



## The Walkers of ----.

by Ron Singer

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That summer, in the hamlet of ----, Maine, people took to walking the roads. This development was occasioned by a meeting at the town hall, a building dating back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the hamlet still was a town. As for the “meeting,” it was actually a presentation. Sponsored by the State Department of Health, it began with a graphic depiction of the woes of obesity, which had reached epidemic proportions in many parts of the state. The problem was particularly acute in rural areas such as ----, where, especially for women, the long winter days were filled with eating and inactivity.

The power-point presentation was slick and alarming. First came statistics, in the form of simple, very clear graphs. Next were blown-up shock photos of naked people, front and side views like mug shots, with weights listed, up to six-hundred pounds apiece. Each photo was accompanied by a projection of the person’s alarming medical chart; there were even a few death certificates. (Names, of course, had been deleted.) Finally, there was another chart, this one listing exercise options, along with their very dramatic ostensible benefits. By organizing the presentations for early summer, the planners calculated that the recommended regimens, principally outdoor walking or jogging in hamlets like ----, where there were no gyms or health clubs, could gather momentum before the onset of the long, cold, dark winter put all good resolutions to the test.

Initially, at least, the walkers of ---- were mostly women. Within weeks, walking became a fad, partly because there were so few recreational alternatives, even in summer. These women only went to the lake on weekends, when their husbands were free and willing to join them. Nor were they part of the tennis-playing set, almost all of whom were summerfolk with cottages on the lake. Over early morning phone calls, the walkers would set the day’s itinerary and decide where to meet. They walked mostly in pairs, looping from one of the four roads that passed through the center of the hamlet to one of the others. They planned each route to meet their daily quota, which ranged from two to six miles (the range recommended by the Department of Health’s –female—spokesperson). They also chose different routes from day to day, a recommended antidote to monotony. A plus-factor which needed no official recommendation was that, whichever route the women took, the views were spectacular: rolling fields and dark woods against a backdrop of shapely mid-sized mountains.

Mostly large, many of the walkers sported brand new jogging suits, either navy, gray, or pink or green pastel. Cheap new walking or running shoes completed these outfits, which were purchased at the ---- outlet or at the sole surviving dry goods store, both in the nearby resort town of ----, a forty-minute drive from ----. The women would have made this weekly drive, anyway, to do their grocery shopping. An ancillary effect of the town hall presentation was that the shoppers now bought somewhat more fruits and vegetables than before, and somewhat less processed food, full of sugar, salt, and saturated fats. But the shift was a modest one, owing to the escalating cost of produce.

As the women pumped their arms and legs up and down the four steep, winding roads, their men folk would emerge from the bowels of shops, or pause in their lawn-mowing or weeding operations, to watch the walkers go by. It was a significant event for the husbands, too. Jokes soon sprang up like weeds, many involving yoked pairs of oxen or work horses, in fact only a memory in ----, now

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that almost all of the farms had been sold off, and the land had either reverted to marketable timber or been sub-divided into lots for new houses. Few of the men, however, were reckless enough to retail these animal jokes to their own wives, let alone to other women. The jokes metastasized mainly at the garage, where most of the men bought gasoline for their cars, trucks, backhoes and other small appliances. (The thrifty ones had their wives gas up in ----, to save a few cents on the gallon.) The other center for male gossip and jokes was the general store, where the men gathered over morning coffee or to purchase their evening six-packs. It was not lost on some of the more open-minded men that the jokes were mostly sour grapes, because, health-wise, their women were already leaving them in the figurative dust.

Early one morning, when a carpenter with a formidable front porch retailed one of the jokes to Fred, the garage owner, who was strongly built, but with a considerable barrel of his own, the latter replied with a shrug and a smile, "Well, Tommy, no disrespect, but my Marie looks a lot less like an ox or a horse than I do --or you, for that matter!" Tom had no choice but to laugh and shut up.

Fred's wife, Marie, was half of a walking tandem with the proprietor of the bake shop, Jessie. They would begin their ninety-minute walk at six a.m. every morning, by which time Jessie already had the day's baking under control. From seven, when the bake shop opened, until eight, few enough customers showed up that they could be handled by Proctor, Jessie's husband. Proctor was a genial, super-patriotic, disabled Viet Nam war vet who now served as his wife's factotum. The early hour also left time for Marie to go home to shower before beginning her workday as mail deliverer to the hamlet and environs. This job occasioned only the minimal exertion of driving her own pick-up truck around the four roads and getting in and out to deliver and retrieve the mail at the roadside boxes.

