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The Ultimate Trail Ride

by Sharon Doddroe

Worn jeans, Stetson hat, Durango boots, needs a shave, rides a horse, carries a Colt 45 . . . sounds like a cowboy . . . until you mention the cell phone. But take away modern-day technology (he has a GPS unit, too) and you really can see the Wyatt Earpish resemblance. However, 24-year-old Matt Parker isn't in search of horse rustlers or bank robbers, he's seeking something much more philosophical as he rides his horse across the United States. A little fame may also come with the territory, as Matt could become the first person to complete the American Discovery Trail (ADT) on horseback.

Not a small feat, the ADT can be grueling. Matt will travel 5,000 miles in his coast-to-coast quest crossing barren deserts, almost impassable mountain ridges and rocky plateaus. He'll forge through thick forests and traverse deep water, mud, and snow. Stretching from California to Delaware, the trail crosses 15 states and is the only trail of its kind in the country. Meant for hikers, cyclists and equestrians, no motor vehicles are allowed. The series of trails also runs through cities and connects national, historic and recreational trails passing more than 10,000 culturally significant sites. Matt began near Sacramento, California, and plans to end near Lewes, Delaware, by the end of this year. This is the second year of his journey. He rode 1,500 miles from California to Utah from May to September last year before returning to Michigan to rest for the winter. Last month, he resumed his trip and is confident he will become the first person to cross the ADT on horseback.

Right now he's in Colorado. He's straddling the saddle of his five-year-old Missouri Fox Trotter, cooking a meal over the fire, or catching some shut-eye in his sleeping bag. He could even be battling a mountain lion—he's done that. But what he is probably not doing is showering or sipping on a Starbucks. The 6 foot 1 Michigan native will be the first to admit he needs a shower and shave. He longs for a home-cooked meal, and a mattress would be heaven. But he knew what he was getting into. And what he didn't know, he welcomed. The unknown has always been his muse. "There are no challenges in life anymore. You never hear about anybody going on a journey."

The journey, to Matt, is more about life than miles. "I want to experience new people across the country, see their problems and their joys. I'm not in a hurry," he said.

The Hope College graduate has always been introspective. He studied religion, art and music in Michigan, earning a degree in art sculpture. He had already hiked through Europe, Australia, New Zealand, Greece, India and parts of the United States for his own personal education, but was ready for his next challenge. When

he heard of the American Discovery Trail, it fit perfectly into his life plan, "I wanted to test myself to the absolute breaking point," he said. His idea to ride a horse cross-country seemed logical to him, despite the fact that he had no experience with horses. He started by purchasing a horse that would be suitable for trailriding. He chose a six-year-old Racking Horse because the breed was known for comfortable riding due to its bilateral four-beat gait. Only one foot strikes the ground at a time. The horse was a favorite among plantation owners of the old south: a calm temperament, able to withstand high temperatures, and able to provide long strides. Ironically, Smokey had more riding experience than Matt, so Matt spent eight months learning to ride and care for his \$2,200 investment. Matt helped finance his dream by selling his vehicle and guitar. Packing the minimum, he and Smokey left the Pacific coast in late May 2003.

The First 1,000 Miles

Matt left Sacramento with some freeze-dried food, medical supplies, one change of clothes and trail essentials. The first leg of the trail led him through the Sierras, where a mountain lion attacked Smokey. He had set up camp in deep forest and was sleeping in his tent. Smokey was tied to a pine tree when the lion pounced. Smokey broke his tether during the fight and away he went. Matt tore out of the tent in boots and boxers, grabbed his flashlight and gun, and spent the next few hours in search of his horse. One of many experiences that would inaugurate the self-described city kid into cowboyhood.

In the brutal Nevada desert, he would then battle record-breaking temperatures. "Everything melted, including my willpower," he said. Riding about 20 to 30 miles per day, he was more aware of Smokey's physical limitations than his own.

Sleeping for only five to six hours a night, he set up camp and contemplated the trail, his horse, his challenge and his life. Physically, he was exhausted, but the mental stress was worse. He worried about Smokey and as he traveled through the Nevada desert his maps were no help. The roads were unlabeled and he was traveling through areas that hadn't been crossed in a century. "I relied on luck, intuition and a lot of prayer," he said.

He also had the comfort of knowing that somewhere out there across the miles of sand that there would be an oasis of hay and water. Matt's dad, Bill, has logged 10,000 miles in his truck, dropping hay and water in areas where provisions were scarce. Both have cell phones (insisted upon by Matt's mom) and the exact positions of the drops were located using global positioning units. Even if Matt's dad wasn't present at a drop, it was an emotional reunion, "I could see his tire tracks. Just knowing that he had been there made me feel even more alone." Other drops made him smile, like the one that included the latest Harry Potter book.

While it may seem a lonely journey, Matt has been touched by the kindness of strangers throughout the trip. When he rode into the tiny mountain town of Forrest Hill, California, a complete stranger gave him her pick-up truck to go get alfalfa. The manager of the B&B put him up for two nights while others offered their corrals for Smokey. In Nevada, Oz and Lorinda Wichman, Gill and Swania Cochran, and many others opened their doors to "that guy who's riding across America on a horse." Ranger Rob Ewing gave Matt a pair of Carhartt pants and the Haugens, who met Matt on their annual camping trip, followed him along the trail and brought him dinners.

