

# The longest journey

*Decatur alumni hike from Mexico to Canada*



Photo courtesy of Will Wynne

Jackson (right) and Will (left) on Forester Pass in the High Sierras. “The High Sierras were physically the hardest part,” Will said. “There was just so much snow.”

BY CLAIRE GOLDMAN

Mount Whitney stands 14,505 feet tall, reaching higher than any other peak in the 48 connecting states. The mountain is icy and bitterly cold year-round. On June 3, Decatur alumni Luke Jackson and Will Wynne sat huddled in a hut at the peak.

“It was really sketchy since there was so much snow,” Luke said. “We didn’t have any of the right equipment. Neither of us could sleep, but it was really cool to think we were at a higher elevation than anyone else in the continental U.S.”

Luke and Will had reached the end of day 25 of their hike up the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT), which stretches 2,650 miles from the Mexican to Canadian borders. Mount Whitney marks mile 767.

The trail, second longest in the U.S., cuts through California, Oregon and Washington.

The two have hiked together in the past, spending up to a week hiking the Appalachian Trail. On those hikes the idea of hiking the PCT formed. They had introduced the idea more than a year in advance, Will’s father, Frank Wynne, said.

“We met some really cool thru-hikers, and they told us about the PCT,” Will said.

“I talked to Luke, and the time just seemed right.”

Most thru-hikers, people who hike the trail end-to-end, spend about five months on the trail, but Luke and Will only had 100 days before school started in the fall.

Only 2 percent of hikers complete the trek in the time the pair had allotted, according to the Friends of the PCT website, so they only planned to hike as far as they could.

“When they brought it up, I didn’t think they’d make it,” Frank said. “I thought they’d get through the desert, get into the mountains, and call and say, ‘we’re tired, we’re behind schedule, come pick us up.’”

The pair knew they would face not only physical challenges but mental difficulties as well. As they began to hike from the Mexican border, they realized the idea of walking across a continent was not as scary as actually doing it.

“Staying mentally focused [was the hardest part], knowing 2,500 miles are ahead of you,” Luke said. “It’s hard to wake up, hike all day and do it again.”

The first week pushed the two mentally. After putting miles behind them, they acclimated to trail life and trail culture.

“All thru-hikers are pretty interesting,”

Luke said. “Maybe they’re a little weird, but you get to hear their backstories, and you feel like you’ve known them forever.”

The pair would hear the stories of the other thru-hikers, but not always names. After hiking long enough, most hikers take “trail names,” Luke said.

The name sticks, whether they’re hiking the PCT or another trail.

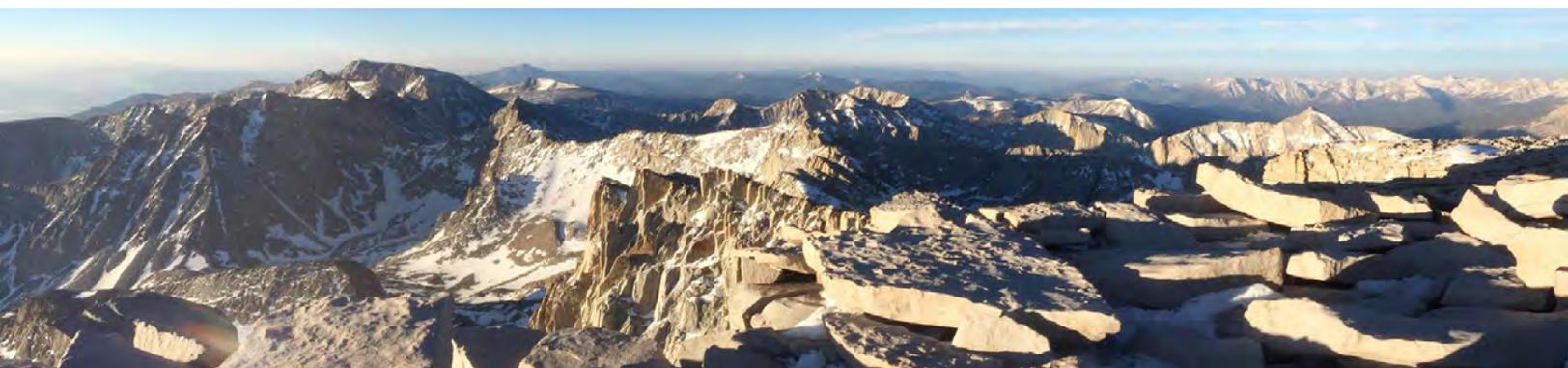
Luke became “Vulture” because of his habit of scavenging through hiker boxes, posts where hikers leave gifts for each other along the trail.

After reaching a town in Southern California, Will was dubbed “Melonhead.” The two were craving watermelon, so they bought one and ate it in a single sitting. After finishing, Will made a bet.

