

# From Sunrise to Sunset - Jesse Whitecrow Walks Across America

By Scott Laird

Jesse Whitecrow has been walking for a long time. A really long time.

Whitecrow has been walking across the United States for three years. He has covered approximately 8,000 miles. At the end of January he had an extended stay in Vernonia as he approached the last month of his trip where I met him and heard first-hand about his adventures.

"I have been planning this since I was six years old," Whitecrow told me. "I was abused as a child. I never had any toys. But I did have a map of the United States over my bed. I dreamed of going where I would be wanted."

Whitecrow began his journey at Cadillac Mountain in Acadia National Park in Maine, the extreme most eastern point in the lower forty-eight states. "It's the first place the sun touches when it rises," explained Whitecrow. "And I plan to finish at Cape Flattery, Washington, the furthest most western point, the last place the sun touches when it sets." He hopes to finish his walk in early March.

Whitecrow met Vernonia resident Rhonda Isakson outside the Sentry market on a cold rainy afternoon in January. "He had this huge pack, so I asked him where he was walking to," said Isakson. "He told me his story, including a rough stretch of travel leading into Vernonia. We offered him a place to spend the night. And our kids, Evelyn and Ian, just fell in love with him."

The next few days brought inches of snow each day, so Whitecrow made it an impromptu layover that lasted six days. "I am just using this as a chance to re-energize," he said. "The Isaksons have been so gracious in allowing me to stay."

Whitecrow spent part of his early life in the military as a paratrooper where he learned survival skills that have been very useful during his sojourn. He has also worked in construction, as a college instructor and as a glass sculptor. "All of my training in life has been preparing me for this journey."

Whitecrow's trip is a journey of self-exploration. When he turned forty in 2003, he realized the time was

now or never to live his lifelong dream. "I began to realize what was really important to me. I started looking at the bigger picture. And the call to do this trip became more pronounced. I wanted to sincerely be who I am," Whitecrow said.

Whitecrow carries an eighty pound pack with all his belongings and walks an average of twenty miles a day. He camps "99% of the time," and mostly lives off the land. He bought his twenty-eighth pair of boots during his stop in Vernonia. He has been receiving regular shipments of pre-bought gear through the mail from a friend in Minnesota.

Whitecrow is planning to write a book about his trip when he is finished, but he was still willing to share some of his experiences. He has faced extreme hostility, from being shot at in New Mexico, "Thirteen rounds through my tent while I was in it," to amazing acts of kindness. "I had poor immigrant families in the Southwest, who hardly spoke English, who know about traveling, about being on the road, come out and give me handfuls of quarters. These were people who know what it's like to not be wanted."

Whitecrow talked about living off the land and living in the wild. "Going over Chief Joseph Pass at the border of Idaho and Montana was amazing," he said. "There were wolves, bears, coyotes. I've had my food sack mauled a number of times. I've had gators in my tent down south. It's rough sometimes, having to build a fire so you can cook, sleeping on top of snow. But

through it all I have never once thought about quitting." Whitecrow has collected a memento of his trip, a necklace made from elk ivories taken from six dead elk he found along the way.

The Rocky Mountains held another highlight. "I originally dreamed this adventure as a hot air balloon trip across America," explained Whitecrow. "That obviously didn't happen. But in the Rockies I came across a hot air balloon festival that was just setting up. They adopted me for the weekend, and I got to spend the entire time flying over the mountains. So I got to live that part of my dream."

He also had some interesting inner city experiences. "I received respect from people who don't respect anything. I was in a bad city neighborhood and this black SUV rolled up, tinted windows, bass music pounding. And I thought, 'This isn't going to be good'. As the windows went down, I was worried. The guy in the passenger seat said, 'Aren't you that guy

that's walking across the U.S.? I thought that was you! I saw you on TV!' They offered me food, money, wanted to know if I needed anything."

As Whitecrow was reaching the end of his journey, he reflected on his motivation for this undertaking and whether he had accomplished his goals. "I set out to find out more about who I am. This was an internal search, an affirmation of my strengths. As I'm finishing, I know I am not ready to be done yet. I don't have all the answers to all the questions I started with. But hopefully those will come during this last stretch."

"What I do have is that I am a man who has lived a dream."



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Vernonia 2020 is a partnership between the City of Vernonia and Bridges Planning, a team of 9 graduate students from Portland State University.



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