

A spiritual journey

By BRIAN GEHRING Bismarck Tribune | Posted: Thursday, October 22, 2009



PICK CITY - It was closure for two men in the twilight of their years.

For one, it closed a chapter in an ongoing saga as he hikes his way across America.

For the other, it closed a chapter in the book of his life - a chapter that dates back to 1994.

Last week, M.J. Eberhart of Missouri spent a leisurely hour walking 1.9 miles of the North Country Scenic Trail at Lake Sakakawea State Park.

It was a walk that technically began last March.

Eberhart, a retired optometrist, set out to walk the 4,479 miles of the national scenic trail that originates at Crown Point, N.Y., and ends at Lake Sakakawea.

But last year's brutal winter and deep snow forced Eberhart to bypass some of the 200 miles of certified trails in North Dakota and return this fall to finish.

For Eberhart, the completion of the North Country Trail was the seventh of the eight original national scenic trails he has hiked from start to finish.

Next year he plans to hike a trail in Arizona, the eighth, then on to on a newly established trail that begins in Glacier National Park heading west to the Pacific Ocean.

Retired in 1993, Eberhart said he decided to take up hiking because being a backwoods outdoorsman always had been a part of his life.

"My granddaddy died in the woods, my daddy died in the woods and I'm working on it," he said.

Eberhart will turn 71 at the end of October.

His first hike was a short 3,100-mile jaunt along the Continental Divide Trail.

The why

Eberhart said when he first started hiking he was curious about how many miles people who hiked racked up, but that's not the case anymore.

He said he was talking with a friend who is a retired mail carrier and asked how many miles he had walked during his career.

He told Eberhart he didn't have any idea.

"Well then let's figure it out," Eberhart told him.

After calculating days off, vacation time, sick leave and the like, Eberhart said he figured his friend logged more than 50,000 miles carrying mail.

"I told myself 'You got a long ways to go, old man.'"

But things change out on the trail, he said.

"How many miles have I walked?" he said. "I don't know and I don't want to know."

Eberhart said it may have been about man against nature or man against himself in the beginning, but somewhere along the path it became about contentment - understanding his place in the grand scheme of things.

"When I started, I was full of bitterness, anger, hatred, frustration - from just life, I guess."

Slowly though, mile after mile, that peeled away like layers on an onion.

"It kind of worked its way down from my head to my feet; then one day it was gone," he said. "I just left it all out on the trail."

For him, Eberhart said there are three distinct planes to hiking: physical, mental and spiritual.

"You'd think the physical part would be the most challenging," he said. "You'd think so, but it's not ... ask anyone who has walked the Appalachian Trail."

He said after the first few weeks, the blisters on your feet turn to calluses and you become accustomed to carrying a pack on your back.

"A full 80 percent of it is mental," he said, convincing yourself you can do it.

Full circle

The payoff, Eberhart says, is the spiritual part of hiking.

"You get the stink of the city off you and then you are just another creature in the woods."

Eberhart said it was slow turning, but when things clicked, he knew he left the baggage from his life he had been carrying around on the trail that day.

From then on, he says he's been able to become content with his place in the world.

"I have been fortunate to not only find that place, but delve deeply into it.

"You realize you are just another speck of sand on the beach - it's a spiritual journey - you can't avoid it."

Eberhart said he has committed to memory a prayer titled "A prayer by the side of the road" that he starts each day by reciting.

"Being a part of the natural aspect of the world helps get your mind right," he said.

But nature can be cruel. While hiking in northern Minnesota, a fierce storm blew in - winds in excess of 60 mph that snapped pine trees overhead.

"And out there in the middle of it was this old man."

Closure

At Lake Sakakawea State Park, there is a faded, brown journal that most days sits on a shelf.

The journal is there for those who hike the North Country Trail to enter thoughts or comments.

Eberhart took the book with him back to Missouri, where he will compose his thoughts, enter them in the journal and mail them back.

The second entry in the journal was penned by Sue Lockwood, the sister of Eberhart's traveling partner, Gordon Smith.

For 25 years, Smith was the caregiver for his sister who was diabetic and blind, having to undergo dialysis four times a day.

Smith said although blind, she was able to walk about 2,900 miles of the North Country Trail.

About the time his sister died, Smith said he underwent spinal surgery and, after 18 months when his health benefits ran out, he was left without an income or a home.

Through chance and coincidence, the two men are friends and Smith supports Eberhart by driving ahead in his old van.

Some nights they sleep in the van and other nights in motels or with friends they have met along the way.

Eberhart said his goal when long-distance hiking is to make about 25 miles a day - 8-10 hours worth of walking.

The "2009 Odyssey," as he calls his treks, took 188 days.

With one of the original National Scenic Trails remaining, the end of the line in North Dakota was special for the two men, but for different reasons.

"This is history, Gordon," Eberhart said to his friend as he paged through the journal.

Smith, through tears as he read his sister's words, said for him it was like coming home.

"Supporting (Eberhart) has kept me going ... kept me from wanting to die," he said.

With a hand on his friend's shoulder, Eberhart said "This provides closure and quality."

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