Chapter 1

Mount Clemens to Rochester

Monday, August 11, 1997

Anticipation. It does not let you sleep easily. The prospect of walking up the state of Michigan roils in our heads as we struggle nearly in vain for any rest at all. We twist and turn silently beside each other, our thoughts churning with excitement, trepidation, memories. Once again I fight "butterflies" as I ride the rosary-filled school bus taking my Notre Dame High School football team to its season opener. Countless election nights flicker by. Final exams, marathons, our wedding day, all jumble together. Lists of gear, hiking dos and don'ts, and the contents of our backpacks careen through my dreams. Our route up Michigan is like a crazy web spinning in my imagination. Finally, we face the first day, as "Monitor News" clicks on at 5:30 A.M.

Today, August 11, is the feast day of Saint Blane, a sixth-century Scottish bishop who is said to have gone on a pilgrimage to Rome, returning on foot through England. So this walking thing is not new. After toast and coffee we lace up our boots, strap on our packs, and step out into the gray and foggy morning with spirits high but plenty of unspoken questions and doubts nagging at us. Will our loads be too heavy? Will our boots serve us well? How will we do walking in a steady rain? The last question, at least, will be answered before day's end. The good Scottish bishop reportedly performed several miracles. We are hoping such intervention will not be necessary. Our friends at the Weather Channel, whom we are to rely on for a good portion of our trip, are predicting temperatures in the mid-fifties this morning—good walking weather—but rain as well.

With our disposable pocket camera we each take a photo of the other on our front stoop. Judy is dressed in green nylon walking

shorts and a T-shirt with "St. Joan of Arc Grade School" on the front. Judy will prove to be as tough and resolute as the French heroine. I am wearing tan nylon walking shorts; my office softball team T-shirt, "Cool Whips," in reference to my leadership position as the Democratic Whip in the U.S. House of Representatives; and a United Steelworkers of America (USWA) baseball cap.

We step off! After crossing the Market Street Bridge over the Clinton River we pass St. Peter Roman Catholic Church and parish school whose history dates to 1843. My sister Nancy was married here in 1980. The traffic in front of the church is now bumper to bumper extending to the traffic light. Sitting in their cars several people recognize us and wave or beep their horns, wondering, we are sure, what their congressman and his wife are doing with backpacks at 7:00 A.M. in downtown Mount Clemens. Normally, if you are backpacking, you do it up north, not in Michigan's third most populated county.

As we pick up our pace through the city streets, Judy casually asks, "How does your pack feel?"

"Okay," I answer cautiously.

There it is—the fear that has been nagging at both of us. We are carrying almost three times the weight we originally planned for, nearly twice as much as we conceded to in the REI store. Both of us have had back trouble. My serious problems led to three operations to my lower back, including two laminectomies, which forced an end to running at age forty-seven. Some thirty years ago Judy discovered she had a curvature of the spine, which can be very painful if she does not stay in good condition.

We know the city concrete is unforgiving, so we look forward to our first trail outside the village of Utica, in River Bends Park. But for now it's close to thirty pounds each and cement under foot as we wind our way through the pleasant oak-lined streets of the older neighborhoods of Mount Clemens.

Founded on the banks of the Clinton River by Christian Clement in 1818, Mount Clemens was incorporated in 1837, when Michigan became the twenty-sixth state of the Union. The oil fever of 1865 was responsible for the discovery of the waters that made Mount Clemens famous. Prospectors drilling 1,300 feet downward hit not oil but water that was strongly impregnated with salts and minerals. Attempts to extract the salt failed when the presence of other minerals was deemed objectionable. For several years the healing

waters from Mother Earth were wasted, unused until local sufferers discovered by mere chance the natural medicinal value. Then followed adoption of the water as a curative agent by local physicians and finally recognition by the broader medical world. Mount Clemens became known as Bath City or the Spa City. Construction of elaborate and ornate hotels and bathhouses put the city on the map. Tourists came from around the country to take the cure, and the city's bottled water found an international market. Spa City enjoyed a glamorous and prosperous era, which faded with the Depression. I remember my parents taking my sister and me on Sunday afternoon drives northward through Mount Clemens. We would hold our noses because of the sulfur smell of the waters.

The city fell on hard times. The springs were capped. It has only been in the last twenty years that the city of eighteen thousand has seen a renaissance. Most of the magnificent old hotels and bathhouses sadly are gone, but new civic leaders such as Dean Petitpren and Gabe Anton have put life back into our town.

