

Dan the Man

My daughter, Michelle, first hiked with me as I wrote about in, "My First Backpacking Buddy." This was our first hike together, but I've hiked and backpacked again and with many others over the years. I purposely backpacked with each of my children, separately and with church groups. Kelly, Daniel, and Laura could also tell of fun times we've had in the mountains and canyons of California and Arizona. I've even camped out and hiked with my wife a few times, which most men seldom do.

I could share stories about tramping up mountains and through the woods with lots of hiking buddies I've had over the years, like Gary Davis, Chuck Robinson, Dan Iles, Dave McQueen, Andrew Snelling, and Steve Austin. I've already talked about Dave McQueen in my book, *Over the Edge*, and Andrew Snelling in, *The Geology Assistant*, and intend to write a short story about Steve Austin later, but I'd like to tell you here about some my adventures with Dan Iles, my oldest and boldest hiking buddy.

He and I've shared great times together in California, Arizona, and Hawaii roughing it with only a pack on our backs and a skip in our step. I first backpacked with Dan on a youth-group backpack trip to the Royal Gorge along the north fork of the American River in the central Sierras. This is the location of over forty backpacking trips that Dan and his wife, Linda, have taken with groups from Calvary Bible Church, Combie Bible Church, and Pollack Pines Baptist Church, for a week each summer.

Dan has built a legacy of organizing and leading these trips that have ministered to over 2,000 high school and college students. Kids take trips to the Royal Gorge first as freshman and frequently return each year until they graduate from high school. Some of the older students return to assist as chaperones in following years.

What makes the Royal Gorge trip so special is that kids keep coming back and reminiscing about what they experienced. Part of the reason they talk about the trip and return for so many years is the physical challenge of hiking five miles in

one day with all your provisions on your back. It's like boot camp with the Marines or an Outward-Bound experience. A second attraction is hiking and camping in the wilderness away from traffic and the distractions of our techno world. And, a third is the exposure to down-to-earth bible teaching from Dan in a setting with object lessons all around, like the way Jesus taught.

One final attraction for the Royal Gorge trip is Dan himself. He's a natural-born youth pastor with few inhibitions. In fact, after fifty years in the pastorate he still relates to kids better than any other youth pastor I know. He's just a kid at heart. He's authentic and one of them, particularly when backpacking. He gives a lot of freedom for kids to be kids. Activities on backpacking adventures are geared around what kids love to do: jump off rocks, swim in the river, slide down water chutes, climb cliffs, chase bears, explore caves! He gives them a lot of freedom and lets them solve their own problems. If one of the hikers gets blisters, he'll hand them some moleskin, tell them to put it on their blisters, and catch up when they can!

But, probably the activity most kids remember from the Royal Gorge trips are the campfire stories. You need to understand that Dan grew up in the backcountry of southwestern Louisiana. There's a tradition in his backwoods' heritage of kids telling scary stories or acting out skits of well-known stories around the campfire like Smokey Bear, the Three Little Pigs, or Goldilocks, with surprise endings. The prime example of Dan's scary stories is his rendition of, "Ma Bradley," the story of a half-crazed woman with deformed arms who runs through the woods near Royal Gorge scaring youth groups. See the short story, "Ma Bradley," for my version of Dan's story.

In addition to backpacking with Dan in youth group settings, he and I've hiked several other times by ourselves. We hiked the Grouse Ridge area and the John Muir Trail near Donner Pass, the Grand Canyon, and the Mule Trail to the Leper Colony on Molokai, Hawaii. When you hike privately with a friend, it's different than with a group. It's quieter, more serene, more peaceful, and reflective. There's not all the clamor and rush as with a group. You tend to sit and watch the sky, listen for animals, and mull over something the other's said.

This was one of the reasons I took each of my children backpacking privately. It builds a rapport in a way no other activity I know can. Dan and I never solved any major world crises in our time together. We didn't try to. We simply spent time together tramping through the forest, sitting around a campfire, or trying to figure out where we'd missed the trail. These were gentle time-sharing experiences.

Another special time together was when Dan and I took our two four-year old daughters camping along the Bear River, only a few miles from our homes in Lake of the Pines, California. We only hiked a short distance because of their ages, but we pitched tents on a sandbar, swam in the river, and cooked dinner and breakfast over camp stoves. This campout with our daughters was especially meaningful to me because of a photograph Dan took of Laura and me stooping to pick rocks off the beach near the river. That image was converted into an impressionist painting years later by Anne Corey, an artist friend on Camano Island Washington.

So, Dan, my friend, you have been an inspiration to me, an example, and a great hiking buddy for over forty years. May God keep you hiking for as long as possible!