

# A TRAIL TO DISCOVERY

*Lone horseman's coast-to-coast ride offers insights into his country — and himself*

By LISA CHURCH  
Special to The Tribune

**A**NTIMONY — Matthew Parker settles into a chair and looks longingly at the water splashing along the rocky creek bottom nearby.

"After being in places where water is so scarce, I'm pretty drawn to it," he says with a melancholy smile. "It's hard to leave."

Since May, the lanky 23-year-old Ann Arbor, Mich., native and his horse Smokey — a smooth-gaited racking horse — have traveled more than 1,000 miles along the American Discovery Trail, through some of the most desolate terrain imaginable. Averaging 20 to 30 miles each day, he spent the past two months

picking his way across the scorching deserts of Nevada and southwestern Utah in the blazing summer heat. If not for the water and hay left at strategic "drops" along the trail by his father earlier in the summer, Parker and Smokey might never have made it this far.

"The water situation, it really took the wind out of my sails. It's tough," Parker says. "The trail's a really beautiful trail, but it's treacherous unless you do some serious planning."

When he reached Antimony, Parker ran into a bit of luck. Ole Lindgren, a local rancher, spotted him crossing the Aquarius Plateau above the creek behind his house. Although they had never met, Lindgren offered Parker a

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LISA CHURCH

Michigan native Matt Parker and his horse, Smokey, take a break at a ranch near Antimony this week. Parker is crossing the country from west to east on the American Discovery Trail, 600 miles of which are across Utah.

## Rider on a trail of self-discovery

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place to stay, rest and fatten up Smokey, who had lost substantial weight.

Parker, too, needed the rest — he had gone through three hats, two pairs of boots, two saddles and had punched three new holes in his belt to make it fit after losing 13 pounds since May. He was also feeling the stress of isolation and loneliness.

"This [trip] has been hard. I could stay here for a very long time," Parker says. "My battery reserves are about 25 percent right now. I think they'd be higher if I had a companion."

Thanks to Lindgren, Parker's wish has been realized — in a way. A friend agreed to loan Parker a mule named Danny, and another nearby rancher outfitted him with a dog — an Australian sheepdog and border collie mix named Boo — to accompany him through the rest of his 5,000 mile journey.

"I got him a dog, a mule and I almost got him a woman," Lindgren jokes. "What more can you do?"

The mule will carry most of Parker's 150 pounds of supplies — including freeze-dried food, at least 20 gallons of water per day, a Colt 45 Peacemaker, a rifle and limited clothing — and let Smokey travel much faster. Racking horses are known for their unusual and quick gait — a four-beat gait in which only one foot at a time strikes the ground. But the weight of supplies and a rider forced Smokey to move more slowly to maintain balance, Lindgren says.

He is impressed with Parker's determination and his philosophical nature.

"Matt's not trying to impress anybody, or compete in this thing. He's doing it as a personal quest, and it's on a much higher level," Lindgren says. "He's fully digesting this endeavor rather than just getting on the other side and saying, 'Man, that was hard.'"

Parker is no novice traveler. He has journeyed across Europe, spent time in Greece and stayed a month in India where he volunteered briefly at a mission founded by Mother Teresa. After graduating from college with an art degree in sculpture, Parker was at loose ends. Then one day he read about the American Discovery Trail and

learned that hikers, even runners, had traversed it. He resolved to become the first person to cross the United States on the trail on horseback.

He researched the trail, bought Smokey and spent 11 months learning to ride and work with the horse. He sold his prized Land Rover, his guitar and most of his belongings to help finance the journey, and when he hit the trail in Sacramento in May, Parker did not really know what to expect.

He has learned that the American Discovery Trail — a mapped route that connects existing roads and backcountry trails to create a nonmotorized course stretching from California to Washington, D.C. — follows routes that are not always horse-friendly. Still, from a late-night encounter with a mountain lion to losing his way because he was using an old trail map, Parker says the trip so far has been an exciting, if humbling, experience.

