

A TICK IN TIME *Rick Volpe*

“That looks like a bulls eye!” These were disturbing words for what I saw on the back of Marge’s thigh on the evening prior to our intended hike on Bright Angel Trail, a conditioning jaunt prior to our planned Apache Kid WV project scheduled to start 5 days later in western New Mexico. The low-grade fever and joint pain of the past 3 days since our arrival from Pennsylvania began to make sense. All that remained would be the physician’s confirmation.

We arrived at the North Country HealthCare Clinic in Grand Canyon Village for their 8:00 am opening, 2 hours later than our originally planned departure for Plateau Point. For nearly an hour, the PA on staff consulted his medical manuals and photos of similar symptoms to confirm our suspicions....Lyme Disease...a very rare situation in the desert Southwest, but not rare for us Pennsylvanians. Marge had apparently been bit the prior week while doing yard work at our home back east.

He properly prescribed Doxycycline, and gave Marge a 12-day supply...enough to get her through the WV trip as well as the trek back home. After popping the first pill, we strolled over to the cafeteria to pick up box lunches, stuffed them into our water-stocked daypacks, and headed off for an abbreviated Bright Angel ramble. After waiting for a pack mule group to hoof their last hundred yards out of the Colorado gulch, we were on our way. It was 10 am, and temperatures were expected to climb sharply on this cloudless day in early July.

90 minutes later, we arrived at the 3-mile Resthouse, 2,000 feet below the rim. The large round thermometer was showing 105 degrees. From the shade of the stone refuge, we could see the green leafy oasis of Indian Gardens, with our original destination, Plateau Point, off in the distance. Wisdom trumped valor, so we rested, ate and drank in the shade for the next 3 hours, escaping the broiling midday sun. The mid-afternoon climb back up to the rim would provide an early indicator of the go / no-go for joining the WV team in the Cibola National Forest.

Well hydrated and refreshed at the aptly named 3-mile Resthouse, Marge and I began our ascent of Bright Angel Trail in mid-afternoon. 2,000 feet of elevation gain over a 3-mile distance translates to an average grade of 12%. This would indeed be a good test for Marge, who was faithfully obeying doctor’s orders with respect to her Lyme-busting Doxycycline prescription earlier that day:

Warning: *Drink plenty of fluids. Wear protective clothing if you must be outside for more than a short time. Side effects may include loss of appetite; nausea; sensitivity to sunlight; vomiting.*

Marge was such a trooper to follow through on our scheduled hike!

The July sun had arced through its vertical broiler position. The rays were now landing obliquely on the trail, and the trees and canyon walls were providing extended periods of shade. In about an hour, we arrived at 1.5 Mile Resthouse, refilling our water bottles and replenishing some carbs. Marge was in good spirits, but still cautious about the remaining 1,000 foot climb.

Advancing up the trail, some bright white cumulus clouds with their cauliflower heads were invading the late afternoon sky, providing additional shade at points where the canyon walls did not. Frequent stops along the route were not just a benefit for the lungs, but for the mind. Peering across the colorful expanse towards the

North Rim, we were in near constant view of mouth of the crevasse known as Bright Angel Canyon. Its junction with the Colorado River marks the location that houses happy hikers at Phantom Ranch. In the forefront, we gazed on the long, flat and sandy ribbon of the spur trail leading to Plateau Point. We pondered the truly grand magnificence of the canyon. How huge. How quiet. A continual metamorphous of sunlight, shadows and colors. Food for the soul.

A cotton white cumulus turned slightly nimbus, sending some welcome sprinkles to our weary bodies, and creating a polka dot design on the dusty trail. With all of this refreshment, Marge was in very good spirits, and the sight and chatter of tourists on the canyon rim above provided the energy for the home stretch, and the setting of a new objective: the shuttle to Hopi Point for sunset pictures.

We emerged from the Colorado gulch with the combination of fatigue and energy that many hikers experience after a unique trek. Weaving through the crowd, within a few minutes we took our place in line at the Hermits Rest shuttle station, chatting with a young couple that we discovered were friends of our nephews from our Pennsylvania hometown...one of those "small world" experiences that travelers enjoy with relative frequency.

Waiting in line, with the tree-trunk peeking sun now shining directly in our eyes, we knew it would be a narrow window of time before the huge orange disc would slip behind the Colorado Plateau. The natural gas-powered shuttle arrived, and off we went to Hopi Point. Exiting the bus, the thin clouds on the western horizon produced a bright bronze backdrop that silhouetted the many camera-armed visitors standing near the rim. We were in time! Finding a spot to sit and click, we quietly contemplated the experience of this very unique day, and the thrill of Marge's clearing the first hurdle on our way to join the WVers for the Apache Kid project, just 60 hours from now.