At the west end of the city we pass the Grand Trunk railroad station built in 1859. Thomas Edison worked here as a railway newsboy and made friends with station agent J. U. MacKenzie. It is said that young Tom saved the agent's little boy from death by a train in 1862. By way of appreciation MacKenzie taught Tom railroad telegraphy. That skill became the basis of Edison's earliest inventions.

Beyond the station we enter Clinton Township and pass the Clinton Grove cemetery, where soldiers are buried from every U.S. war. An older couple holding hands is walking briskly on the cemetery roads getting their morning exercise.

"Not everyone would choose to walk there among the ghosts," I observe admiringly.

"Yeah, well not everyone would choose our walk either," snaps Judy.

I look quickly to see if she's lodging a none-too-subtle complaint, but, no, she is smiling. We share a laugh that relaxes us both.

A quarter-mile beyond the cemetery we cross a heavily trafficked Cass Avenue onto Clinton River Road. We walk beside the large white, ghostly hothouses, which are the distinctive sign of our local rose industry. This is also the site of the former village of Frederick, which was established to serve as a freight terminal for the Clinton-Kalamazoo Canal. It was once thought that Frederick would become an important port and metropolitan center until the ambi-

tious project fell apart. Clinton Township has now established a park on this venerable site to recognize its rich history.

The canal, conceived at the peak of the era of canal building, just before the rise of railroads, was part of a Michigan internal improvement program that was announced by Governor Stevens T. Mason in 1837. The Clinton-Kalamazoo Canal would make it possible to cross southern Michigan by boat from Lake St. Clair to Lake Michigan. In July 1838, amid much fanfare, construction began at what is now the corner of Clinton River Drive and Canal Road. Hard times made it difficult to sell bonds to finance the project, and the money ran out in 1843, with only twelve miles completed. Excavation stopped, work ceased, and an angry group of workers who had been denied their rightful pay vandalized the locks and other parts of the canal. Our walk this first day will follow the old canal into the city of Rochester.

Now we face a seven-mile stretch along Canal Road bounded on both sides by subdivisions. We walk on sidewalks through the township of Clinton (pop. 100,000) and the city of Sterling Heights (130,000), both essentially bedroom communities cut by industrial corridors serving the auto industry. We are on the north side of the road where on occasion the remains of the canal are visible depending on how new development has altered the terrain. The canal often reappears as a wetland and therefore by law is protected from further destruction. And it is obvious why these small parcels are treasures. The wetland vegetation reveals red-wing blackbirds, scarlet epaulets proudly on display, gracefully bending the reed grasses on which they perch. The ditches proffer a colorful bouquet of fireweed, violet loosestrife, black-eyed Susans, and the delicate ivory doilies of Queen Anne's lace, softening the brick and mortar housing tracts we pass.

Our first inquiry occurs about one mile into our Canal Road walk. Two young women meet us on the sidewalk.

"Are you training for a hike?" one asks.

"No. Actually, we're on our hike," Judy answers.

"Where are you going?" the other asks.

"Mackinac," I answer, casually.

"Really? Wow! That's terrific. Good luck!"

We are actually feeling just a bit giddy—perhaps there are even signs of creeping overconfidence. The weight is riding lightly on our backs. Our identical pairs of boots cost an astonishingly high $189

each, but they are giving us the stability we need for the load and the distance. Judy is having one small problem with her pack, which is riding too low, below her hips, defeating the design purpose of resting on the hips and taking the weight off the back. We try to adjust her shoulder straps but realize the problem may require reassembling the pin placements. That will have to wait until we stop for the night. The rain has generously held off, but there is already mist in the air. We are anxious to get as far as we can before the rain begins in earnest.

As we approach the village of Utica, just beyond Sterling Heights an elderly woman working in her front garden calls out to us in a heavy colloquial accent, "Wherz ya goin'?" Again we answer Mackinac. She exclaims that she's never heard of such a thing and can hardly wait to tell her husband at dinner. It's obvious that we have added a little spice to her day. We wonder if her husband will believe her story.

By 10:30 A.M. we've reached Utica and the ten-mile point. Our goal is to average about three miles per hour, and we are right on target. Three cheers. We cross the expansion of M-59, the new suburban super-road that is being enlarged to relieve congestion in fast-growing northern Macomb County. This project has dramatically altered the city of Utica. The old village is located on a steep slope above the Clinton River. A German community settled in 1817, Utica was originally known as Hogs Hollow. For many years the town was primarily the home of retired farmers. Fifty years ago it was famous for all the rhubarb grown in its neighborhoods. Walking through the old section of Utica, we look for a way to enter River Bends Park, where we expect to find our first trail.

