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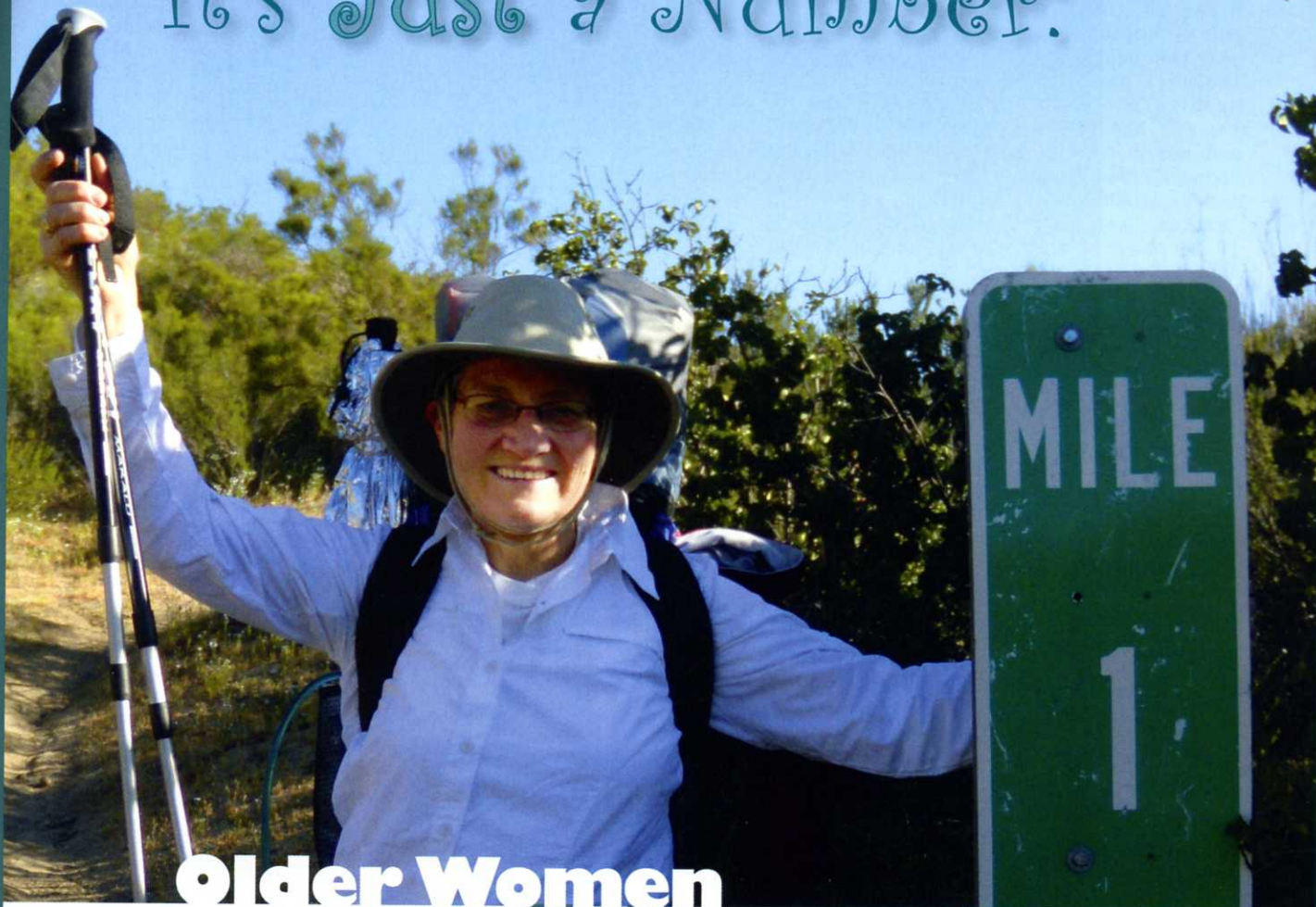
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It's Just a Number:



Older Women Take to the Trail

By Kathy Fritts

"I needed an adventure, so for a 60th birthday present to myself, I quit my job and hiked the Pacific Crest Trail."

But **Ginny Benware** of Portland, Ore. isn't hiking by herself. A growing number of older women regularly load up backpacks and head into the wild.

On a *Backpacker Magazine* forum, **Kim Wersal**, says: "On a backpacking trip last weekend, my husband and I met a group of half a dozen women, mostly in their 50's at least, and they looked like they were having a blast."

The pleasures of hiking are not just for the young and firm. But who are these women?