“I don’t remember what the odds were,” Luke said. “Maybe one in five or one in ten. But he lost, and he had to walk around town with half a watermelon on his head like a hat.”

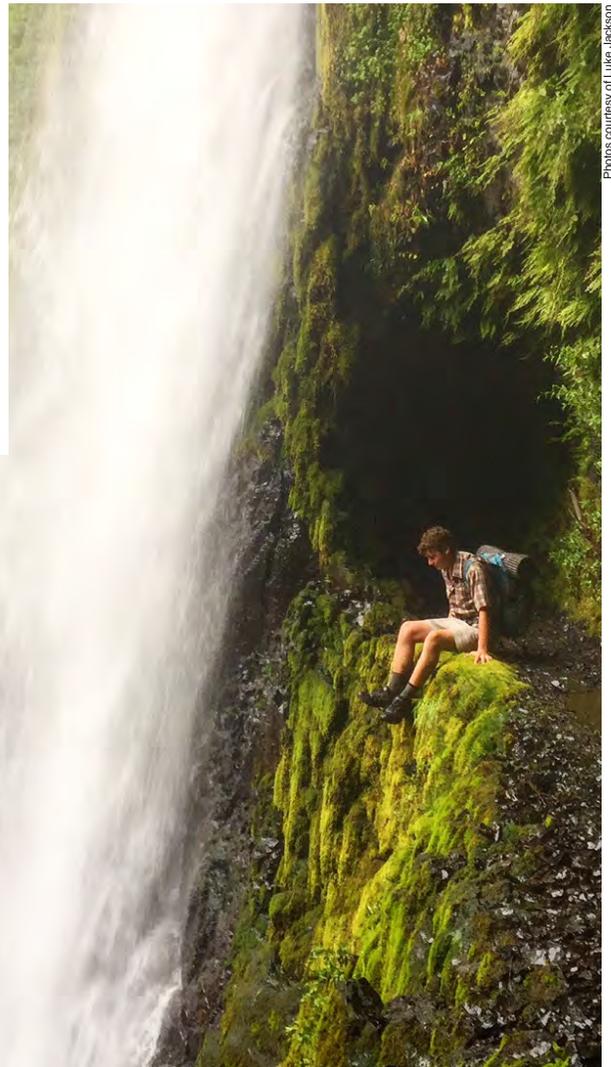
The pair worked their way north, reaching the halfway point in Northern California after 49 days. It was there they decided to pick up the pace and try to finish within their goal time.

“We thought it would be a letdown if we didn’t finish,” Luke said. “There were a lot of,





Above: Jackson and Wynne sit atop Eagle Rock near San Diego on May 14. Right: Wynne sits beneath Tunnel Falls in northern Oregon, just short of the Washington border. Below: The view from Mount Whitney's peak, the highest point in the lower 48 states. The hut where Jackson and Wynne spent the night is visible in the background.



Photos courtesy of Luke Jackson

you could call them haters I guess, who said we couldn't finish. We wanted to disprove them."

They began to increase speed, averaging 30 miles a day, sometimes pushing past 40. Though the trip became increasingly difficult, they knew others had it worse.

"Hiking alone gets lonely," Will said. "This way, you have someone to share the experience with."

On day 60, they crossed from California into Oregon, and on day 73, into Washington.

As they walked, Luke and Will both recorded their adventure; Luke keeping an Instagram account and Will writing a blog.

"We knew we'd be seeing things we'd never seen before," Luke said. "The Appalachian [Trail] looks the same most of the way, but the PCT is way more beautiful, and there are so many different landscapes."

One particular view stayed with Luke.

"In Goat Rocks, Washington, you were up on a ridge, and you could look down, and in the valley there was a herd of maybe eight or nine goats playing together," he said.

Then, on the rainy afternoon of day 89, the two reached the Canadian border.

"It was really anticlimactic," Will said. "It was cold. We were just like, 'wow, we actually did it,' and then turned around and set up camp."

Both Luke and Will said their experience "was about the journey, not the destination."



"It changed my values," Will said. "After being out in nature that long, a lot of stuff doesn't seem so important. You stop caring about what people think of you. You stop caring about classes or stress."

Luke agrees that since he's been back, he cares less about all of the little things.

"The trail teaches you what you need and don't need," Luke said. "You learn what you are capable of."

Both are back in college, and they share the same complaint: they're tired of sitting still.

Everyday life makes them too claustrophobic, and they have too much energy for

sitting in class. Both say they have become "increasingly fidgety."

According to Robert Moor, author of "On Trails," these complaints are common among hikers. For a long time after they finish, thru-hikers will feel restless. Often, these hikers return to the trails again and again.

Luke already wants to go back.

"It'd be cool to be a triple crowner, to have hiked the PCT, the Appalachian and the Continental Divide Trails," he said.

It seems the PCT is calling the duo to lace up their hiking boots again. ■

