

Mountains of the moon

Nothing ordinary about traverse of Idaho's Great Rift

By Steve Crump
Times-News writer

ALONG THE GREAT RIFT — Submitted for your approval, Ryan Walz, John Walz, Mike Jensen.

Three Idahoans on an early-May hike within 90 minutes of their Pocatello homes. All are experienced outdoorsmen, all know the desert well and all have been in trackless wilderness many times before.

But this Saturday is different, for the Walzes — father and son — are adrift with Jensen in a sea of shimmering rock where the point of the compass takes a man where he doesn't want to go.

Welcome to a familiar world with an alien leer, where shadow crowds substance and things are rarely all they seem.

There's a signpost up ahead, but it's too late for the Walzes and Jensen. They've long since crossed over into the rift zone.

Amazingly, it had never been done before. Maybe nobody wanted to.

Never had anyone walked the 62 miles from the visitors' center at Craters of the Moon National Monument to the moonscape a half dozen miles east of Mindoka known locally as Higgins Blowout.

In between lies the Great Rift, a nasty scar on Idaho's chin.

Two-hundred fifty years ago, a hiccup in geologic time, the rift was oozing lava and belching steam; 2,500 years ago, it was sending 30-mile rivers of molten rock rolling toward the terrified families of Indians huddling in isolated caves.

Now the rift lies, half-healed, within 50 miles of 135,000 people, within 75 miles of 240,000. Most of them have never heard of it.

Those who have know it only as the dull part of Craters of the Moon, where the raven-black obsidian gives way to sagebrush and gopher snakes and the Star Wars vista melts away to the ordinary. But a few people, like the Walzes and Jensen, know it much better.

"The stars at night are indescribable," said Ryan



Top left, Mike Jensen traverses a field of aa lava near Blacktail Butte southeast of Craters of the Moon National Monument. Rope-like aa was formed from thick, slow-moving lava that hardened into rough irregular mounds. Top right, Mike Jensen, left, and John Walz rest their feet near Crystal Ice Caves, which lie near the southern end of the Great Rift.



Waltz, a 49-year-old right-of-way supervisor for the Idaho Transportation Department in Pocatello. "When you're out there it seems like there are more stars than there is space between them. The coyotes serenade you at night too. It's really beautiful."

The National Park Service said no.

"They're going to hike in an area more remote and rugged in comparison to other wilderness areas," Bruce Edmonston, chief ranger at Craters, told The Associated Press before the trip. "Compasses can't be trusted on the lava flows and in the summer, there is no water, no shade and no shelter."

John Walz, a 24-year-old geology major on hiatus from Idaho State University, and Jensen, a 25-year-old graduate student in psychology at ISU, had discovered the rift years before, and along with it their passion for spelunking, rappelling and rock climbing. But the Park Service, which has jurisdiction over the northern end of

the rift, doesn't want civilians getting into trouble, so it severely limits access to the rift from the monument's southern boundary.

"You could probably count on one hand the number of people who have tried to do this hike," Edmonston said.

"We had to talk them into it," John Walz said. "They knew us, because we had been in the monument so many times, and we had a series of meetings before they gave us approval."

"It's one hell of a hike," said Scott Iex, a Boise businessman who serves as director of the privately funded Craters of the Moon-Great Rift Project. "If I had done it, I would have gone and got a corporate sponsor."

That's sort of what Robert Linhart did in 1923, when he limped the southernmost 28 miles of the rift and lived to tell his story to National Geographic.

His account was a harrowing one, including a three-

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Rift

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day march through rugged, often razor-sharp "aa" lava during which Limbert couldn't even find a smooth place to lie down.

"Limbert was a great storyteller who could tell the same story 12 times and make it more interesting each time," Jex said.

But Limbert's yarn captured the nation's attention, and that of Idaho's powerful Republican senator, William Borah. A year later, President Coolidge signed the bill creating the national monument at Craters of the Moon.

But except for a few geologists, the rift to the south received little attention. In 1952, a couple of cavers chanced upon a huge subterranean ice cave in King's Bowl, a large lava flow near the southern end of the rift, and later a businessman drilled a hole and briefly operated Crystal Ice Cave commercially.

The Apollo astronauts did some highly publicized training in the monument and along the rift to prepare them for working on a hot, lunar-like surface, but the southernmost 40 miles of the rift has largely been left in the same splendid isolation in which Limbert found it.

