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## **Reflections from a Walk Across North Carolina**

Edited and Published by Plants and Healers International 2015

Written by Frank Cook 2001

Recollections from the first part of the walk:

As we pass through the Equinox I gather my strength to continue walking across North Carolina. Yes I have made it through the first part of the walk with 140 miles under my belt (or should I say feet...sore feet!)

I began the walk on the tip of the Pamlico Sound in the town of little Washington. This has been a significant place for me as it is an old family home which I frequented as a child but had not been to in 16 years. I took several walks around the area admiring the large trees. It made sense to me to start at the beach and walk with the spring up into the mountains.

But sense was nowhere to be seen when I headed out on March 6th against a headwind in cold weather. Apparently a northeasterly had gone astray and for the first two days I had to call out for the wisdom of WankaTanka (white buffalo). Fortunately, heavy weight on my back did what it could to keep me warm. 25 Pounds to Food and cooking stuff+medicine; 10 pounds to tent and sleeping stuff; 15 pounds to clothes, books, and stuff; few pounds of water and filter.

The first night I was blessed an hour before dark with a little cove near a stream (perhaps the only cove in that flat world). There I set up my tent and built a small fire feeling a special sense of satisfaction while making a tea and stew.

Each morning I would disappear my camp, eat porridge, and practice yoga. Practically all the walk occurred along small rural roads. It was an amazing psychological game I played walking along the roads. Taking a day to walk what one could drive in 15 minutes. Each day people would stop to offer assistance (which they assumed I needed--After all who walks when you can ride?!?) It is one of the core reasons for my walk. I had noticed in recent years that I focused more and more on the destinations and not the journey. This walk is all about the journey--taking a month for what can be driven in 8 hours!

The sides of the roads are repositories of most everything--all those lost glasses, lighters, clothes, toys, not to mention trash and dead animals. It was clear with each

step that our obsession with cars and speed has left the earth a great landfill lining our asphalt roads.

The hours would pass one step at a time. Another major reason for the walk was to connect more deeply with nature. As I have walked this journey with the plants for 8 years now. I find myself zooming from pristine forest to diverse ecosystem. I am walking to see what this world is mostly made of. I had entertained thoughts of eating from the wild along the way. True, I did eat from the wild each day (and hope to eat more!), but much of what I saw was in polluted environments. I have recorded in my notes several hundred species of plants encountered along the way (see below). I interacted with over 50 of them in some way such as tea, nibble, food, medicine, fuel, and fiber. Daily I ate violets, pines, dandelion, blueberry, and mustards.

A majority of the people lived in trailers, it seemed, or the brick equivalents. Lots of pickup trucks. But each day I would pass by a special caretaken piece of land...wonderful to see those beacons of hope. I've grown in my admiration of statuary.

The first few days felt very coastal sandy. I walked along the Tar River a full day before crossing over. She is a deep swirling brown flow--who gives and takes away. As I moved west from her, the soils changed from white ocean sand to brown river sand. I saw Bald Cypress as far as Wilson. It felt swampy much of the way. The cold nights had the virtue of keeping the insects dormant. I would not camp where I did if it were summer time.

Each day became warmer. The spiders and ants began to appear. When I reached western Franklin Co. I began see rocks and rolling hills. Birds welcomed each day with me. Often the raven, mockingbird, cardinal, and turkey vulture. Frequently the hawk and blue heron. I had no idea how much cotton is grown in NC (#1 sprayed crop). I saw thousands of pounds blown about. The smilax guarded any woods fiercely.

It was good to slow down. I felt the pack grow lighter as I ate food each day. Rain came the last 3 of 4 days. I arrived at Falls Lake north of Raleigh and felt I had finished the first part of the walk. It was nice to walk with a few friends and to see so many people while here in the Durham area. Claudia and I hiked around northern Durham for a couple of days--One night we spent along the Eno River, then the next near the Little River Lake. I have been blessed by knowing both these rivers for over 10 years and saw the most diversity along them then anywhere I had been on the walk so far. It was wonderful to walk up the Little River from the east and to understand its relation to the greater area better. Thank you Beth and John for a comfortable landing pad back into modern life with cars, hot water faucets, stoves, and refrigerators...ahh, a familiar life.

