

Web Blog engl. SUNwalk 2008 XX

5/30 – 6/16/2008

Mocassin Valley, Virginia – Fairfax, VA

5/30/2008

Mocassin Valley – Abingdon, VA

It will become a long day – at first on the narrow highway 613, with almost no cars. The road follows the amiable Mocassin Valley, the brook with its clear water glittering in the sunshine, along the mysterious wood hills – they appear like a huge, fluffy, segmented resting animal. On the map the road seems to be quite straight; but in reality it's winding through the valley in countless bends – and for hours and hours there is no end to it.

Often if I ask how long it will take to get somewhere people reassure me: „You are almost there. It's not far.” And then I walk for another hour. Most of the people know the distances from driving and forget that it takes 15 to 20 times longer to walk than to drive.

In the morning I am singing 108 Tibetan mantras that I chant every day - “Thaiatha OM – Bekandze - Bekandze - Maha Bekandze - Radza Samud Gate Soha”, a mantra for our healing and for the healing of Mother Earth. A herd of cattle is listening attentively. There are about 20 beige Limousine cows and as many dark Angus cows, and also a Texas longhorn steer. Slowly they start to walk. They follow me towards east, towards the morning sun. They cross a river and accompany me until the fence stops them. In the afternoon I arrive at the highway 58, a very busy four lane road. It reminds me of the “Transjurane” in Switzerland, the freeway that crosses the Jura Mountains.

Shortly before it is getting dark I arrive in Abingdon, a very pretty little town with beautiful brick stone mansions. One of them, the Martha Washington Inn, is located in the middle of a blooming park. It has an eventful history: It has been built in 1832 as a private residence. Later it became a finishing school for young ladies. When the armies of the Civil War battled in and around Abingdon, the building served as a hospital for wounded soldiers,

and romantic stories of nurses and soldiers still endure to this day. After the Civil War the “Martha” became a women’s college, and today it is an elegant hotel in which I sleep very well.

5/31/2008

Abingdon – Marion, VA

Rex McCarty, the newspaper man and Democratic Delegate in Gate City suggested to me to meet Laura Lee in Abingdon. She is the chief of staff of the Virginia Rep. Rick Boucher, the chairman of the subcommittee for energy in the US Congress. Laura welcomes me in Rick Boucher’s office at the Main Street in Abingdon. We have a lively conversation, and she recommends to me to contact the Washington bureau as soon as I arrive in the capital. Rick Boucher is very influential in US energy policy. He is open to renewable energy and energy efficiency although he still supports the coal industry – Virginia is an important coal producer. I hope to be able to share my visions of a sustainable energy future with Congressman Boucher.

Not far from Marion two bikers are struggling against the wind – for me it is a wonderful tailwind. Mike and Mark started from the Baltimore area. They also want to cross the USA with their own muscle power. Their destination is San Francisco.

6/1 – 6/3/2008

Marion – Roanoke, VA

For a whole week I am walking between the mountain ridges of the Appalachian Mountains and the Blue Ridge Mountains towards northeast - Marion, Wytheville, Radford, Christiansburg, Roanoke, Buchanan, Lexington, Staunton, and Harrisonburg, until New Market where the route changes from northeast to east, towards Washington D.C.. I follow the highway 11 – parallel to the Interstate 81. Because the freeway is not far away I find always a hotel or a motel, and also convenience stores for food; therefore I don’t have to carry food for long stretches of my hike.

After Wytheville the map shows only the freeway; but there are two service roads on both sides of the freeway. For 16 miles I am having an almost empty road just for myself walking through the New River Valley, through an area that is also called “Draper’s Valley”.

My phone is ringing. Thomas Kost calls me from Basel, Switzerland. Thomas, together with Marcello Zandona, has optimized my GPS position finding. Now my friends can see on the internet where I am in the evening. Shortly before his call I had a dream where Thomas appeared. And now I hear his voice, in the middle of the Appalachian Mountains.

