

Hard Corps: Hiking at Altitude

The Santa Fe Chili and Marching Society

Charlie Cragin

One thing is certain when the members of the Santa Fe Chili and Marching Society convene for their Wednesday hikes. The hike will start at 7,000 feet altitude and it's usually uphill from there. The Society was formed in 1971 by John "Jack" Masters who came to Santa Fe in 1969. He was a best-selling author who wrote about India and his experiences as a British Army officer in Burma, Iran and Iraq during World War II, attaining the rank of brigadier. He emigrated to the United States in 1949 and lived in Rockland County, New York, for twenty years. Jack reportedly ran the Society like the military organizations he had grown up with beginning with his time at the Royal Military College at Sandhurst. He selected each of the members and his autocracy thrived under the precept that "everyone has a vote but only one counts." In the early years, members hiked up to 25 miles once a week and finished the trek with spicy green chili stew. Forty-five years later, the distance of the hikes may have diminished, but the tradition of chili stew at hike's end continues strong.

The legacy of Jack Masters remains and as today's members hike many of the trails that he had once hiked, they recall stories of this larger than life "Renaissance Man" and pass them on to newer members. While some may be apocryphal, his fellow members paid homage to him upon his death in May 1983:

In the last twelve years of his life, the Santa Fe Chili and Marching Society became Jack's central interest. It was a funny name, but it was a great and serious endeavor. We whom Jack involved in it will remember it with gratitude to our dying days. To describe us as a set of about twenty people meeting every Wednesday to walk in the Santa Fe area is totally inadequate. It does not begin to do justice to the creative skill and imagination with which Jack Masters organized us and led our walks. Without him, such oddly assorted men and women would not have met and become friends; we would not have discovered much of the most beautiful scenery in the region; we would not have accepted the rigors of long walks every week, rain or shine. He opened to us worlds of beauty, excitement and adventure. And, of course, one of the greatest things about him was his ability to bring together a couple dozen of the most diverse characters, all with strong (and usually opposing) points of view, and somehow meld them all into one cohesive, strong and loyal group.

While the Society has evolved, many of the rules and traditions Jack set in place remain to this day, none more so than the requirement that the assigned hike leader provide a hot chili meal at the end of winter hikes and refreshments at other times of the year. Today's membership is limited to twenty active members, each of whom leads one or more hikes each quarter, five seasonal members, and sixteen emeritus members.

Hike leaders are responsible for reconnoitering their planned hike, notifying all members, coordinating transportation, evaluating weather conditions and dishing up the hot chili and refreshments. Information concerning each hike is reported to the record keeper who maintains the log of hike location, participants, and approximate hiking mileage and elevation gain.

Membership is replenished through the guest invitation system whereby members invite guests to join them for hikes. After a guest has completed ten hikes, they are eligible to be considered for membership, just as Marie-Paule Parcels was in 2007 when she visited occasionally from Michigan. Originally from

Quebec and now vice-chair of the group, she with her husband, Ramon, moved from Michigan to Santa Fe in 2009 and became a regular member in 2010. “In addition to the great workout and keeping me in shape, the interactions with the people in the group are what is so special about the SFCMS. We all come from different backgrounds and professions so the conversations are very interesting and cover a whole range of topics. Every week I come back home with something I learned during the hike,” Parcels said. The Santa Fe region of northern New Mexico offers hike leaders a diversity of trails. Nestled between two mountain ranges, the Sangre de Cristos to the east and the Jemez to the west, it’s a hiker’s dream location. For example, in just the Santa Fe National Forest there are more than 1,000 miles of trails. The Sangres are the terminating point of the Rockies and boast New Mexico’s highest point, Wheeler Peak at 13,161 feet. In the summer, mountain trails offer solace from the heat and, in winter, great opportunities for snowshoeing, cross country skiing or “yak-traking.” This past winter, club chair, Judy Costlow led the group on a snowshoe hike to Aspen Vista on a trail leading to Tesuque Peak (elevation 12,040 feet). It was a typical Santa Fe winter day: Crisp air, with sunny blue skies. A hiker’s delight! A fresh, deep snow coated the aspens, spruce and fir accentuating the delight of the day.

Spring and fall trails abound across the high desert or descents into the valleys and canyons. Hikes into canyons along the Rio Grande are a marvelous opportunity to observe the blossoming of a Santa Fe spring. Spring flowers abound on the Red and Blue Dot trails into White Rock Canyon near Los Alamos. This 8-mile loop trail descends about 1,300 feet to the Rio Grande. You’ll discover a spring-fed creek with a small waterfall and lovely pool. The petroglyphs will reach out to greet you. It’s accessible year-round.

Bandelier National Monument, 48 miles from Santa Fe, offers many well-maintained trails on its 32,000 acres of land and is a favorite destination of many hikers. Altitude ranges from 5,330 feet at the Rio Grande to more than 10,000 feet in the Jemez Mountains. The Cerro Grande (Big Mountain) trail leads to the highest point in the park, elevation 10,199 feet. The mountain is part of the rim of Valles Caldera, a crater formed after a volcanic eruption 1.2 million years ago. Bring a panoramic camera for shots of the Sangre de Cristo and Sandia Mountains. Alternatively, take the park’s most popular hike through wooded Frijoles Canyon to Upper Falls. The trail originally went farther to Lower Falls but a recent flood washed out the trail and it is now being reconstructed by park personnel.