The ball field behind the Utica High School athletic field offers us a way into the park. We follow a path one-quarter mile over the railroad tracks into what was formerly known as the Rochester Utica State Recreation Area. Finally, we are off concrete and asphalt. The tranquil beauty of the little worn trail is a wonderful surprise. Judy is terribly allergic to poison ivy and poison oak, so we tread carefully. There are reeds nodding above our heads as we proceed northward between the Clinton River on our left and the canal and railroad tracks somewhere on our right. Foolishly, I have no compass, so maps, the sun, and landmarks will have to guide us. All around us are colorful wildflowers and beautiful butterflies. A host of swallowtails and monarchs reminds us of scenes in Gabriel

García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude.* This too feels like a magical place, awakening our hibernating senses—rich, musty smells; soft, springy ground; nature's designs and textures.

As we follow the trail northward we are accompanied by the quirky, soulful sounds of croaking frogs. Wading through a sea of seven-foot-high grasses, we spot our first deer thirty yards ahead. Despite frequent encounters with these beautiful animals, we are still struck by their grace. Motionless, we watch respectfully before gently alerting the doe to our presence.

A mile and a half up the trail we break into a baffling 300-yard clearing vaguely resembling a par four golf hole. Then Judy notices a contraption with a science fiction design, perhaps six feet high and bell shaped at the top with ribbed metal chains attached top and bottom to form a basket. This oddity is situated at a point where a golf green normally might be. To our amazement we find ourselves ambling through a frisbee golf course—a strange and unexpected discovery.

We walk the length of two holes before coming upon the park's picnic area nestled among a grove of hickory trees. The hickory is a rough, rugged hardwood tree. Hickory is far stronger than steel, weight for weight, more elastic, less brittle, and less heat conductive. The wood was used by early pioneers to construct covered wagons, which rolled west on hickory hubs.

In the park across the river from the picnic area and frisbee golf course lies the remains of historic Spring Hill Farm. In the 1840s Peter Lerrich, owner of the farm, assisted in building the Utica Methodist Church. Being a deeply religious man, he once salted a corn crop so that it would ferment too slowly to be used in the Utica distilleries. But it was the Lerrich family's abhorrence of slavery that reserved a place for them in history. They provided shelter, food, and clothing for runaway slaves before and during the Civil War. For many slaves their farm became a revered stop on the famed Underground Railroad to Canada and freedom. The Spring Hill Farm became the safest alternative route because many slave owners and their agents patrolled the closer and more obvious passage from Detroit across the Detroit River and into Canada. The Lerrich farm provided a respite for slaves traveling northeast to cross the St. Clair River at Algonac, Marysville, St. Clair, or Port Huron. They were guided to the farm by a "Beacon Tree," a virginal cedar standing over one hundred feet tall and visible from great distances. The Ler-

richs would hang a quilt, one side green, the other red, to further signal the slaves when it was safe to enter the cave near the spring. To protect the escapees, Peter and Sarah Lerrich tried to keep their noble efforts secret even from their children, as their daughter Libereta describes.

> In the year of our Lord eighteen hundred and fifty, I was five years old, not old enough to go to school but just old enough to want to know the whys and wherefores about everything and must have stumped my mother for answers not too untruthful, for truthful answers she did not dare. . . . [My father] in turn would be asked by me, "Why was our house built way off here, forty rods away from the road . . . ?" And his answer would be, "Mother and I thought that it would be better to build here to be near the Spring-in-the-Hill, we must have water, you know." . . . [This] was much more truthful than poetical and silenced my tongue, but not my thoughts, as to why the bricks around said spring, that held the water back, were so wide, wide enough for a man to walk on, and why it looked like the inside of a log house in back of the water with the logs so nicely fitted and [grooved], and why the little ramshackled door at the bottom of the hill that always shut itself, was kept covered with a grapevine, running on nails; and why the vine never stuck fast to the door by tendrils as other wild vines did; and why we were told to always hang up the vines just as we found them "to keep the water cool." And why did the fried cake crock get empty so quickly? It did not seem reasonable that a six gallon crock could empty itself so often, but I was told if Mother did not complain about it, I needn't.

In the late 1930s the great heavyweight boxer from Detroit, Joe Louis, purchased the 250-acre Spring Hill Farm for $100,000. Louis turned the farm into a popular showplace for his passion, horses, building a track and restaurant. Rather improbably, in the 1950s and 1960s the property became a Nike missile site before being turned over to the National Guard and finally to the State Department of Natural Resources. The buildings of the Lerrich farm have long since disappeared, leaving only a few foundation stones, sidewalks, and the remains of several flower gardens. The Beacon Tree is now gone, cut by a former owner for fence posts after perhaps two hun-

dred years of growing and giving life and hope. The land seems empty without it—a void in a distant glorious past.