"You shaved!" Marge exclaimed as she looked at me over breakfast at the Grand Canyon Village cafeteria. It had taken my wife nearly 45 minutes to notice that my usual prickly-haired face was clean-shaven, the first time in nearly 20 years, and she had been oblivious to my clandestine hair removal, having been preoccupied with the fact that the bright red bulls eye on the back of her thigh was fading to a pinkish shadow. She caressed my smooth cheek and confirmed that I looked five years younger.

We departed the Grand Canyon under a mix of sunshine and light showers, with glimpses of a faint rainbow we spotted from the lookouts at Grandview and Moran Points on our way to Desert View. A climb up the 70 foot tall Watchtower gave us one final glimpse of the Grand Canyon and our first of the palette-flat Painted Desert to the east.

In Winslow, the clerk at La Posada handed us our key, and up the stairs we went to the Amelia Earhardt room. La Posada, the last great Fred Harvey hotel and architect Mary Colter's masterpiece, is an 80,000-square-foot Spanish hacienda built in the late 1920's, and frequented by the Hollywood crowd. A stroll down the who's who guest room corridors is like viewing the attendance list at the Academy Awards in the 1940s. Internet travel bookings can come with negative surprises, but this National Treasure, which also doubles as the Amtrak Station, was all that we hoped it to be and then some.

The gardens and patios of the hotel are flanked on the south by the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad, and to the north by historic Route 66. A short walk two blocks west, and we were "Standin' on the corner in Winslow, Arizona," singing that familiar Eagles refrain to the bronze Don Henley statue commemorating the spot. On this comfortable July evening, we were treated to a free open-air concert, and we sat on the curb with the friendly local townsfolk to listen, comfortably full from the authentic Mexican meal we had enjoyed earlier

at Casa Blanca.

The large comfortable bed in Amelia's room welcomed us home as we closed out another great day in the Southwest. What a thrill to enjoy these bits of America as we trekked along towards our Sunday morning rendezvous with the WV team at the Ranger Station in Magdalena, New Mexico.

Marge's palm-sized red bull's-eye had shrunk and faded to a yellow egg-shaped blotch on the back of her thigh. As we headed to breakfast, Marge was feeling 100%, good news for me and our WV team, which we'd meet the next day at noon at the Magdalena Forest Service Ranger Station in New Mexico. Marge's system had responded rapidly to the Doxycycline regimen, a miracle of modern medicine! While enjoying breakfast, we discussed our plans for our final pre-WV sightseeing day. We would enjoy a relaxed 150 mile drive southeastward to Springerville, AZ, that would include a swing through the Petrified Forest.

The Petrified Forest: 200 million years ago scientists say that these rocky remnants of prehistoric conifers from the Triassic Period grew in expansive groves along an equatorial riverway here, now hard to envision in the desert southwest. Long buried under tons of volcanic debris, the xylem and phloem accepted the gradual embalming of silica-quartz, colorfully laced with traces of iron and manganese.

We grabbed a quick bite at Joe and Aggie's Café in Holbrook before heading south to Show Low and east to Springerville. We arrived in Springerville in mid-afternoon at our motel and hauled our plastic-tubbed gear from the back of the 4Runner into our room. The time had come to shift gears to WV backcountry prep. We spread our supplies across the bureaus and beds, checklist in hand. An hour later, our backpacks were solidly filled with tent, sleeping bags, pads, clothing and personal gear.

After a 120-mile eastward drive to Magdalena, NM, we were greeted at the USFS Ranger Station by WV trip leaders Bill and Sue Koenig, three other team members, and the district ranger. We followed him in his US Government white pickup for 20 miles to the west of town, turning on a dusty gray-white caliche road and crossing one of the three 13-mile long rail track arms of the Y-shaped Very Large Array (VLA), an assemblage of 27 radio astronomy antenna dishes, each more than 80 feet in diameter. It was reassuring to know that no ETs would arrive at our Apache Kid Wilderness camp--at least without being spotted!

The next 30 miles of off- roading became progressively more challenging as we began heading up into the San Mateo Mountains on deteriorating dirt roads. As the elevation increased, the piñon and juniper topography was replaced with Ponderosa pine. The western sky had become an ominous dark gray during our drive to the trailhead. Fortunately, we had our rain gear handy in our packs. The 3-mile uphill backpack to basecamp could become an adventure of its own.