

Discovering America the pioneer way

By Patrick Abanathy
Staff Writer

Monday night, he rested after a shower and a good meal; however, Tuesday afternoon no doubt came a little early for 23-year-old Ann Arbor, MI resident Matthew Parker who, since the last weekend in May, has been making his way along the American Discovery Trail with only his six-and-a-half-year-old horse, Smokey, to keep him company.

Following college, during a 10-month stay with his San Jose based brother, Chris, he decided to look into the challenge of riding horseback along the trail connecting San Francisco to Washington D.C. via a route removed from cities and paved roads.

That same day, following his love for travel and meeting people in other areas, he began to exhaust every possible source which could offer insight and preparation for the endeavor. Beginning in less-congested Sacramento, as planned, the journey will end upon his arrival in Ann Arbor sometime in the fall.

"I just wanted to rediscover America on my own terms," he said.

Carrying the "bare minimum" some of his items have included, freeze-dried meals, a six-liter water bladder, additional water, two tiny aluminum pans, hiking boots, a Colt 45 Peacemaker, a sleeping pad, sleeping bag, a light camping stove and a black cowboy hat.

Parker has also mixed in some modernity keeping close at hand his cellular phone, a Canon Elf camera and a GPS.

Last, but not least, he has brought along several maps plotting his course along the rugged terrain. To keep he and Smokey's load as light as possible (around 280 pounds maximum), additional maps will be mailed to certain locations via his parents.

To all knowledge, Parker says he could easily be the first to ride the trail horseback without a support team or packhorse.

"I'm on my own," he said adding that he had both support and naysayers; however, none of his friends wanted to share the adventure with him.

Although the trip has been great for the most part, some unforeseen setbacks have been unavoidable. A local example is this week's unseasonable weather, which kept the young adventurer in the Ft. Churchill area a little longer than expected.

In fact, the time of this late-afternoon interview, with a somewhat exhausted Parker, was originally reserved for his arrival at the Fallon Speedway.

However, lightning flickering around the destination kept him at the Ft. Churchill campground with his new friends, Helene and Jeffrey Haugen, an extra night with confidence in an imminent weather change.

The next day, when an October-like chill accompanied Monday's thunder and rain, the Haugens invited Parker to stay for yet another night in the area at their Wabuska home where he could receive a good meal, a warm bed and his first shower in nearly a week.

Although it took him about nine miles from the trail and put him a little further behind schedule, he decided to accept the offer and return to the trail on

Tuesday.

"I'm taking things one step at a time," Parker said occasionally rubbing his eyes and beard with tanned hands testifying to his last month in the summer sun.

He added, ironically, Nevada has been his first encountered rain along the trail. Now, past the Sierra Nevada and just inside the Western Nevada border, he is about to embark on quite possibly the most challenging portion of the trip facing one of Mother Nature's most unforgiving landscapes...the desert.

Parker has all the confidence in making it across this primarily barren state; however, his concerns focus on his four-legged travel companion who can easily consume 15 gallons of water daily.

To further add to the lack of forage between here and Humboldt is the presence of alkali within some water sources. Parker said, with all natural pools, he makes sure the water does not burn his lips before he and Smokey quench their thirsts. Along the desolate expanse, prior to Parker's arrival, his father is leaving hay and water "drops" at certain trail/highway intersections across Nevada. This is where Parker's GPS, which can locate these "drops" within four feet, becomes quite useful.

Aside from the bare necessities, Parker's father left a few surprises at Ft. Churchill including a couple beers, a book and some fruit. This was only half the surprise for Parker in that this particular "drop," as well as some upcoming drops, are "so far out of the way for him (his father)."

"I love the guy," Parker said adding that their second parting in Virginia City last weekend seemed to weigh heavier on both their emotions than did their initial parting.

When the weary traveler rode into the campsite Saturday, two hours later than anticipated, the local campers, including the Haugens, were already anticipating his arrival having been informed by his father.

"I had the warmest welcome in the world," he said adding that he was then offered breakfast and planned to meet up with the Wabuska couple down the road Wednesday night for one more homemade dinner before moseying on down the trail.

Some of his next stops include Fallon, Salt Wells, Sand Mountain and Middlegate.

Looking out upon a vast desert, along a trail which, at farthest, is 50 miles south of U.S. Highway 50, Parker says, "I will have to take what the good lord will give me now...It's going to get worse;" however, having the parallel highway lifeline is not without its benefits. Also the desert's non-claustrophobic atmosphere is a plus.

He said it is often tough not letting the solitude and elements get to him; however, his love for problem solving keeps the trail interesting in that one mistake could spell disaster.

"That's just part of the adventure," he said.

With the ultimate goal being to reach Ann Arbor alive and well, Parker says he does not see it as one goal. Instead, each stop is a little victory which make the trip much more enjoyable.

So far, some of his favorite parts include the people and the beautiful scenery he has encountered. Also, he says explaining his trip to curious onlookers adds to the overall fun.

On the flipside some non-favorites include keeping his horse well maintained and occasionally having to travel near highways, which offer uneven terrain, broken glass and honking motorists.

Having sold many of his possessions, including his car, to fund the journey, Smokey is literally all he has left and is a vital portion of the trip. In fact, he says the Tennessee Walker horse is treated much like his own child...except the times when he is tied to a tree.

Smokey has often returned the favor in that, aside from minor skirmishes with coyotes and mountain lions, the horse's size helps ward off would-be dangerous animals. Parker added, even though these dreaded predators are often harmless, "you can never give them an opportunity to be harmless."

As for the future, Parker, with his degree in sculpture, plans to look at graduate school and maybe the Peace Core. Ultimately, he says making it through this trip will also ensure he can make it through life.

Also, he says he would like to write a book about his journey and, depending on how he feels, next spring might find him back on the trail heading toward Connecticut.

Overall, the trip spans around 2,500 miles and will take Parker across California, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Nebraska and Iowa before reaching Michigan. With Parker walking about 50 percent of the way, he knows the journey ahead will be a test of physical endurance.

Said Parker; "It's going to be great."