To celebrate that past and preserve it for future generations, Congressman Louis Stokes of Ohio led an effort in Congress, which I joined, to pass the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Bill. The Underground Railroad stands as one of the most significant stories of American history. Prior to 1865 its complex network of individuals, sites, and routes represented the primary means for slaves to escape to freedom. The railroad spanned twenty-nine states; had branches in Canada, Mexico, and the Caribbean; and reached as far away as Africa, eventually helping hundreds of thousands of African Americans flee slavery. That brave struggle for freedom hallowed this very ground.

As we leave the park at Twenty-two Mile Road, the rain begins to fall. A large oak at the side of the road shelters us as we put on our rain gear. Proper rain gear is probably one of the most essential items on our clothing list. Wet clothes can lower your body temperature to the danger point. It doesn't have to be freezing or even near it for a hiker to become hypothermic when wearing wet clothes. The greatest risk of hypothermia comes when you least expect it. So the question for us was, what kind of gear? We rejected ponchos as the least effective option because in wind they are practically useless. We decided on rain suits (jacket and pants) but declined the most expensive brand with its supposed feature of breathability. The argument over whether or not this truly works centers on whether it is simultaneously breathable and waterproof. We have read that the fabric seems incapable of keeping up with the water vapor escaping the body while backpacking. The $300 high-end rain suits yielded to the $95 nylon suits that we purchased at the REI store.

We pull out our pack covers even though our backpacks are made of water-resistant material. Moisture has a way of finding seams and zippers and saturating your gear if the pack is left unprotected. The covers fit nicely over the full packs, allowing us to continue unhindered.

Judy is now dressed all in blue, and I am a vision in green as we move west toward Yates Cider Mill, with the old canal on our right behind a string of light industrial shops. The rain is now steady and strong. Two miles up the road, looking like two nuclear decontamination workers with our hoods drawn tightly around our faces, we

coincidentally pass by a large scar on the park's surface. This actually was the location of an original Superfund toxic waste site, now controlled, all two hundred acres, by the State of Michigan.

Weariness sets in as we plod our way to Yates Cider Mill. We attempt a shortcut from the road to a trail by the river but soon find ourselves sinking in a field of mud. With our boots heavy we finally find the trail and walk three-quarters of a mile to the shelter of the mill and large red barn located at the convergence of the river and the old canal. The mill has been powered by water since 1803 and is now a popular gathering place for families who hike the nearby trails and for fishermen and canoeists. The Clinton River is wildly natural in this far northwestern part of the county.

The mill is also a very popular weekend destination in the fall for those seeking cider, apples, doughnuts, and a touch of the out-of-doors. We take refuge from the driving rain under an overhang at the mill and find it closed and deserted. We are alone, wet, and increasingly chilly. A fifteen-minute break allows us to try again to adjust Judy's pack and to quench our thirst. We have come fourteen miles, with three left to finish our day. Across the road from us lies Yates Roadside Park, a scenic but small facility on the banks of the river. And across the river is Bloomer Park, which hosts the terminus of the canal. Our goal is to cross into Bloomer Park and take the three-mile trail into Rochester. But Bloomer turns into a bummer.

To our surprise and disappointment a fence has been erected along the edge of the park across from the cider mill. We cross the road bridge to see if we can find an opening, but the fence is too high and new to overcome in the rain. Our other option is to ford the river, so we backtrack across the bridge and into Yates Roadside Park. But the water is now running too deep to wade across the river, and we resign ourselves to walking the park's perimeter into Rochester. Cars and trucks roar by, spraying us with more water. Not only are we denied our hope of being on a trail, but the course ahead seems endlessly miserable.

William S. Knudsen, then president of General Motors, once remarked that "the American is a person who insists on going from Point A to Point B *sitting.*" He could have added, "and dry." This is certainly true in Macomb County. The county was named in honor of Brigadier General Alexander Macomb, who during the War of 1812 defeated a British squadron on Lake Champlain. Heavily wooded like most of Michigan, its grand forests gave way to the ax

and peavey and became rich in agricultural production. Its flat and fertile fields yielded bountiful harvests for neighboring Detroit and environs. The descendants of the early German and Belgian settlers and farmers witnessed a dramatic change after World War II, when auto plants began to mushroom throughout the county, and returning veterans moved to Macomb County to begin their family life in this newly created suburbia. Spilling out from the urban centers of Detroit and Hamtramck, this migration of Germans, Poles, Italians, Ukrainians, and others flavored Macomb County with their rich cultures. From this polyglot sprang churches, schools, cultural centers, and festivals (which were often held along the banks of the Clinton River)—traditions that still today create the mosaic of social and religious life in Macomb. From a population of 100,000 in 1940 to its present 750,000, the majority of its families are now connected in some way or another to the auto industry.