This is not a journey so much about getting back to nature, as much as letting nature back into me. I was able to stay warm with teas most days and yoga helped me to check in and stay flexible. I was delighted to find I had maintained my weight in the walk.

I have mapped out the trail ahead walking tomorrow from this wonderful Wood's Edge Gardens on Bike Route 2 to Linville Gorge, then up and over Mt. Mitchell down

across the French Broad and out to Max Patch. Hope to be done by April 12th--about 200 miles from here! Maybe I'll see you out there.

I've learned much this first part--sizing up the experience with the plan. Now I plan again wondering what challenges and teachings lay ahead. May the days of cold and rain pass and make way for spring. My challenge to you is to get to know the lay of the land, the flow of the water, the birds, the animals and the plants within a day's walk of you in each direction--one step at a time. Look forward to seeing you this year!

Namaste,

Frank

### Plants Used as Fuel, Tea, Nibble, Food, and Fiber

Alliums	Pines
Beech	Plantain
Blueberries	Privet
Chickweed	River Birch
Cinnamon Fern	Rosehips
Creasey Greens	Rue Anemone
Dandelions	Rumexs
Day Lilies	Shiso
Deer Moss	Spleenwort
Dogbane	Swamp Mallow
Dog Fennel	Sweet Cicely
Echinacea	Trout Lily
Galiums	Turkey Tails
Grasses	Usnea
Holly	Violets
Honeysuckles	Wax Myrtle
Jewelweeds	Wild Carrot
Liverwort	Wild Ginger
Mustards	Wild Oats
Oyster Mushroom	Wintergreen
Partridge Berry	Wood Ears

### OM WALK 2001- NC Leg 2 and Leg 3 Carrboro to Max Patch

On March 24th after a week of recovery, catching up with the various aspects of my regular life, and preparing to head out again, I walked with family from my Carrboro home through the woods following Phil's Creek to where it crossed the road and joined bike route 2 again. It was wonderful to walk this way-making our way along trails, stopping to look at flowers (liverwort, spring beauty, bloodroot, spicebush...) and life along the stream. It was the way one might imagine a walk across NC would have been a few hundred years ago.

But within an hour we were back up along the asphalt path of modern times. I had decided not to follow the MST trail, instead I mapped a course through the middle of the state with the help of topo maps.

The Dehmer/Robinson family walked with me a while seeing what it was like out there along the trail, then zoomed back to their modern lives. Claudia stayed for another day. When evening came we had walked 8 miles or so and found a place to camp across a small stream behind a farmer's field. Claudia gathered dock leaves as I set up the tent. With a fire going we boiled the dock and added nutritional yeast and Braggs for yummy greens.

I slept well...nice to be out under the stars again. Tea for breakfast of dock, dandelion, *Galium*, Christmas fern, honeysuckle, violets, privet, and chickweed. I have come to see from the walk the importance of teas from the land you are on. They warm, hydrate, connect, and nourish.

In the afternoon Claudia was picked up and zoomed away back to Durham. It was just me again walking the road west. It was clear I was in Quaker land from the frequent Friend's Meeting Houses and historical markers along the road telling how the Quakers helped to end slavery. As I passed the town of Julian I crossed a trading trail from the 1600's that traveled between the settlers in Virginia and the Catawba Indians.

Sadly, I knew the animals of the region mostly by their roadside remains. The opossums seemed to usually be the big losers. Reminds me of a saying, "Why did the chicken cross the road? To show the opossums how to do it."

On the third night out a deep freeze came into the low 20's. I had found a wonderful cove to sleep in full of rich woods' plants: trilliums, rue anemone, mayapple, yellowroot, pipsisiwa.... When I emerged from my cocoon in the morning I was sorry to see the trilliums frozen solid. The sun rose as I disappeared my camp and prepared to walk on. With the sun I witnessed a small miracle as I watched the trilliums defrost and perk back up to their former grandeur. Amazing Nature!

My pack became lighter each day from my eating. Before long came the sweet time when the pack was manageable and there was plenty of food. But the pack kept getting lighter and before long I began to dream of missed delights.

I made a point each afternoon of showing a peace sign to passing school buses (our revolution is grassroots). One day west of High Point a bus passed and about an hour later I walked by a house and out trotted a bleach blond, ear ringed teenager. "Wow, dude, you've been walking a long way!" he said with a big smile. He handed me a Dr. Pepper and cupcake then trotted back up to his house. First time I'd been a "Pepper" in 15 years. The offering didn't kill me and a while later I found a wheat grass field and munched on some to balance me out.