As it happened, just as the conversation between the garage owner and the carpenter was taking place at the gas pumps, Jessie, a large, strong woman, and Marie, a short, compact one who had no intention of becoming "a fat slob," popped up the hill and quick-marched past the garage. Fred and his wife waved to each other and exchanged smiles, and Jessie called out breathlessly, "Hey, Tom! Fred! You guys should join us!" And she cupped her hand to mime the outline of a big gut.

"That's okay, thanks, Jess," laughed Fred. "We'd just slow you down." And with that the two women, whose contrasting heights were also a subject of mirth, pulled themselves over the prow of the hill and disappeared.

The gas pumping proceeded in silence until, as Tom's credit card was being processed, Fred returned to the subject. "I'd better warn you, Tommy, one of these mornings, Marie is going to have me out on the road there with her. And I'll be counting on you, in particular, to keep the jokes from getting out of hand." Tom smiled, signed, took his receipt, and drove off without further comment.

Sure enough, within another week, Marie and Fred had formed the first mixed-gender walking tandem in ----. The couple was better matched in size than Marie and Jessie, with whom, to Fred's relief, his wife still walked every other day. To preserve his tattered dignity, he refused to wear the new pastel-green jogging suit Marie had bought for him, decking himself out, instead, in an old pair of gray sweat pants, an also-old blue t-shirt, and the same pair of jogging shoes that he wore around the house. Luckily, Marie was able to return the pastel outfit and get her money back. By Fred's third morning walk, it had not gone unnoticed by every wag in the hamlet that his face, as he passed, was brick red and

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drenched in sweat. In contrast, Marie was fit enough, by now, and her husband, slow enough, that she showed virtually no signs of exertion. Not even her make-up was affected.

That morning, the weather was beautiful --clear and cool for August, with an unbroken blue sky-- what Mainers refer to as "weather like it used to be." As they passed the garage, where young Chris, a student at a nearby branch of the state university, was manning the pumps, Fred wore a small, stoic grimace, and his sharp, pale-blue eyes scrutinized his employee for signs of levity. Luckily for Chris, he apparently had his feelings well under control. Besides, he prided himself on his own fitness regimen, which was another reason not to scoff at his boss's belated efforts.

As Fred and Marie chugged past the garage, there was a deafening roar. Suddenly, a gaggle of motorcyclists, riding Japanese bikes and sporting full Harley regalia, flew around the bend at the crest of the hill and accelerated straight down toward the walkers. As they sped toward the crossroads, the eight bikers were undoubtedly hoping to impress any bystanders. In libertarian Maine, the fact that none of them wore headgear, other than colorful bandannas, did not break the law. One reason the bikers did not slacken their speed was that, ten minutes before, a few miles back east, they had spotted the county sheriff. The blue light on his car had alerted them, and, as they slowed down, they could see that he was absorbed in measurements at the spot on the road where, as everyone knew, a hapless driver had collided with a moose the night before.

As they crested the hill, the bikers followed the contour of the road by swerving left, which carried them directly toward the huffing garage owner and his wife. Spotting the couple just in time, the riders veered back to the right, and, following their leader, they all missed Fred and Marie by at least a foot.

"Slow down, you young fools!" Fred shouted after them. This prompted a hail of laughter and epithets and several raised over-the-shoulder middle fingers.

"Assholes!" Marie shouted.

"Damn!" Fred added. Then, he thought for a moment. "You know, Marie, I bet those clowns are part of that gang from ---- who've been pestering people around here all summer. Let's run back to the garage and call Al and Bobbie so they can get their plate numbers if they go that way."

A minute later, the call was made. It was answered by Bobbie, who sat with her husband Al on the lawn in front of their large, ship-shape double trailer, which had been bought fifteen years before with some of the money from the sale of Al's family farm. The trailer stood back from the road that led south out of the hamlet. In fact, Al and Bobbie lived not in ----, but in ----, the adjacent hamlet along the highway, which caused no end of annoying Post Office mishaps.

Al was retired from the State Highway department, where he had been the foreman of a road-repair crew. In addition to her duties as a housewife, Bobbie had worked at a range of menial jobs. They now spent many hours watching traffic along the road, waving to, and honked at by, passing motorists. A birdwatcher, Al was armed, as always, with a pair of powerful binoculars, which he kept on the side table next to his big green Adirondack chair. Closing her cell, Bobbie, in her matching chair, told him what to look out for and borrowed the mechanical pencil and pad he always kept in the breast pocket of his shirt.

