

Women

weaving

trails & stories

by Ardis Eckel

Their trek began at Two Pan trailhead. A group of 11, they represented a remarkable brew of backgrounds, ages, and professions. Some were experienced backpackers, others had never hiked. All were from the Palouse region of northeastern Idaho and southeastern Washington. All had answered the flyer that read, in part, "Gain the confidence to plan your own outdoor adventures! Have time for personal reflection in a beautiful setting! Receive free writing instruction from professionals!!" And all were women.

"Leading a group of women both intrigued and concerned me," says Debbie Lee, writer, English professor at Washington State University, and co-facilitator of the four-day hike into the Eagle Cap Wilderness of northeastern Oregon. "I've backpacked for years with family, friends, and students, but never with a group of all women. How would we all relate?" I wondered. "What if there was a medical emergency? My brother could fix anything. Could I? And where was I going to get a hand saw?" Though petite at 5'2", Debbie is fit and competent. It was just that she'd always left certain details to her father or brothers. Still, the women's writing and

backpacking expedition, "Exploring the Wilderness, Exploring Ourselves," came together just as Debbie, Andrea Mason, and Caroline Pechuzal intended.

Andrea, an instructor at WSU, who, along with Debbie, planned the reading and writing assignments, was there at the trailhead, but was unable to take the actual hike. Caroline, a volunteer at Palouse-Clearwater Environmental Institute, was there every step of the way. The trip had been her idea in the first place, and she'd organized everything from route to gear to meals.

"Caroline is a great leader," Debbie says. "She coordinated everything, including who was in charge of preparing morning and evening meals. The first night, when we camped at the trailhead, everyone brought food to share. We sat around the fire getting to know one another while we ate brownies, pie, and peapods straight from the garden. It was a feast!"

The next morning, August 29, 2008, the group began a four-day, 19-mile hike that would take them from 5,600 to 8,610 feet above sea level, from the trailhead up to a high plateau, down to the turquoise-blue water of Swamp Lake, and back again.

Before they left camp, Debbie handed out that day's reading and writing assignment. Expedition themes included "Fear and Survival," "Water and Family," and "Intimacy and the Wild."

"We used stories like Terry Tempest Williams' *Whistling Swan* and Mary Austin's *Land of Little Rain* for reading assignments," Debbie says. And the authors' names roll from her tongue like the names of old friends. "The goal was to find a connection between those stories and our personal experiences, then to weave both into what we experienced as we hiked."

They experienced weather so warm that some wore hiking shorts during the day, and nights so cold that some had trouble keeping warm. They hiked through icy streams, up slippery shale slopes, across snow fields, and down switchbacks steep enough to make one stumble. They endured heavy packs and blistered heels.

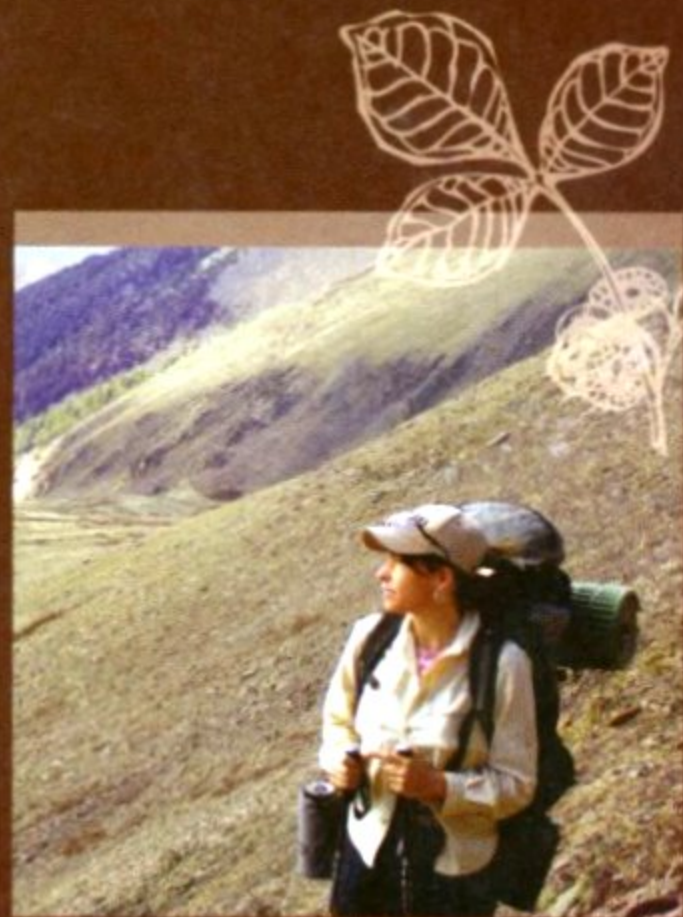
"Those are the kinds of things we worked into writing time when we stopped late afternoons to make camp," Debbie explains. They were also experiences that made Debbie realize how prepared she really was. "They began calling me Mary Poppins," she says, then smiles. "My first-aid kit was totally full. I had the moleskin. I knew how to treat a blister. I had three extra pairs of gloves. Safely pins. An extra ground cover, extra tent stakes." She laughs. "It was very empowering. It gave me a lot of confidence in my own skills."

Debbie was also the resident fire builder. And once that was done, those appointed brought water to boil for coffee and tea and prepared food enough for all. "Eating meals together was a communal experience," Debbie says. "We'd have oatmeal or granola for breakfast. Dinners were more elaborate. After dinner one night, we passed a pan of melted chocolate and used it to dip dried fruit. It was like that, camping with all women. Everyone was so willing to contribute. The atmosphere was less competitive. There was a more open sharing of deep histories. It was a vertical experience."

It was the perfect atmosphere for reading what they'd written each afternoon. The night they camped at Swamp Lake, their writings dealt with "Water and Family." "I'd asked them to think about connotations of the word "swamp" in literature and history," Debbie begins in the articulate way of writing professors. "We also used an excerpt from Elizabeth Stone's

Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins: How Family Stories Shape Us. I wanted them to think about how women carry stories under their skin. Then I wanted them to write about a strong or memorable woman in their past. And to switch back and forth between that and their feelings about being here at Swamp Lake. One woman wrote a light-headed piece that made us smile. We were blown away by another's piece because it was powerful and raw. It's a wonderful thing to share your writings without fear of being judged or criticized in a negative way. And it seemed that the deeper we went into the wilderness, the deeper we went emotionally."

The group spent their last night together in the same meadow as their first. They were tired, their muscles sore. It was so cold that some doubled up in tents for warmth. They woke to snow-covered ground and the realization that four days in the wilderness can change a woman forever.



Debbie Lee (above) is a professor of English at Washington State University, where she teaches literature and writing. She is the author of three books and numerous articles about women, poetry, and landscape. She is currently at work on a cultural and natural history of the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, where her grandmother lived in the 1920s and '30s.