John Draper was an early settler in this area. His wife Bettie Robertson Draper was captured by the Shawnee Indians at Draper’s Meadow (today Blacksburg) in 1755. Mrs. Draper was carried into the Ohio country along with her sister-in-law Mary D. Ingles and five others. Six years later John Draper found his wife living in the family of an Indian chief. After paying for her return the Drapers went home to the New River Valley. About 1765 they moved into a log cabin in the area that is still known as Draper’s Valley. There is a mountain pass that leads to Pulaski. From this pass there is an awesome view – one wood hill silhouette behind another one; woods, some clearances as far as one can see; until today there are almost no signs of human civilization visible.

Pulaski is surrounded by gentle, smooth wooden hills – it’s called “Gem City of Southwest Virginia”. Its history began with a farmhouse, a railroad and a water tank. Around 1854 the die “Virginia and Tennessee railroad company” – later the “Norfolk and Western” – brought its track through there. To provide water for the small wood-burning engines which puffed along the way, a water tank was erected. This was called Martin's Tank, so named because Robert and R. D. Martin had owned most of the land through which the railroad passed. "Martin's Tank" was Pulaski's childhood name.

An African American family is sitting in front of the house, in the evening sun. „Oh, my God, you are walking! Oh, man, I would join you if I didn’t have a good job. Many people should walk for that cause.” He cannot be convinced that he will find another job, maybe a better one. When I continue my hike I still hear him for a while: „ He is walking, oh man, awesome.“

Tony is sitting on his scooter and chats with a friend. He has a long white beard. When he sees me walking he gets excited: “I also crossed the USA,

by bike. I am one of the guys who feel at home everywhere.” I ask him how long it took to grow his long beard. :”35 years.” I tell him that in Elm, the mountain village where I live, there are also farmers with such beautiful long beards. “Oh, yes, I know, in the Swiss Alps!”

There are even more connections between Pulaski and Switzerland, in addition to long beards: An event vital in Pulaski's history occurred in 1893. In that year the courthouse at Newbern was destroyed by fire. As Newbern was two miles from the railroad, agitation arose to bring the courthouse to either Dublin or Pulaski. Both towns desired it and to settle the matter an election was ordered. Bitterly contested, the election resulted in a victory for Pulaski, after the matter had been carried to the Virginia supreme court of appeals. Newbern lost its central position in the county.

I am fully enthusiastic about „James“, the cart that I pull through the USA. What a wonderful invention! I wouldn't have made it so far without “James”. It would be almost impossible to carry such a load with the camping equipment on my back. Francois Jeancourt from Wabern near Berne has made a fantastic contribution to the world with this invention! Best materials, very wear-resistant, a wheel that never has a puncture because it's compact; a bag with a very solid zipper. After having learned to pack the bag in a way so that the weight is in the middle line, the balance becomes easy too. Only once a screw broke because of the constant heavy load – shortly before I arrived in Radford where I could replace the screw in a bicycle shop.

Nearby there is a health food restaurant. Gina is waiting on me. Before I leave she brings me a heavy paper bag with water melon and sandwiches – filled with apples, bananas, peanut butter, and granola – “on the house”! Gina is so enthusiastic about my walk that she went to her children in the second floor and told them about it during a break. Her delicious gift nourishes me so well after walking in the rain. I enjoy the sandwiches and the watermelon, beneath the canopy of a closed store in Christiansburg.

Four days later, soon before I arrive in Staunton, a white car stops on the other side of the road. Who is leaving the car and approaches me crossing the road? Gina - carrying again a heavy paper bag in her hand! Again I am given two of these unique sandwiches, and two fruit cups, one with strawberries, one with watermelon pieces. Gina, her friend John and her children, Ezra and Esther, are traveling to Washington, D.C., from where the children will fly to California in order to see their father. John suggested a

detour. He wanted to show Gina the house in Staunton where he grew up. Otherwise we wouldn't have met again. After they left I thought: Hopefully Ezra and Esther will get another healthy snack for their flight – in spite of the detour to Staunton...

