

LYLE BIALK

1. Why did you sign up for the hike? How old were you?

26 years old.

I had graduated college, unable to find a job in my field and was working as an Arby's store manager. Not a happy situation. Saw the "Hike With Us" ad before the hike started and sent for information. I did not receive a reply after a couple of attempts, so it went to the "back burner". In Dec. of '79 I found out I was going to Colorado Springs to be in my college roommate's wedding the following June, so decided to give Hikanation another shot. Got a response and started planning/saving so that I could join on July 2, 1980. Best decision I've ever made.

2. What is your favorite experience from the hike?

Way too many to narrow down. Let's just say July 2, 1980 through May 27, 1981. The entire experience was a once in a lifetime opportunity and I thoroughly enjoyed 90% of it.

3. Did you have a moment of enlightenment or "ah-ha moment" on the hike and if so, what was it?

The "ah-ha moment" that greatly affected the rest of my hike was at the very beginning. I started hiking with the group as we left Ruby's Inn. After the first day, we joined up with a Dixie National Forest ranger who led us, hiking en mass. We hiked when the group hiked, rested when the group rested, following one right behind the other. After a day and a half of this, I seriously thought – no way was I going to hike like this – I was ready to quit right then. The ah-ha came when I suddenly, and out of the blue, realized that EVERYONE was complaining about this "forced march" method and I reasoned that this must not be the norm. I decided that I would give Hikanation two weeks, if I still did not enjoy it, I would leave and spend my summer hitching around out west. SO very glad I stuck it out.

4. What was your favorite state and why?

I guess I would have to say Utah for all the normal reasons. Such a variety of hiking environments and beauty.

5. What was your least favorite part of the hike?

I assume many folks will say Kansas. I actually enjoyed much of Kansas. My least favorite was probably Maryland and Delaware – I was not really ready for the hike to end. I would have been perfectly happy to turn around and head back.

6. How did the hike change you?

Many ways, increased self confidence, cemented my passion for backpacking, proved to myself that determination and perseverance does accomplish amazing things. Most beneficial and "freeing" lesson was how little I/We actually need in our lives to be truly happy. That has served me well for all the years since the hike.

7. What do you tell people about your achievement now?

That it was the most amazing year of my life and that America is an amazingly diverse country, and that the people are, the vast majority of the time, just as amazing. Kindness reigns supreme among all walks of folks, whether rich or poor, educated or not. Just get to know them.

8. What would you have changed about the hike?

A little less animosity within our ranks would have been very nice at times.

9. Did you pursue other hiking/backpacking afterwards? Long journeys or short weekends? Very definitely. I generally backpack two to four weeks per year – more now that I'm retired.

Virtually all of my vacations involve backpacking. Usually one to four week trips.

10. What did you learn about yourself that you are willing to share?

That I sometimes come off as judgmental – always working on that.

11. Did it make you a stronger person?

Absolutely

12. Are you proud of your accomplishment?

Absolutely

13. What was the dumbest thing you did on the hike?

Went swimming in a muck bottomed pond in Utah when I had huge old blisters/calluses on the bottom of my left heel (the campsite where we had the sour dough pancakes for breakfast and had to change the local's tire on the pickup when it went flat). Had to spend about an hour scraping all the muck out of the blister with a stick and rinsing, then scraping again, before I could hike on it.

14. What was your most vivid memory from the hike?

Tons of them. One scary one was when Jeff Paul was attempting to light his stove. He had just filled it, it flared up and caught the surrounding vegetation on fire. Jeff was attempting to stomp out the fire, but was still holding his open fuel bottle. With each stomp, more fuel splashed into the fire. Took several of us shouting at him before he realized what he was doing. Scary while it was happening – great laugh after it was over.

15. What was your funniest moment on the hike?

Again, so very many to choose. Since I have Jeff Paul on my mind right now, how about Oak Creek Canyon, Utah. Shelly was camped at, what she thought was, the edge of the populated area. I was camped nearby, just barely within sight. In the AM, Shelly was squatting down, taking care of nature, when Jeff Paul strolled by, in typical fashion, with his arms crossed. Shelly, friendly as she always was, hollered out a boisterous “Mornin' Jeff?”. Jeff, shy boy that he was, about died. Got the morning off to a very humorous start.

16. What was your most embarrassing moment on the hike?

Sudden, projectile vomiting without warning after eating lunch in a large group and drinking fruit punch. Attributed to Los Animas' alkaline water – affected many folks.

17. What was your nickname on the hike?

Don't believe I had one, at least not to my face. :-)

18. Any other thoughts or stories you'd like to share?

Plenty, but I think I've said enough.