On August 5, he crossed into Utah, the birthplace of another Parker—Robert Leroy, or Butch Cassidy as he's known. Tired but determined, Matt was prepared to tackle the state's 600-mile trail. And he was about to meet a savior of sorts at just the right time.

In Antimony, a rancher curiously watched the duo crossing the Aquarius Plateau,

not far from his home. Perhaps he saw how Matt's jeans were hanging (both he and Smokey had lost a substantial amount of weight), maybe it was the vacancy in Matt's eyes, but Ole Lindgren did more than watch. He provided food and the comforts of home, companionship and advice. All in all, Matt and Smokey stayed three weeks, a much-needed rest before heading to Hell's Backbone on Boulder Mountain. The next stretch of rock and desert leading to Moab would no doubt be a challenging trail. By the time they left in late August, Lindgren had arranged to loan Matt a mule to ease Smokey's load and a dog to ease Matt's loneliness. Danny Boy, the mule, loaded with 150 pounds of supplies would become crucial to the trip. Boo, an Australian shepard/Border collie mix put the spark back into Matt's brown eyes.

Back on the trail he had high hopes about making it across the Rockies before snow, but he was forced to cut the trip short near Monticello when Danny Boy needed a two-week rest to heal an infected ankle. Realizing that his time frame to cross the Rocky Mountains had been diminished, he made the strategic decision to stop. In late September, Matt and Boo went home to Michigan to celebrate the holidays with family while Smokey and Danny Boy rested at Matt's old friend's, Ole Lindgren.

The Winter

Matt retired his cowboy boots for hiking gear over the winter working in Bivouac's, a sporting goods store in Ann Arbor. It was important to spend the holidays with his family. "I'll probably spend Christmas with my family for the rest of my life," he said. When he wasn't working, he wrote and "just sat around." In the back of his mind was the thought that by Christmas next year, he would be trotting onto the Delaware shore, the first person to cross the ADT on horseback. "What I am most proud about is that I am doing what I said I was going to do. A lot of people just talk about what they are going to do. I'm doing it." When May rolled around he was refreshed as he headed to Ole's place in Utah to retrieve Smokey and Danny Boy. Outfitters Surplus had donated a Trailmax packsaddle for Danny and Matt had been given a new riding saddle as a gift. It didn't take long, however, until his determination would be tested again, before he even started on the trail.

First, he had to make the difficult choice to change horses. "Smoke just didn't have the heart for the trip. I always got this feeling that he was homesick so I allowed a woman who had been riding him at Ole's to take him and give him more of the life he wanted," he said.

Matt tried several more horses before choosing a three-year-old black Arabian named Achilles, but while training him on a hilly road, the stallion got spooked. Matt was dragged 30 feet and ended up with a couple broken ribs, a bruised hip, and scrapes from his wrists to his elbows (he's just now starting to heal). In the end, he settled on a "gorgeous" 14.5H palomino Missouri Fox Trotter named Little Face, but praised Arabians. "They are the best horses on the planet and so efficient at harnessing oxygen and feed."

He also had to leave Boo behind. Unfortunately, she had picked up some bad habits in Michigan. "Boo developed a taste for bicyclists," he said. The dog had also gotten quite protective of Matt and he was afraid the trip would become dangerous for the little dog. Boo was adopted by a Denver family and is now protecting their ranch said Matt.

Danny Boy, however, had no complaints or emotional problems as Matt packed about 150 pounds on his back. Among the supplies were 40 pounds of grain, a tent, bedroll, rope, small cooking stove, utensils, two pairs of spare boots, two changes of clothes, medical supplies for all and a lariat. Matt carried five liters of water, a satchel that was his grandfather's and three books: Solitude, The Hobbit and The Bible. Matt, Little Face and Danny Boy left picking up where they had left the trail-near Monticello, Utah.

The Next 3,500 Miles

For the first nine miles Matt walked Little Face and Danny Boy because the horse had never led. As they headed through Geyser Pass, severe thunder and lightning welcomed them causing another delay. And physically, well, his fastback saddle hasn't turned out to be conducive for distance. But Matt was emotionally strong and more confident now carrying the experience of the first thousand miles.

During this interview, he had just crossed the Colorado border. Chatting on the pay phone in Gateway, population 50, he was at the Trading Post café, relaxed, yet excited and anxious about what the Rocky Mountains would bring. He was more concerned about the weather and terrain than the very real chance that he could have another run-in with a bear or a mountain lion. "It will be beautiful, but high altitudes are always dangerous. And then there's the chance of summer snow," recounting how snow had cut his trip short last year. He estimates he'll be able to get through the Rockies in three weeks and anticipates that the trip will not be as mentally stressful as the desert, "It will be a little more populated and I won't be as alone as I was in Nevada and Utah," he said. He described Gateway as a boomtown compared to some of the towns he passed through in Nevada. "One town had a population of 12," he laughed. While he carries two guns for protection, the Colt 45 Peacemaker and a Winchester 94 model 3030, he'll probably stop carrying the rifle as he makes his way east through populated areas. "People in the East won't be as open to seeing a Winchester sticking out of my saddlebag," joked the modern-day cowboy.

What does Matt Parker think about as he contemplates the next 3,500 miles? "Sometimes I look at it as a job, sometimes I look at it with fear, but mostly, I look at it as the adventure of a lifetime."

You can follow Matt's adventure at www.mattandsmokey.com. For more information on the American Discovery Trail go to www.discoverytrail.org which links to specific trail locations by state.

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