Also in Pascal's Kitchen Restaurant in Radford Howard Lytton leaves his table where he eats with a friend, Matthew, and comes to my table. "Are you also walking through the USA?" he asks. His stepfather, David Stoess, has done the same thing in 1991, from Los Angeles to the Empire State building in New York City. He has written a book about this adventure - „Right Foot in the Pacific, Left Foot in the Atlantic: An Adventure across America“. Howard offers me to send the book so I can read it on the boat back to Europe.

In the internet I read about David Stoess and his journeys:

"There are many stories I want to tell you. Stories such as the one about a nudist at a windmill; one about a man who felt sorry for me and literally gave me the shirt off his back; one about kissing the plaque on the Empire State Building, and even one about the time I drank water...that was only intended for flushing toilets."

On April 8th, 1991, David Stoess left Los Angeles on foot. He arrived at the Empire State Building on September 24th. This is the story of what happened to him in between. Filled with humorous and harrowing tales of torturous heat, near-fatal flash floods, relentless fire ants, and naked Samaritans, it is a personal tale of physical challenge, mental hardship, and unlikely heroes. It is, as Stoess sees it, a tribute to America and her people.

When I say I was often offered rides but refused because I wanted to say I walked every inch, people look at me slightly askew. You wanted to walk! Why? What cause were you walking for? I tell them the only cause was cause I wanted to. I wanted to see if I had it in me.

About the Author, David Stoess:

David Stoess is a native of Kentucky and by his own admission was born with a map in his hand. In 1965, he and his bride, Nancy, bicycled from Louisville to Daytona Beach for their honeymoon. Nancy passed away in 1990, and in 1991 David embarked on one of the greatest adventures of his life - a walk across America. But his wanderlust wasn't totally satisfied. In 1995 he paddled a sea kayak 2,000 miles from Pittsburgh to New Orleans. Three years later he walked the 450-mile Natchez Trace Parkway. What's next? I'm eyeing Seattle to Miami, Stoess says. He currently resides in La Grange, Kentucky.

Before I arrive in Christiansburg I buy mineral water in the convenience store of a gasoline station. The sales clerk seems to be very moody and harsh. I ask him: "Are you unhappy?" "Oh", he complains, "business is very low. I feel so bored. If am busy I feel well; but everything is done, no work, it's very difficult." He joins me outside the store where I drink and eat something. He asks about my walk, and we get to know each other. Punja becomes now very friendly and offers me an additional bottle of water for free.

In the evening of 6/3/2008 it's now certain: Barack Obama will be the democratic candidate for the US Presidency – 200 years after US Congress has banned slave trade. The democratic Convention that will elect the first African-American presidential candidate will take place on 8/28/2008, exactly 45 years after Martin Luther King's speech "I have a dream" that he held in front of the Lincoln Memorial after a march to Washington on 8/28/2008.

6/4 – 6/8/2008

Roanoke – Harrisonburg, VA

John Schaefer from Salt Lake City - the friend who made the www.sunwalk2008 home page, together with Gilberto Schaefer - comes to Roanoke, together with his daughter Emily and the two grand-daughters Madeline and Isabelle. We walk together towards the center - a long walk in the afternoon heat - we take turns in pushing the double buggy with the children. At the end of the walk we cross an Afro-American neighborhood. John - outgoing and inspring - is promoting the SunWalk2008 wherever he sees people. Once we are surrounded by black teenagers. One of them introduces himself as "Terrell". I understand "Thoreau" - and I start a teaching lesson about the famous New England "Walden" Thoreau. John dismantles the misunderstanding, and Terrell is disappointed not to have the same name like this early environmentalist and human rights activist.

