Tim Ernst, our Arkansas coordinator, was a guide for 5 years when the caverns were finally opened for tourists. The guides are college graduates, work for the National Park Service and are especially well informed. I am impressed with the Park Service personnel. All of them are stuffed with knowledge. Very interesting – all of them.

December 15, 1980

Back to the grind.