

Camino de Santiago

January 2017

I'm crazy!

Rummaging around in old computer files looking for pieces of writing I might have socked away, I came across the pilgrimage route we followed in 2000. How on earth! Why? Did I ever decide to walk 500 miles across the northern tier of Spain? And not only walk, but carry a 25-pound backpack filled with clothes, sleeping bag, toiletries, shoes, rain gear and first aid supplies. Talk about age appropriate or in my case, inappropriate . . . OMG! What was I thinking? Who did I think I was?

The New York Times is partly to blame because sometime in 1999 it featured a story about a 60- year-old man - or maybe he was only 50, I don't remember - but this man, a professional person, who was an accomplished hiker decided to celebrate his recovery from illness, cancer I think, by walking the 1000 year-old pilgrimage route to the tomb of the apostle, St. James. The route he chose began in St. Jean Pied de Port, a small town in the French Pyrenees and made its way across the northern part of Spain and ended in Santiago de Compestela - the end of the earth in those days - where religious belief or myth holds is the burial place of St. James the Apostle. How did St. James get there? Don't even ask! Anyway, after his beheading in Judea while on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land his relics were buried in Spain and he became its patron saint and the inspiration for Spanish Christians to drive out the infidels!

Unlike the pilgrim featured in the New York Times, I was not an accomplished hiker - far from it! I did like to walk and did so with my dog, Clyde, almost

every day in William Land Park unless it was raining. Most often we walked 3 miles and some days if going for coffee at Metro, we would do 5 miles. I can't pretend I wasn't warned. The Times pilgrim cautioned readers: Do not be deceived, the Camino is no walk in the park. I am experienced, in good shape and have climbed mountains. This 500-mile pilgrimage is challenging. He wasn't kidding! It damn near killed me!

I was warned but not persuaded. Walking is walking, whether it is in William Land Park or in Spain. Ok, it is 500 miles of walking, but if all I had to do during the day was walk and I averaged 2 miles an hour that would be 18 miles a day in a 9-hour day, 27 days would yield 486 miles. Close enough! I would do 20 miles on some days, which would bring me to the finish line. Besides, I am sure on many days I could average 3 miles an hour, similar to my usual walk with Clyde. I knew I could do it if I made up my mind to do it! I made up my mind!

However, the question still remains unanswered; why would I even want to do this pilgrimage at all? For several reasons: (1) I was nearing my self-selected age of retirement – 65 years of age; (2) I had served as Executive Director of Loaves & Fishes for 13 years and while I loved it, it was old hat. Especially the daily grind of dealing with personnel issues both large and small, keeping the ever growing staff on the same mission page, i.e. feeding the hungry and sheltering the homeless without judgment or the pretense of rehabilitation, and the daily worry about raising enough private sector money - \$1.4 million a year, as I recall it - to pay the bills; (3) For a full 5 years I had been engaged in a high profile media fight with city officials who publicly trashed homeless people, would not even admit to their presence in the Sacramento community and

would just as soon see them vaporized. Think I'm overstating the case here? Think again! (4) A new century – 2000 - was on the horizon – how many people live to see a new century? I didn't know but I would be one of them! I felt the need to celebrate this personal landmark in some significant way – and walking the 500 miles of the Way of St. James in the spirit of my religious ancestors covering a 1000 years of history would be perfect! I thought. (5) Finally, I was bored and restless. I needed a change and a religious pilgrimage would provide me with enough cover to make that possible.

Well? How did it turn out? 16 years later, I am still not sure, but here is what I think.

First, we made it! Well, not the entire 500 miles on foot but certainly close to 450. Halfway through the Camino we decided that walking the 2 or 3 miles from the remote outskirts of a city to the city center did not count as pilgrimage miles. We took a taxi instead! Here was our rationale. Once you have arrived at the city limits of your destination city, you have to walk by the city dump, the public sanitation utility, the electrical power plant, the automobile junk yards, the manufacturing plants, the warehouse districts, the new and used truck and auto sales lot, the new and used agricultural equipment sales lots, the cement plants, the lumber yards and building supplies stores, the fertilizer plants, the slaughter houses, etc, ad nauseam before you actually arrive at your destination. These cannot be considered legitimate pilgrimage miles. Case closed.

Second, the Pilgrimage route itself is a glass half-filled or half-empty, but you don't get to choose which glass, you have to accept both. The route is scenic

about half the time and near major highways the other half. You don't know the 40-mile stretch of Highway 99 between Sacramento and Stockton like I do but that replicates a typical 3-day walk on the pilgrimage route – lengthy city outskirts on both ends, trucks on a highway nearby and even when you are not close enough to see them, you can hear their roar in the distance, vineyards and vineyards and more vineyards, farm houses, small rural hamlets with services here and there and most of the way flat as a table. I agree! There are many scenic rural and hilly stretches of the Camino that provide the pilgrim with a sense of solitude and peacefulness seemingly without end and these are to be cherished but you would be better informed if you remember the more typical route between Sacramento and Stockton California.

Third, we weren't really pilgrims! We were Americans hell-bent on achieving a goal! We had a destination and only 27 days allotted to arrive there and by damn we would do it! A real pilgrim – we met only a handful along the way – leaves early enough in the morning, say 8:00 AM, walks 10 miles to arrive at their next destination in time to eat the main meal of the day served about 2:00 PM in Spain. The rest of the day is spent resting and taking in whatever sights the village or town has to offer. Time is of no concern. If your pilgrimage takes 6 weeks, so be it. If it takes longer, not a problem! You arrive when you arrive, you finish when you finish. Not to worry!

Yes, we walked the pilgrimage route, we accomplished our goal. We met some very nice and helpful people, learned how to cope with the daily uncertainties of where to find lodging for the night, where to find very early morning coffee or not, and how to be resourceful in dealing with the unknown and unfamiliar. It was a life-challenging experience in a foreign country and we learned much

about ourselves – both the good and the ugly! You might say it was a highly condensed version of the daily grind of life itself!

If I had to choose one unforgettable highlight of the Camino, it would be the warm afternoon I spent on the bluff at Finisterre looking out to sea as far as I could see and realizing that until 1492 this was, indeed, the end of the earth! I felt a profound sense of connection with those ancient pilgrims who just like me, made their way here to this very spot many, many centuries ago to see for themselves and to recount to others how they visited the end of the earth – they went as far as they could go!

If I had to choose one unforgettable lowlight, it would be visiting the curio shops surrounding the cathedral at Santiago looking for an appropriate pilgrimage memento to carry home with me. Alas, only T-shirts made by Disney were available and these featured a variety of grotesque cartoon-like characters who were mocking or otherwise making fun of pilgrims. Whatever religious or cultural significance that is attached to this 1000-thousand year old pilgrimage is seriously eroded when the pilgrim finally arrives in Santiago. A disappointing and somewhat disturbing finish to the Camino de Santiago!

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July 10, 2000

Pilgrimage Route of LeRoy & Bonnie Chatfield

Camino de Santiago, May 25 to June 21, 2000

St. Jean Pied de Port (French side of Pyrenees)

Roncevalles
Zubiri
Pamplona
Puente La Reina
Estella
Los Arcos
Logrono
Navarrete
Santo Domingo de la Calzada
Belorado
San Juan de Ortega
Burgos
Castrojeriz
Fromista
Carrion de los Condes
Sahugun
Leon
Astorga
Rabanal del Camino
Ponferrada
Villafranca del Bierzo
Cebreiro
Sarria
Portomarin
Melide
Pedrouza
Santiago