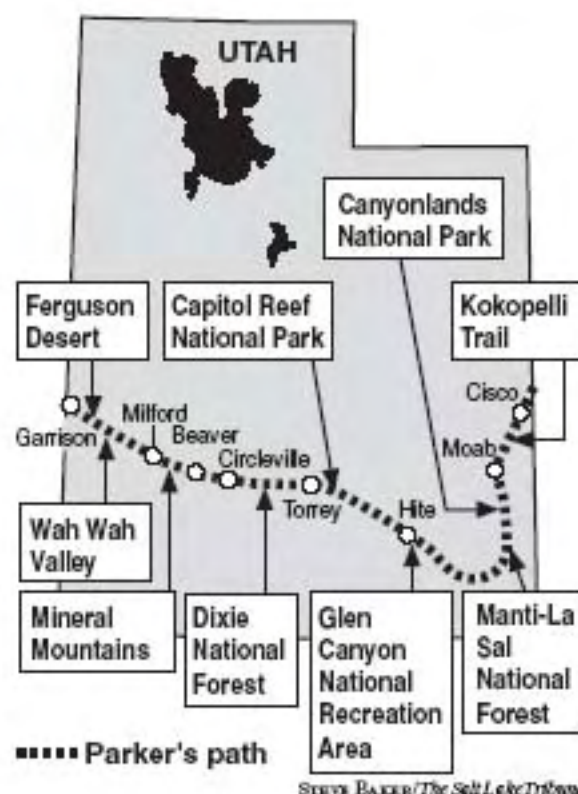
"I'm about one-third of the way through the SAT of life right now. And I still have thousands of miles to go," he says. "I have a lot of unanswered questions that I'm struggling with lately."

Most places, he has met generous people such as Lindgren who have taken him in, fed him or offered a place to sleep and a warm shower. He hopes that hospitality continues as he makes his way east. As winter and the likelihood of snowstorms approaches, Parker plans to winter in Michigan with his family, and then return to the spot where he left the trail to complete the trek.

Dick Bratton, the Colorado coordinator for the American Discovery Trails Society, says Parker set himself a difficult task.

"The trail was originally intended to be a hiking trail. In some areas, it's not really amenable to horse travel," Bratton says. "But Matt's determined. I'm betting he's going to make it. But it's not going to be easy. But I'm betting he's going to be the first person to cross it on horseback."

On Tuesday, after three weeks' rest at Lindgren's ranch, Parker finally embarked on the next arduous stretch — from the Aquarius Plateau to Hell's Backbone on Boulder Mountain. He will cross Waterpocket Fold, an almost impassible ridge of vaulted white rock domes that stretches 100 miles through Capitol Reef National Park, and head into the high plateaus of the Henry Mountains before descending toward Hite and Lake Powell. From there, he will travel rough backcountry roads to Canyonlands



STEVE BAKER/The Salt Lake Tribune

National Park, Lockhart Basin and into Moab — again, most of it through desert.

Parker keeps in touch with family and friends with a satellite phone his mother insisted he pack.

His parents will meet him in Hite and they plan to make more water and hay drops. His father, Bill, has already logged more than 10,000 miles crisscrossing the West this year to leave provisions. Katie Parker says her son will still have some difficult spots to navigate.

She has faith in her son. But she is, after all, a mother, and she wonders where his life will take him. He has talked of writing a book, or joining the Peace Corps, or perhaps attending graduate school after he completes his ride. But after months spent alone in some of America's most isolated places, Parker may have other plans.

"He's a seeker," she says. "I'm not sure he knows what he wants to do with himself when this ends."

Parker just takes his journey one day at a time.

"This is my personal rediscovery of the United States. I'm not in a hurry. It's not a race," he says. "The only thing that keeps me from being disheartened is the sense of discovery and knowing I've come through so much. I never look ahead. You always have to motivate yourself day by day."

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