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Top Stories

'Ride' of passage across the country

By Chandra L. Mattingly, Staff Reporter

September 02, 2005

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When Matt Parker, 25, calls his ride across the United States "a ride of passage," he's not kidding.

"I kind of wanted to see what I was made of at a basic level. I couldn't imagine a more supreme test (than) to ride a horse across the U.S. in this day and age," said Parker, who rode his horse, Cincinnati, through the county Wednesday, Aug. 24, and Thursday, Aug. 25.

These days, people his age and younger have no rites of passage, no way to discover their strengths and weaknesses, unlike former ages and other cultures, said Parker.

"They're just coddled to the point of uselessness," he said about his own generation.

Now on his third horse and 6,800 miles into the trip, the Ann Arbor, Mich., native has crossed deserts, endured snowstorms and overcome a broken back he suffered in a fall in Kansas.

But he has discovered nothing ever is done just by one person, including this ride. "There's always somebody that's helping me," said Parker.

He and his horse spent the night at Lawrenceburg Fairgrounds.

Parker's journey began in 2003 in Sacramento, Calif., as he set out to ride across the United States on the American Discovery Trail. When he finishes his ride in Delaware on the Atlantic Coast, he'll become the first person to ride a horse the entire length of the trail.

Parker was commissioned to map a horse route on the trail's pre-existing bicycle and pedestrian route, and receives some help from ADT volunteers, including the coordinator in each state. But much of the time the assistance he's found along the way has come from complete strangers, he said.

Often, he simply knocks on the door at a ranch or farm and asks if he and his

horse can spend the night.

"Plus I rely most heavily on God. Just about everything I've needed, he's given me," said Parker, graduate of Hope College, Holland, Mich., a Christian college.

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Traveling education

He earned a bachelor of fine arts degree, specializing in sculptural history.

But his education, while the best imaginable, didn't show him anything; didn't teach him how to live, he said.

And he has always had a passion for travel. In addition to touring historic points of interest in both the United States and Canada with his family, he has traveled to Australia, New Zealand, Europe,

Greece and Cypress.

While at Hope, he took a course on India and Indochinese religions which culminated in a month-long trip to India. Students dressed in traditional clothing, ate regional food and visited religious shrines and locations. The contrasts of wealth and poverty forever changed Parker, he said.

India is both "the most wonderful place and the worst place I have ever seen," he said.

Throughout college, Parker also went camping and hiking with friends, whether in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, in the Porcupine Mountains, or along the Appalachian Trail, he said.

So when he set out on this trip, he wasn't inexperienced in camping. But he has found keeping his horse sound to be more difficult than he expected, and finds himself often fatigued.

"I've got depressed a lot. ... I've been doing this a long time, and it's time for it to be over now," said Parker.

Yet he has seen the trip turn into an inspiration for the people he has met, and people who have followed him along the trail, he said.

"I did the riding but it seemed like all the love and support came from them," he said.

Bad day = cold fries?

People need to see that the world is a wonderful, beautiful place, and focus on the positive, said Parker.

"People these days have a bad day if their fries are cold," said Parker. He'll never sympathize with anyone whose day is upset by the trivial, or agree with folks who see danger lurking everywhere, war breaking out on every border.

"In the history of mankind, the world's never been safer," he said.

As he has traveled, Parker has found more strength to stand up for what he believes and to speak out against things he doesn't agree with, he said.

"It really bothers me when this country bashes the presidency," he said. With his route going through Washington, D.C., he is hoping to ride through the city with the mounted police.

"If I get an interview with George Bush, that would be great. I'd ask him for a job," said Parker, who is considering going into public service.

But he is not sure he will be a politician; on his Web page, www.rideofpassage.com, he mentions entering the Peace Corps.

Meanwhile, he had a new saddle coming for his horse, who had developed a sore on his back, and was looking forward to a reunion with family while in Cincinnati, said Parker.

He named the Appaloosa in homage to his grandparents and father, all of whom are Cincinnati natives, he said.

"I'm hoping he'll finish up the rest of the trip. ... He's a pretty tough horse," said Parker.

He has ridden Cincinnati since leaving Osage City, Kansas, in May 2005.

His first leg of the trip was made on Smokey, a racking horse he rode from Sacramento to Moab, Utah, in 2003.

Problems with the horse and winter weather forced him to stop, and he returned to Michigan until June 2004, when he resumed the ride on a Missouri Fox Trotter named Little Face.

On that leg he got as far as Kansas, where he was injured in a fall. He then went back to Michigan and began training with a new horse, an Appaloosa originally named Silver, before returning to the route this spring.

Currently, his horseback route just follows U.S. 50.

But for hikers and bicyclists, the nationwide American Discovery Trail runs through cities, townships, forests, mountains and deserts, connects five national scenic trails, 10 historic and 23 national recreational trails. It leads to 14 national parks and 16 national forests.

For more information about the trail, go to www.discoverytrail.org.

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