We can spend the night with Ed Dolinger, one of John's friend. Ed works as an artist, a sculptor and painter. He also teaches arts at two colleges for girls. He is renovating an old factory building into a gallery and workshops for artists. The six of us spend the night in the rooms above this construction place. It takes a while until I find a more or less quiet corner in the hallway

and some hours of sleep - after carrying away my mattress from snoring friends, from a roaring refrigerator and from the cold draft of the ventilator.

Before I meet John and his family I pass once again the office building of a local newspaper, the "Mainstreet Newspapers" in Salem. It's a repetitive pattern when I offer my story at the reception: "Do you look for news? Here they are!" Meg Hibbert wants to leave the office for lunch; but she stays. She makes an interview on the SunWalk. She asks questions, and she writes simultaneously her article for the "Salem Times-Register".

Also Cody Lowe, staff writer at the "Roanoke Times", takes plenty of time for a conversation after I walk into the Newspaper headquarter. His article appears the next day. It shows that he has a lot of understanding and sensitivity for my issue and that he shares my concerns and visions. He organizes a photographer who follows me, Kyle Green. He finds me, just in the moment when Jay Hogan offers me a cold drink on this extreme hot day. He is also interested in details. He takes pictures of my feet that have carried the Swiss hiker so faithfully from Los Angeles to Roanoke.

In the evening a big dark limousine stops. Steve Funkhouser steps out of his car, with a camera in his hands. He has read the article in the "Roanoke Times". He wants to make a picture himself. "Funkhouser" sounds like the Swiss name "Fankhauser" - Steve confirms that he has Swiss roots. He has worked in Europe as a member of the NATO forces, also in the crisis area of former Yugoslavia. There is a Sheriff star on his card. Steve works now as an investigator for the Rockbridge County Sheriff's Office. "Call me if you need help!" he tells me before he leaves again.

For ten days I am walking through a heat wave - temperatures between 90 and 100 degrees F. Fortunately I chose a route with towns and villages, where I find stores. Therefore I find always something to drink. Like in the oasis in the desert the thirsty creatures meet each other in convenience or grocery stores or in front of them - like during the hot summer of 2003 when Gregor Sieboeck, the world wanderer from Bad Ischl, and myself met in front of a supermarket in Silz, Tirol (Austria). We soon became aware that both of us were walking for an environmental cause, Gregor towards west for three years, I towards east for half a year; and that we have started our walk at the same day, on 6/28/2003. Heat and thirst can become the beginning of a friendship. Gregor met the Dalai Lama as a boy. His Holyness gave him a white silk belt. This belt has protected me during the

last months - Gregor gave it to me during a shared lecture in Vienna, just before I left Europe for my SUNwalk.

This time I meet Heather, Iris, and John in front of the grocery store in Troutville. These three young students started their bike trip in Norfolk, VA. They want to cross the USA by bike. Their destination is Portland, OR, their home town. All of us are glad that we can refresh our dry mouths with a cold drink from the village store and that we can "refuel" our depleted water storages with fresh water.

When I walk towards the small historic town of Buchanan I can witness a wonderful sunset - in the windows of a house that is located on the top of a hill. The windows are shining in bright orange color as if the interior of the house was on fire. Behind the house the woods are also tanned by the evening light; and a huge cumulus cloud forms a majestic crown above this landscape - a color symphony of red, yellow, and orange.

I am not able to learn history out of history books. What I read – without a connection to the content or the location – travels through my mind like a train through a tunnel – it enters the tunnel on one side of the mountain, and leaves it at the other side. But if I walk and come to a historic site, I experience the vibrations of this place, the “genius loci”. What I read or hear there sinks into my being. It’s comparable to a part of a dream that I remember in the morning. If I get hold of it I sometimes can reconstruct more parts of the dream. When I read the “historical markers” along the way I get a hunch of the history – through the bits and pieces that happened at that location and that are described there.