Each day I met kind people. One day a farmer asked me "where ya goin?" "Hiking from the ocean to the mountains," I said. "Oh yeah? Got your food in that pack?" "Yeah, but I eat from the wild each day," I said holding up my plant ID book. "Well, okay, but you take it easy on those rabbits," he said smiling. I laughed and

walked on. It occurs to me that the rabbit's biggest concern from me, a vegetarian, was competing for food, not being eaten!

The Piedmont seemed much more fertile and vibrant than the coastal areas. I actually found the rolling hills easier to walk than the flat areas. The walk reminded me that I am not a mountain man, but a two-legged striving to be a global being. On this path I focus on interdependence, adaptability, appropriate technology, simplicity, learning the lessons of life, and staying in the flow.

As I walked I roughly calculated that I was taking a million steps to cross the state. I realized I was always one step from a fall that could end the walk. Rather than hold me back I felt strangely freed from fear in knowing this. It empowered me to be present in each step. I reject the analogies that we are like machines. It is a view that weakens us. Our beings are vibrant, dynamic, self-repairing, and rejuvenating. It is our habits, mindsets, and lifestyles that wear us out.

On the sixth day I came to face one of my biggest fears of the walk. The rain began early that morning. It had rained a handful of days earlier in the walk, but this storm did not stop. I did fine keeping dry inside the tent doing various tactical maneuvers to keep back the floods. By early afternoon I realized I could not just sit there for days waiting for the rain to stop. I had brought all manner of rain gear. It seemed time to try it out. So I packed everything in plastic and entered the world of cold, windy water.

It wasn't fun but I realized I could do it. Everything on me was wet and the wind seemed to find the sneakiest ways to blow under my poncho. As dark approached I realized I would fare much better in a barn or garage for the night. So I approached a farmhouse and knocked. A little, old lady stared at me from behind the door. I explained my situation and asked to sleep in her barn. "I'm sorry," she said, "I don't know you and fear you." I felt sorry for her fearfulness and headed back to the road. Not ten steps later a car going the opposite way stopped. A woman rolled down the window and asked if she could help. I told her what was up and she let me into her car and let me use her cell phone to check in with family. We were driving down the road and she said, "I haven't done my good deed for the day. Would you let me get you a hotel room for the night?" I was touched and accepted. We shared our stories some and next thing I knew I had all my stuff out drying and I was taking a hot shower. Prayers are heard; Angels do exist. The next day the rains stopped and I headed out strong instead of needing to recover from the challenges of the rain. Thank you, Rose.

During the walk I crossed great rivers (in size and antiquity): Tar, Yadkin, Little, Eno, Linville, and French Broad. Not to mention the half a dozen human made streams of super highways-40,77,85,95...). I awoke from a dream one morning and wrote in discombobulated, scribbled, half-awake scrawl: In addition to growing deeper with the plants, I have grown deeper with all the wild. I have eaten seeds of the pomegranate. I have come to know the snorts of bucks, the slaps of beavers' tails, the honks of geese, the hoots of owls. I have not forgotten your cry, high hawk. Each day (rain or shine) the birds sang to welcome the day-the chickadees, cardinals, mockingbird, bluebirds, and many others whose names elude me but whose songs fill my soul. I have come to see

butterflies as faeries. I have looked into the black eyes of a barred owl and a groundhog. In these ways this walk has been a rite of passage with Nature.

Though walking along back roads (80% of the journey) may be discounted by the mind as a boring (and dangerous) time, there is much to be learned along these modern trails. I grew to see more clearly that each experience has both its virtues and darkness.

I encountered hundreds of dogs and learned dog language enough to realize that half the tied up dogs were barking "Take me with you!"

By the beginning of April many trees were beginning to leaf out. Walking daily I was able to experience nature coming into spring in its mysterious, special way. I'll not soon forget turning the corner onto Reavis Road the tenth morning out and seeing the Appalachian Mountains rising up in the west. So beautiful. Tears came to my eyes.

