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Hiking In My Dad's Hundred-Year-Old Bootprints

Story by Gail Galbraith Everett

Over a hundred years ago, at age 28, my dad raced to the summit of Mount Baker and back to win the 1911 Mount Baker Marathon, considered America's first mountain endurance race. On an October day in 2015, with my 80th birthday looming, I hoped to honor his memory by hiking a portion of the trail he ran.

My sisters and I grew up with Dad's stories about "The Great Mount Baker Race." His grueling adventure began in Bellingham, Washington, with a midnight ride in an open, stripped-down Model T Ford. At terrifying speeds - up to fifty miles per hour - his driver careened twenty-seven miles up a rocky, rutted road, often plowing through deep mud. From the trailhead, Dad ran thirty-two miles to the summit and back. To surmount the glacier before the morning sun began to melt the ice, racers ran in darkness. Long before the days of LED flashlights, my dad carried a "bug," a Crisco can with a candle poked through.

When the 100-year anniversary of the race inspired an Emmy-nominated documentary, I remembered that I'd

often dreamed of hiking along the route of Dad's triumphal run.

For me the time was right. I'd been feeling my age, struggling with regrets and unfulfilled goals. It was time to prove to myself once again that it's never too late for an adventure. With our friend and guide, Dan Probst, and my daughter, Natalie, I planned to hike up to the meadows at Mazama Park, under the Easton Glacier. It would be six miles up and back with an elevation gain of more than 2,000 feet.

Unfortunately, when *The Mountain Runners* documentary came out in 2012, what is now the Ridley Creek Trail was blocked with massive evergreens that had uprooted and crashed down the mountainside. Inspired by the film and his experience at Italy's 200-mile Tor des Geants race, ultra-marathoner Probst began to dream of reviving the 1911 race as a 108-mile run from Bellingham to the Mount Baker summit and back.

He organized volunteers to reopen the trail and made partnerships with the Forest Service and Washington Trails Association. The route now lies within the Mt. Baker Wilderness Area where the

use of chainsaws is restricted. The maze of fallen trees had to be cut by hand with crosscut saws.

Once the trail was cleared, Dan had invited us to hike it with him. So here we were. Our adventure began on a cloudy mid-morning in October. After we left the car at the trailhead and headed through the woods to the Nooksack riverbed, mists cleared long enough to unveil the snowy summit of Mount Baker. Below it ran the steep ridge where our route would ascend up to the meadows.

Looks pretty steep, I was thinking. At that moment a bald eagle left a towering fir tree and soared toward the mountain. I love eagles. A poster on my bedroom wall reads: "Even the youth will faint and grow weary...but they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up on wings as eagles."

I would tackle that mountain.

Back to reality. I'd forgotten to bring gloves, and already my hands were freezing. My daughter, a preparedness zealot who before our every hike holds an argument with me about supplies per the

Photos by John D'Onofrio

Mountaineer's "Ten Essentials," dug into her pack and pulled out long red gloves that she'd packed for emergencies (those scarlet gloves, of course, dominated the photo Dan later posted on my Facebook page). That, I hope, will teach me to bring my own gloves next time.

I faced our first challenge - crossing the river. A narrow log hewn flat by the Forest Service spanned the river in front of



Gail on the trail
Photo by Dan Probst

us. I took a deep breath and stepped up, grabbing the rope handrail that stretched shoulder-height beside the log. I planted one foot in front of the other, not daring to look down at the river crashing and foaming over rocks as it rushed down from the glacier.

I climbed down from the bridge, first hazard overcome. The track began to climb, gently at first then steep and twisting. Where my

dad had run; I plodded along, treading carefully in spots where mud lingered from fall rains. To keep from slipping, I grabbed at roots of fallen trees along the path.

My boots began to rub against my ankle bones. I couldn't admit to Natalie that I'd forgotten to bring moleskin. And brisk breezes from the snowy heights made me wish I'd worn a warmer turtleneck under my blue fleece vest. Determined to just keep moving, I ignored these minor discomforts and forged on.

As we paused to look at 500-year-old cedars, Dan pointed out blazes on the tall hemlocks, made by the men who built the trail. These blazes would have been fresh when my Dad ran the first Mount Baker Marathon.

Breathing heavily, I half-listened as Dan told Natalie about his efforts to make the "Mt. Baker Ultramarathon" a yearly event.

Last summer he and three other members of his Cascade Mountain Runners club sped along this path during a 40-hour run from Bellingham Bay to the summit of Mount Baker and back. (See "Bellingham Bay to Baker - and Back" by Suzanne Lundberg, *Adventures NW*, Fall 2015.) Those robust souls ran all that way; our dad ran thirty-two miles, I reminded myself. I can do this.

Dan was the ideal guide. Ever watchful, where the trail was steepest, or where I had to step on slippery rocks to cross small streams from the melting glacier, he subtly reached out a hand, graciously keeping pace with a lady old enough to be his grandmother.

We'd been planning this hike for months, hindered by blistering hot days, followed by September rains. So when we



Joe Galbraith
Photo courtesy of Gail Galbraith-Everett

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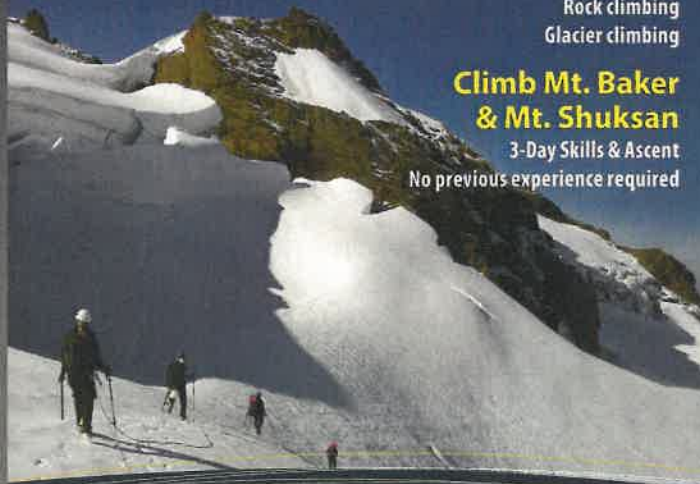
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