One example: The „Natural Bridge“ I see between Buchanan and Lexington. The “Cedar Creek” has excavated a huge, 215 feet high and 40 feet deep bridge. Its existence goes back to the end of the Paleozoic Age. The Monacan Indians called the nature miracle “Bridge of God”. On July 5th 1774 Thomas Jefferson bought the bridge and 157 acres of land from King George III for 20 shillings (\$ 2.40). He built a little cabin where he retreated often for a rest.

At another location, near Fairfield between Lexington and Staunton, a sign describes a red block house that stood here in earlier times. It belonged to the McDowell family. Didn’t I hear this name in medical school? 1730 John McDowell received some land in this area. He dies during a battle between

Iroquois Indians and settlers in 1742. 2 years later Lt. Gov. George Thomas from Pennsylvania mediated between the settlers and the Indians. A compensation of 100 pounds was paid to the Iroquois people. On Nov. 11th 1771 Ephraim McDowell was born, the grandson of John McDowell. Ephraim goes to medical school, at first in Staunton, VA, later in Edinburgh, Scotland. He was the first to successfully remove an ovarian tumor. He is seen as the father of abdominal surgery.

When I met Gina, John and Gina's children on the road before Staunton, John pointed to a white speckle in the green woods – the white columns of a mansion that Thomas Jefferson has built in this area are shining through the green woods.

In Staunton I encountered another piece of history: Thomas Woodrow Wilson was born on 12/28/1858 at Coalter Street. He was the 28th President of the USA, during WWI. He also served as the President of Princeton University and as the Governor of New Jersey. He was also the main sponsor of the League of Nations although the USA never became member – the US Senate didn't ratify the US membership. The headquarters of the League of Nations were located in Geneva, Switzerland. Wilson died on 2/3/1924.

In Staunton my host was Ulysse Desportes, also a personality of lived history. Steve and Maxine with whom I stayed in the wood hills of the Mocassin Valley asked a friend in Staunton whether I can stay with him. He was out of town during my visit; but he asked Ulysse Desportes to be my host. Ulysse is 87, a retired art history professor and painter, full of life and joy and humor, full of history and stories. He shares a big house with his dog Kirkby, an affectionate griffon. He walks with Kirkby every day – the dog is choosing the route, and Ulysse stays in good shape. The house is filled with paintings and antiques. There is one painting that Ulysse has painted himself that impresses me the most: The shadow of a playing Jazz Band. Ulysse tells me that he painted it in front of his class in less than an hour.

We tell each other stories until midnight. The next day I realize that I slept too little. My energy is low, and it needs lots of willpower to get to Harrisonburg during this extremely hot day.

6/9 – 6/16/2008

Harrisonburg, VA – Fairfax, VA

The next morning, after nine hours of deep sleep, I am fully recovered. With this energy level it's easy to walk the 33 miles to Luray in the Shenandoah Valley, in spite of the heat and the long uphill stretches.

Also today I encounter American history: In Lacey Springs, Thomas L. Rosser's cavalry (Confederates) attacked Thomas W. Custer's (Union) camp before dawn on 12/21/1864. Rosser and Custer were room mates and friends at the Military Academy of West Point...

Not far from here Thomas Lincoln, the father of Abraham Lincoln, has been born, around 1778. The family had an inn here, the Lincoln Inn. Today it's hot. The scent of hay is in the air, silence. I close my eyes. I see a dusty road, horsemen with the gun in their belts, stopping the galloping horses in front of the inn; horse carriages, coaches that also make stopovers here.

A car stops and ends my daydream: Conny offers me a big cup of cool spring water. She has seen me, close to her house, when I took some notes after having read a historical marker. She also gives me a waterproof plastic bag with a towel, filled with ice cubes. What bliss to cool the hot face with a cold, wet towel! I refill the ice during the day in stores, again and again. I refresh myself during every break, thinking at Conny with deep gratitude.