By the next day I was walking along a ridge and found it hard to find water. My map indicated some spring sources. Upon getting to them I saw that cattle pens had been set up all around the knob trashing the springs that flowed through them. A big stand of poison hemlock thrived in the stinky waterway. So I decided to hike around the pens and up on the knob. The bulls followed me as far as they could, bucking and snorting, feeling Spring. I hiked around and up the ridge, eventually finding a spring source and a patch of black cohosh-my first of spring.

I walked into Alexander Co. (where? You probably ask). In this rural area I really began feeling the mountain energy. The streams were so clean and clear. Three different deputy sheriffs stopped to check me out while passing through. Without exception, during the walk, the eight authorities who talked with me were polite and curious. Their reaction to my story ranged from bewilderment to respect and encouragement. I generally didn't mind talking with them-bridging the gaps and having someone know my whereabouts.

On the 13th day I survived the polluted business strip of Lenoir. As evening approached I began looking for a place to camp, but the houses were spread out in such a way that a secluded spot eluded me. Finally I saw a dense grove of privet, heard frogs, and saw some big trees in the distance. So I jumped from the side of the road, down into the tall grass, moving fast before any cars came along. I got down on my hands and knees like a rabbit trying to squeeze through honeysuckle and avoid briars. Crawling, crawling, getting stuck. Hoping nothing was knocked from my pack. Feeling a bit harried. Then I came to a deer trail and saw the hardwoods in the distance beckoning me. I found a spot in a relatively dry floodplain next to a cherry tree. I was blessed to find Sochane to eat by the river, a favorite food of the Cherokee.

The next day I came to the base of the mountains and walked for hours along the most extensive plant nursery scene I had ever seen. I made it to the Piedmont Spur and the Forcinelli Family came to meet me as I left the road to walk a couple of days through Linville Gorge. The Forcinellis brought with them a feast. We camped together on top of a ridge. I enjoyed being high up in these mountains listening to a whippoorwill and telling stories around a fire.

The next morning Frank and his daughter, Frankie Jane, and I broke camp and made our way over the hills and up to Table Rock-a majestic ridge above Linville Gorge. F.J. did well, with some help from her dad, and walked (and rode) the next two days along the ridge and down into the gorge. We waded the river then headed down to the end of the canyon where we got a ride to their house. During our time together I learned much from Frank about his views of food and living. He feels people are eating themselves to death by consuming depleted food in poor combinations.

Along the ridge water was scarce. Eventually we found a cold spring and drank freely. Despite fears I had, Frank felt that water which was running clear, was well aerated, and had snails present was good to drink. I explored this several times with success (only once having some digestive discomfort). We were blessed to find flowering trailing arbutus with its heavenly scent. It was exciting to wade the Linville River and enjoy the density of plants that crowd that waterway. There were spectacular views from all sides while in the gorge.

After a couple of days of recuperation I was given a lift to Armstrong Creek. After some ritual swimming in ponds, I bid the family farewell and began one of the most exciting days of the walk. By the time dark came I had followed the creek up to its headwaters climbing over 3000 feet and seeing over a hundred species of plants in this rich Appalachian woods. After a while the trail seemed to disappear and I scrambled up steep ravines eventually reaching the Blue Ridge Parkway.

The Parkway had little traffic and was idyllic compared to the roads I had walked down below. There was hardly any garbage or dead animals. The guardrails were wooden, people drove slowly, and there was generally ample room to walk. Not to mention that the land about was teeming with plants and clear mountain springs.

I followed the road until dusk, then found a nice campsite up on a ridge. In the morning I awoke to see Mount Mitchell in the distance. I made my way to its base, stashed my big pack, and started the climb up to the highest point east of the Mississippi. I was amazed to find ice and snow still on the ground and realized it would be a very challenging experience in inclement weather. Though it was in the 80's when I started the five mile walk up, it soon became apparent I had dressed too scantily in a t-shirt and shorts. But I pushed ahead into a whole new reality of plant life up the mountain. Along the way I passed through yellow birch, Carolina hemlock, and spruce groves. There were alpine meadows and springs bursting forth all about. Clear examples of acid rain were evident in the melted trees near the top. On the peak a burial mound was resurrected containing the remains of Rev. Elisha Mitchell who fell from a waterfall there in 1857. Looming over that was a Jungian-like concrete tower. I was greeted at the top by a dense fog and a steady wind from far away (the Rockies?) I descended quickly, gathered my backpack, and made my way down the parkway.