So, here, where the history, economy, and lifestyle are based on the automobile, we decide to walk! Not just any walk, but a twenty-one-day, 335-mile walk—17 miles the first day. When we share the idea of our adventure with hometown folks, they typically respond, "You're doing this on purpose?"

Today the northern half of the county is yielding swiftly to subdivisions and commercial development while still struggling to retain its farmlands. The expanding auto industry has altered the landscape. The presence of a record thirty-five golf courses (riding mainly) has for now helped stem the complete elimination of open land while providing green spaces and recreational outlets. In the lower eastern half of the county, bordering Lake St. Clair, which divides Michigan from Ontario, is the largest recreational boating fleet in the United States. Despite a short boating season of only six months, my congressional district has sixty-five thousand registered boats, the most in the nation.

So contrary to all conventional modes of travel here—minivan, electric golf cart, or cabin cruiser—we are walking in the pouring rain. We turn a corner and to our pleasant surprise find ourselves in the midst of a broad swath of colorful wildflowers. Buttercups, yarrow, mullein, and aster are radiant against the gray rain. Our spirits are lifted. Goldfinches and doves accompany us on our soaking-wet walk to town. The goldfinch will turn out to be a faithful companion all the way to Mackinac.

Rochester lies between the high banks of the Clinton River on

the south and the wandering Paint Creek on the north. A New York family, the Grahams, settled the city in 1817. They named the town after Rochester, New York. Earlier in the century the steep hills and the broad, stream-laced valley attracted workers from the auto plants in Pontiac just a few miles to the west. Fifty years ago Rochester's industrial profile included a foundry, a knitting works, a paper company, and the Parke-Davis Biological Farm. Only Parke-Davis remains, but the area is also home to three other distinctive institutions, Meadowbrook Theater, Oakland University, and the Leader Dogs for the Blind. Today Rochester is an upper-middle-class suburb of 7,100 people located twenty-four miles north of Detroit. A true, old-fashioned main street is anchored by a variety of shops, restaurants, and parks.

Upon reaching the heart of town, we proceed three blocks north to the Spartan Inn, "Your home away from home." The lady at the front desk remembers us from our earlier visit in the summer to make reservations. We told her then of our plan, and it amused her that we would be walking into her motel. Either we did not impress her enough to be given a convenient room, or she sweetly sought a quiet corner for us. In any case we find ourselves in the farthest room possible from the office, in room 41 on the second floor. This pattern will become familiar over the course of our trip. After the relief of reaching our destination and checking in, hoisting our packs again and staggering to our room often seem the hardest steps of the day.

Our room is a simple sanctuary—small but very dry. We hang our damp clothing and dripping gear everywhere. Our legs ache. Yes we are used to running and biking, but walking seventeen miles with nearly thirty pounds on your back awakens a whole new set of muscles, which are now screaming their displeasure. The pain vividly reminds me of the first week of double-session football practice. It is a necessary passage for future success. After stretching our aching limbs, we take a ninety-minute fitful nap. When we rise, the rain has stopped.

The lady at the desk recommends the Rochester Cafe, three blocks south, for dinner. We choose a restaurant across the street. We should have followed her advice. After dinner we pick up a copy of the *Oakland Press* and retreat to our room for some planning, repairing, reading, and writing. The room is dimly lit for reading, but I pore over maps for tomorrow's short fourteen-mile walk

and then write in my journal. Judy works on her pack. Out our window the August sky is streaked in yellow, orange, and reds. The gorgeous sunset bids a stunning farewell to our first day.

Judy is very sore and worries about the future, when our days will be longer and our loads heavier. She is excited to have completed day 1, but her natural caution focuses on potential problems. Mainly, she is concerned that this may be too great a risk for my back. I promise to admit any signs of trouble rather than keeping quiet, as is my habit.

The Tigers and Blue Jays game on TV is quiet comfort as we prepare for tomorrow. The forecast is for cloudy skies, a high of sixty-two, and rain late in the afternoon. At 9:30, just as we are about to drift off to sleep, there is a knock at the door. Our friend Stan Kemp has come to hear the story of the first day. He missed us earlier when we were out to dinner. We want to share our adventures with him, but exhaustion rules.

"I'm sorry to say, Stan, it's lights out for us in one hour," I tell him. "It's been a long day, and we hardly slept last night. You know, anticipation—."

Total Distance	335 miles
Walked Today	17 miles
Walking to Do	318 miles