Often I see black snakes on the road or next to the road – wonderful animals, sometimes more than three feet long. The head is slightly elevated. They are taking a sunbath, motionless. Often they heat themselves up on the hot pavement – so they are highly threatened by the traffic. I try to bring them away from the highway. It doesn't help to throw small gravel stones onto them. I usually have to bring James' wheel very close to their head. Then suddenly they shiver and disappear in the high grass or between pebbles and rocks, with elegant serpentine movements.

In the evening glow worms are shining in the dark. Once I put my GPS device into the grass next to a motel. When I look for it again later I mistake the green glow of the glow worm with the green blink signal of the GPS...

Again and again I am having short, beautiful, and deeply moving encounters with horses. Also today a horse looks at me, highly attentive, curious, when I

come closer on the road. I look back and nod. The horse is also nodding. We nod, back and forth. Awesome – the high energy of this animal’s presence. It throws its head and mane into the air. It’s galloping a circle and stands still again, as close as the fence allows it. It’s looking again at me, nodding again. And it stays there and follows me with its eyes until I disappear.

New Market: It’s a very emotional moment when I read for the first time on a sign “Washington D. C. – 102 miles“. Here the direction of my walk changes from northeast to east – directly towards the capital, Washington D.C. There are another two mountain ridges and the Shenandoah Valley that I have to cross – they form the Shenandoah National Park. Climbing the first mountain pass in the heat I am thankful to every tree and its shade.

Walking in the heat it becomes evident how important trees are for the micro-climatic conditions. If there are no trees and no shade the heat weighs on the landscape heavily. As soon as there are trees there is soothing shade. There are also drafts that arise between the light and the shade. Therefore I observe where there are tree shades on the road and follow them, changing the side of the road again and again.

When I walk downhill I pass the “Sonny’s Restaurant”. A man in my age with white hair, in a white kitchen apron, follows me. He wants to know where and why I am walking. Soon I am surrounded by all the members of the family who work here. Pictures are taken, and the host refills my glass with milk from a big plastic bottle. His son brings me a “Sonny” T-shirt with a motor biker on it...

When I cross the Shenandoah Bridge the sun sets behind the Massanutten Mountain. The evening light reflects as golden-yellow ribbons in the mountain shadow on the water surface. A water shoot babbles and gurgles, and deepens the silence of the evening.

There are a few highlights on my walk to Washington, D. C.: The Crossing of the Thornton Gap, the last mountain pass before the capital – almost always in the woods; the stay at Foster Harris Bed & Breakfast House at (Little) Washington, VA, where John and Diane spoil their guests with much care and professionalism – from the exquisitely designed rooms to the Lindor candy on the pillow at nighttime, to the delicious breakfast on the balcony in the morning; a culinary-vegetarian top experience in the “Inn of Little Washington” (www.theinnatlittlewashington.com), one of the best

restaurants in the world – recommended by John, and thanks to him with a good walker discount; the encounter with John Bradley, CEO of “Resole America” in Warrenton – he resoles my MBT sandals and helps me with contacts in Washington D.C.; meeting True, a journalist, in the little historic hilltop town of Warrenton – “True”, what a great, promising name for a newspaper man; the arrival in Fairfax, Virginia, where I found a quiet hotel and a modern Public Library where I can catch up with my correspondence and writing; meeting again my two cousins Robert and Rudy Keiser and Rudy’s wife Jeanette who live in this area – it’s now 35 years since we met for the first time; and I enjoy very much to be able to witness their development – from little boys to talented and socially involved grown up men.

During these resting days it is as if I wake up from a long wonderful dream – after almost half a year of timeless hiking time. I was able to live fully in the moment. I could tap my physical potential, going to its limits. The encounter with many helpful, hospitable people is resonating in me like a pulse strengthening my faith in humankind. And I feel the awesome, vast landscapes I was allowed to walk through. I feel them in my body as if they had become a part of me.

Tomorrow I will walk into the center of the capital. I will try to increase the politicians’ appetite for renewable energy and energy efficiency, for the healing potential of the SUN for the economy and for the health of our unique planet.