That night I slept near the familiar Craggy Gardens and felt I had come home in many ways. With the morning I headed down the mountain on what became my longest walk of around 20 miles. I was amazed by the fertility of the creeks I walked along into Weaverville. The morning was enlivened by spring showers. I spent that night at a friend's house (thank you, Davida) listening to the rains come down through the night. In the morning the water continued to come down and we walked along the French

Broad seeing so many wild plants clustered near that wide, flat river that runs north a ways. After crossing a bridge over the river the rain started to let up and a beautiful afternoon ensued. I walked the back roads of Leicester and Sandy Mush seeing some amazing views of the western Appalachians.

I truly felt at home as I made my way to Doggett Mountain along route 63. No fewer than eight people stopped that day to offer me rides. I spent the night near the base of the mountains at some friends' house (Thank you Stephen, Jamie, James, and Pam). There Claudia joined me in the last two days of the walk.

Claudia was a steady companion on the walk joining me to walk on five occasions (walking over 80 miles). Her participation allowed me to savor the excitement of companionship as well as appreciate my times of solitude. Thank you, Claudia, for making this walk a special experience.

Climbing up Doggett Mountain I had my greatest brush with danger in my reenactment of a favorite Tarzan movie. I tested the grapevine before giving my all. It held firm so I gave a running jump... You'd think there wasn't even a vine involved the way I came crashing down on the road. My ankle took the impact, but with only 25 miles to go I wasn't about to stop. Thanks to arnica oil, cold springs, mud, and a wrap I was able to walk on.

Late Easter morning after some rain we walked down Spring Creek, then began the fourteen mile climb from that beautiful valley up to Max Patch. Claudia and I were joined by two friends, Aslan and Swan, (and a puppy). Up and up we walked enjoying each other's company and meeting some amazing plants including morels, dutchman's pipe vine, and meadow rue. The larger significances of the day did not escape us. In addition to feeling the vibes of Easter, we acknowledged it to be the last quarter of the moon, the last day of Passover, tax day, and the day Dr. Albert Hoffman in 1943 discovered the transcendency of LSD-25. April 15 indeed! An auspicious day to finish this walk.

The day moved on. Few cars came along these rural, winding roads. It seemed a longer walk than I had anticipated. I wore a small pack for the day, leaving my big pack in a car at the crossroads of Trust.

Evening came and finally we could make out the open bald of Max Patch. This mountain is one of the highest balds east of the Mississippi (almost 5000 ft.). The Cherokee believed this was where humans first came from. As the story goes, a giant black bird landed near the top (where there is indeed a flattened spot) and from its belly came the 2-leggeds.

As we left the woods, the wind began to build from a threatening, deep-purple storm front directly overhead. The strong wind pushed behind me, helping me up the hill to end a pilgrimage. I prepared for the imminent down pour. On the flat spot I looked around making offerings to the directions, seeing the beauty of the Smokey and Appalachian Ranges. It was wonderful to pour the Pamlico Sound water (which I carried from the start of the walk) into the ground envisioning its long journey back to the ocean. A powerful releasing.



We scurried back down the hill amazed to still be dry. An orange, otherworldly sun rested on the edge of the sky, then sunk away. I had assumed (incorrectly) that people would come to this spot on Easter. Since no cars were present we began the walk down the mountain. An appropriate way to be reminded that The Walk continues where the OMWALK 2001-NC ends....

Plants used as Nibble, Tea, Food, Medicine, and Fiber not mentioned in Leg 1:

Angelica  
Barberries  
Burdock  
Garlic Mustard  
Ground Ivy  
Hemlock (*Tsuga*) buds  
Japanese Knotweed  
Lambsquarter  
Oxalis  
Rock Tripe (lichen)  
Rudbeckia (Sochane)

Sassafras  
Solemon's Seal  
Sourwood  
Spicebush  
Toothwort  
Trillium  
Wheatgrass  
Willow  
Yarrow  
Yellowroot

General Message: Everyday is Plant Day

- Reintroduce wild foods into your diet as nibbles and teas
- Appreciate Diversity and get to know the plants around you
- Be humbled by the complexity of Nature and recognize our roles as caretakers
- Find Peace, Connection, and Friendship in Nature during these critical times.

Blessed Be. Frank



Picture of Frank Hiking by John Rottet