They can be organized groups of friends like FLAB - "Fun-Loving Adventuresome Broads." (www.hikingwomen.typepad.com)

They may be retired and taking up peak-bagging instead of golf. Some are solo hikers who cherish being in control of their lives. When her husband Tom's knees gave out, **Karen Pico** of Ruch, Ore., found **Bill**, her 70-year old hiking "buddy" by trolling the want ads

Women backpackers have a long history. **Emma Rowena Gatewood**, better known as **Grandma Gatewood**, was the first woman to solo hike the Appalachian Trail in 1955. She was 67 years old. Until 2007, she was the AT's oldest female thru-hiker. She also walked 2,000 miles of the Oregon Trail from Independence, Missouri, to Portland, averaging 22 miles a day. She wore Keds sneakers and carried an army blanket, raincoat and a plastic shower curtain for shelter. "I thought it would be a nice lark," she said. "It wasn't."

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Above: Ginny Benware at mile one near Campo, Calif.

I only began hiking as a day hiker when I neared sixty and my children were grown. Of all that I've done, I am the most proud of my hikes on the PCT, as it has been my teacher and my doctor. I am so grateful to the PCT for all the peace and freedom it has brought me. Though I have learned many things through all my hikes, the long backpacking journey along the PCT has shown me that many things we covet and hoard in life are not necessary to live a happy life. When backpacking long distances, extra clothes, extra water, extra food; any 'extras' are only burdens. I recognized that if we can rid the excesses and greed from our everyday life, we can all live together as healthier and happier people. In addition, through hiking the backbone of the Western crest, I've discovered this amazing Earth's secrets and history, and realized that we are all a part of nature. I only hope we can preserve the Earth for many future generations.

Hiking gives me opportunity for reflection, and time to think about my past and how future generations can live a good life. I hike more for meditation and for inner peace than achievement, so I'm not too comfortable with attention. My children and grandchildren are very encouraging of my hiking and are my biggest support group. They seem glad that I've found something I value and continue to pursue.

I graduated from the seminary in Korea and was a teacher, but after marriage, I've been a housewife. After my children were all finished with college and well on their way to independent professional lives, and after caring

for my aging parents, I decided to think about the best way to live a healthy life and not be a burden on my children. I connected with hiking because I don't have any natural athletic skills or talents. All hiking required of me was my own two feet. I didn't need to compete with anyone - all I needed to do was match my own footprints and set my own pace and go where I wanted to go. Early on, I was so grateful for the well-kept long trails that PCT has provided me. Freedom to think on my life and to reflect.

My thoughts on advancing age are that it should not be a factor on how we choose to spend them. I found my fulfillment in hiking, but we all have something we want to do, we should seek and discover or continue what we enjoyed doing and simply just keep doing them and not stop. We can all discover our passions, put our best effort into it and do what makes us happy.

Sincerely,

Helen Choi

I say, amen to a remarkable lady. Now I can hardly wait for next year's hike. 🐦

Ginny Beware (left) with Amanda Gladics near the Panther Creek Campground in the Gifford Pinchot National Forest, Washington.



Older Women Take to the Trail

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In 1976, **Teddi Boston** was the first woman to solo thru-hike the PCT. She was in her forties and had four children. **Karen Berger** is one of only a few dozen people to complete the Triple Crown (AT, PCT, and Continental Divide Trail). She has written more than a dozen backpacking books and was a contributing editor to *Backpacker Magazine*. **Jackie "Yogi" McDonnell**, wrote *Yogi's PCT Handbook* and is an authority on how to hike the Trail.

The backpacking bug bites older women in many ways. Ginny Benware was on a three-day hike near Mt. Jefferson when she met some PCT hikers, and thought: "I can do this." Karen Pico was fascinated after reading *The High Adventure of Eric Ryback*, and the idea percolated.

Older women seem to be free of the competitive urge to eat up miles - a trait so often seen in younger hikers. They can't

keep up the grueling pace of their youth without risking injury. Age brings a certain wisdom and perspective. Backpacking is not a race. And napping under a Doug fir or skipping rocks on an alpine lake are the real rewards.

Older women backpack for the same reasons as anybody else: to feel forest duff under their feet; to gain respite from frantic routines; to make a connection with nature; and to master a physical challenge. But the most important reason is "they looked like they were having a blast."

So if you are one of these women, keep hiking. And if you should meet one on the trail, salute her. 🐦

Kathy Fritts, 63, is a grandma and former Girl Scout backpacker who plans to hike the Oregon section of the PCT in 2011. She lives in Jacksonville, Ore.