"It's probably the cleanest wilderness environment in southern Idaho," said Jex, who grew up in nearby Blackfoot and provided the rift's periphery as a youngster. "If you like deserts, you love the rift."

But you really have to like deserts. Thirty-six hours after the Walzes and Jensen set out from the monument, some 25 miles along the rift, Ryan Walz started feeling a

little nauseated.

By morning, as the air temperature climbed past 90 degrees and the three descended a lava flow colored brilliant blue by titanium in the rock, the elder Walz stopped sweating, began shivering and started vomiting.

"I was pretty panicked," he said. "And starting to get disoriented."

He could have picked a better place for heat exhaustion. The party was five miles away from one of the five places where it had cached water last summer — in this case, an emergency airstrip on the eastern edge of the lava flows. Out on the metal-rich rock, compasses lie by 10 and 15 degrees, and when the terrain took the hikers into swales, they had no way to navigate because they couldn't see their landmarks.

"It's like being lost in a heavy sea," John Walz said.

Two or three miles short of the airstrip, the water ran out, and John Walz and Jensen had to keep the elder Walz cool by splashing melt water left in crevices. They tried making him drink some of the canned pineapple juice Jensen was carrying in his pack, but Ryan couldn't keep it down.

"When they finally got me to the airstrip, they built a lean-to and as soon as I cooled down a little, I started to feel better," he said.

Then the younger Walz used his father's walkie-talkie to call for help.

"We were hooked into the (Transportation Department) repeaters, which are UHF radios that operate on line-of-sight," Ryan Walz said. "But the repeater on East Butte was blocked by Southern Butte and

we couldn't raise the repeater on Chink's Peak (a mountain southeast of Pocatello). The only thing we could raise was the Burley-Cottrell repeater."

Fortunately for Walz, Fred Stechelein happened to be working in the Transportation Department's District 4 shop in Shoshone that Saturday and heard their call for help over the radio.

Stechelein phoned John's wife, Jodi, in Pocatello, and kept in contact with the hikers until Jodi and her brother, Casey Thompson, reached the airstrip by 4-wheel drive later Saturday.

"I would guess it was over 100 degrees on the rocks and there wasn't any wind," Ryan Walz said. "If there hadn't been snow and ice in the cracks and crevices, we would have been in real trouble."

John Walz and Jensen continued their march southward — gingerly.

"The first day, you get heat blisters," Walz said. "Then you walk on them the next day, and they keep getting worse and worse."

They reached Crystal Ice Cave, and beyond it, the huge Wapi Flow crowned by Old Juniper Kipuka, a 100-foot cinder cone surrounded by junipers. One is 650 years old — probably the oldest living thing in Idaho — and its trunk 11 feet in circumference.

"I took a picture of it in the distance, but I wasn't going to do any more walking than necessary," he said.

It was an eight-hour walk across the Wapi Flow and its sizzling surface into the history books. Finally, five days after it began, the

first ever north-to-south traverse of Idaho's Great Rift ended with a long pull on a jug of lemonade.

"My dad and my wife met us at the south end," John Walz said. "We were real glad to see them."

Next up for the younger Walz: a hike over Iceland's 100-mile volcanic rift, which is even younger than Idaho's.

"But not for a while," he said.

"I'll go back to the rift, but probably not to walk the whole thing," the elder Walz said. "After all, I am 49 years old."

"It's the one area of Idaho that's probably not going to be much different 50 years from now," Jex said. "Even if Craters is made a park, the traffic isn't going to come from the south. You can get people to leave the interstate to look at one lava flow, but you're not going to get them to drive three hours out of their way to see another one."

"You know, at one time there was some talk of running a highway right down the rift so people wouldn't even have to get out of their cars," he said.

John Walz has been that way on foot, an excruciating journey redeemed by vast fields of wildflowers and stars, of antelope playing in a moonscape and of life where it has no right to be, of cobalt-blue rocks glistening so brightly that they hurt your eyes, and of the odd B-1B bomber.

"The Air Force practices low-level flights over the rift," he said. "Scared the hell out of us."

Consider if you will: one more ordinary day ... in the rift zone.

Spotlight

Continued from C2

development and family relations and the daughter of Michael and

one of 15 French instructors from throughout the United States to participate in a summer seminar

at the National



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