On average Santa Fe enjoys 283 sunny days each year. To a great extent, altitude controls the hiking environment. A warm, snowless winter day at 7,000 feet will transition to a chilly, deep snow day at 10,000 feet. Altitude acclimatization and hydration are the watchwords of hiking at altitude. Elevation affects the degree of difficulty of a hike. Higher altitudes equal lower atmospheric pressure which creates thin air. Simply put, if you come to Santa Fe from a sea-level environment, the effort to pull oxygen into your lungs on Day One as you attempt to climb to 8, 9 or 10,000 feet will cause you to feel really bad. You’ll need at least a couple of days to partially acclimate to the thin air. And when folks tell you to “drink lots of water,” they mean it. The altitude and the low level of humidity will suck water out of your body faster than you can replenish unless you do. In fact, start drinking more water before you begin your trip. It will help you get in the groove.

When John Baxter, now an emeritus member, came to Santa Fe in 1969 after a ranching career in Colorado and Montana, he found Santa Fe to be “one of the most interesting parts of the country that I didn’t know much about.” Enrolling in various collegiate courses, he ultimately received his PhD in History of the Southwest and spent years consulting with lawyers litigating water rights issues who

needed to be educated as to the historical context. John began hiking with SFCMS in 1987 and became a member in 1989. Still hiking with the group, at 89 John loves the “spirit of camaraderie. It’s a weekly event that every member who is in town is required to attend and there is a great esprit de corps.”

Symphony conductor Bernard Rubenstein first came to Santa Fe in the early 60’s as music director of the city’s symphony. Professional activities took him to Europe, “but we always returned to Santa Fe because of its beauty and warmth,” said Rubenstein. “I started hiking with the club through my association with professional harpist Roz Simpson, who invited me as her guest. I was hooked! I thought I knew most of the local hiking trails but have been awed by the collective knowledge of our club members,” he said. Bernie enjoys hiking the Kitchen Mesa trail at Ghost Ranch “because of its short challenging stretch up the narrow slot to the cliffs.” The hike offers striking vistas, interesting geological features, and the best display of red rock in northern New Mexico.

Shana Gunn came to Santa Fe in 1977 and began hiking with SFCMS in 1986. “Jack Masters had died several years before that, so I never did actually meet him, but his legend and lore was still very much alive at the time that I joined the group. My most memorable hike was sometime in the 90’s when we got lost in the Pecos on Grass Mountain and did not emerge until nine or ten in the evening. No GPS, of course, only a compass (which we were all obligated to carry per Jack Masters) and the wisdom of oldtimers who knew how to use one, and familiarity with the terrain which allowed us to find our way and walk out following the Mora River.” Shana observed that she saw and experienced places “accessible only by making the trek” and gained “great accomplishment and pleasure to have done so.”

Judy Costlow came to New Mexico following Peace Corps duty in Bolivia. She has lived in Santa Fe for forty-five years and followed her husband into membership in 2010 when he transitioned to emeritus status. Judy recalls her climb of Lake Peak to a summit of 12,409 feet, but the one trail that stands out from all the others is the Las Luz Trail in the Sandia Mountains in Albuquerque. “We would hike up and take the tram down. And it is gorgeous. Rising almost 4,000 feet, the ecosystem is constantly changing. We tried it many times. One time the wind was blowing so hard, they closed the tram at the top. Another time they failed to tell us the tram was closed for repairs. Since we are an older group, 15 miles round trip is too much. I love that hike!”

The SFCMS has existed since 1971 and retains much of its original ethos. As Judy said: “I think we have kept the spark of the group over the years. Everyone is happy to be outside enjoying our beautiful New Mexico. We have new members, but all seem to embody the Chili spirit. We don’t hike as far as we used to, but the spirit remains!”

“The chili after the hike is particularly interesting because, like the hikes themselves, no two chili recipes are the same,” reported former chairman Alan Pearlman who joined the group in 2003. “The chili variations are great, ranging from green chili stew with pork and potatoes to a Texas chili with no beans. And a dozen or more variations in between,” he said. The serving of the chili by the hike leader is the crowning moment at the end of a winter’s day hike when steaming chili is enjoyed by all. And to the hike leader goes a salute: “Hip Hip Hooray!”

If you’d like a primer on hiking in the Santa Fe area, check out *Day Hikes in the Santa Fe Area* (various editions), published by the Santa Fe Group of the Sierra Club and *Best Easy Day Hikes: Santa Fe* by Linda Regnier and Hope di Paolo.

Southwestern Chili

Olive oil

1-1/2 lbs raw skinless turkey or chicken breast cut into 1-inch cubes

1-1/2 cups chopped onions

1-1/2 cups chopped green or mixed colors peppers

4 cloves garlic, crushed

4 (14-1/2 oz) cans of no-salt-added stewed tomatoes

2 (15 oz) cans of black beans, drained and rinsed

8-ounce can frozen chopped green chiles undrained

1 (6 oz) can of tomato paste

1 (1-1/2 oz) package of chili seasoning mix

2/3 cup of water

1/2 cup of chopped cilantro

1 tablespoon of seeded and diced jalapeno pepper

1 tablespoon of lemon juice

1 teaspoon ground cumin

1/4 teaspoon of ground cloves

Coat a Dutch oven with olive oil, place over medium high heat til hot. Add turkey or chicken and next three ingredients; saute until meat is cooked. Stir in stewed tomatoes and remaining ingredients. Simmer over low heat for 1 hour, stirring occasionally. Yield 10 servings (267 calories per 1-1/2 cup serving)

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