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Sure enough, a minute later, the eight bikers roared down the straightaway past the trailer. Al spotted, and Bobbie recorded, two plate numbers. The older couple disliked this generation of bikers, in part because they had, themselves, spent many vacations cruising the highways of New England and beyond on a double Harley with seats like lounge chairs. They had always worn helmets and kept strictly to the speed limits.

Within a few more minutes, Bobbie had called in the two plate numbers to the ---- Department of Public Safety. Within a week, five of the eight miscreants showed up for a bench appearance at District Court, and, depending on prior records, each was fined between one and two hundred dollars for reckless endangerment and gross violation of the speed restrictions of the hamlet of ----. It was estimated that they had roared down the hill past Fred and Marie at 55-to-60 mph in a 20 mph zone. The five miscreants each posted bond to pay their fines, and none of them contested the charges, which would have added court costs when they were found guilty. The three no-shows were soon rounded up, as well. All eight bikers turned out to be local. Most of them were youths who either worked part-time at the mills or were unemployed. The three who had not initially appeared before the judge served a day or two in the county jail, then paid double fines.

Marie had an adage that she trotted out fairly often to divide people like herself and her husband from people like the young motorcycle hooligans: “ants versus grasshoppers.” In front of Fred and Marie’s four-square modern house stood a large, neatly stacked pile of drying, freshly cut firewood, sufficient already for fall and most of winter. In front of the shacks and rusting trailers of the “grasshoppers” were either a few randomly flung sticks or no wood at all.

“Come winter,” she would comment, “those fools will be begging the county for firewood. And we’ll be the ones who pay for it!”

“You betcha,” Fred would reply.

As summer wore on, the cast of walkers in ---- changed. There was, of course, some attrition, indicated by the appearance of practically new sweat suits at yard sales. There were also some new converts, including the husbands of a few of the by-now veterans of the walking corps. But none of the former walkers’ outfits were purchased by the converts; the jokes would have been unbearable. All told, the number of walkers crept up by six or eight, which was not bad considering that the permanent population of ---- (not counting summerfolk) was less than 100.

Since Fred and Marie now walked together daily, Jessie had found herself a new partner, in the form of her old partner, Proctor, whose already massive arms and shoulders enabled him to pretty much keep up in his wheelchair with his wife’s steady pace. On the steepest hills, if no one happened to be around, Jessie would push the chair up to the crest, where, as often as not, Proctor would shout, “Race you to the bottom, Jess!” at which point he would barrel down the hill away from her. Needless to say, as she bounced after him, Jessie’s heart was in her mouth.

In early August, talk about a fund-raiser for the Fire Department surfaced. No

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one knew who had come up with the idea, but it crystallized into an all-comers ten-mile walking race around the hamlet and environs on the Saturday before Labor Day weekend. There would be a low entry fee and small prizes for the top finishers.

Like the Ice Out contest and Fishing Day, a friendly competition between permanent and summer residents was anticipated. A hot topic was whether the fittest of the hamlet's walkers would be able to keep up with the "lakers," some of whom were dedicated joggers, runners, climbers, kayakers or bicyclists. Fred and Marie and a forty-something couple named Price and Juney, who lived just north of town and ran ten serious miles every day, were the principal carriers of the hopes of the year-round residents. Price worked in construction and was rock hard. Juney was a professional fitness freak. Three times a week, she drove to the resort town, where she taught "killer" aerobics classes in a converted garage that was now called a fitness center. As for the other two local hopefuls, by now Fred's barrel was all but gone, and his log-like legs moved up and down the hills like pistons. Marie was Marie.

Proctor had immediately disqualified himself. "It's a *walking* race," he explained with his usual blunt good humor, "not a *rolling* race." Jessie would, of course, participate, but the scuttlebutt was that that she would be lucky to finish in the top twenty.

About two weeks before the big race, Jess and Proctor and Marie and Fred became poster couples for the walking program. On Friday morning, a reporter and a photographer from the paper in a nearby town turned up at dawn, and, getting permission signatures, the reporter interviewed the couples, after which the photographer took numerous shots of them walking (and rolling) the roads of ----, against the backdrop of the mountains. Some of these photos appeared in that Sunday's edition, as part of a full-color four-page spread that was pretty much a free ad for the race. Almost as soon as the paper came out, the four walking heroes' phones began ringing off the hook. Almost all of the calls were encouraging and congratulatory. One was not.

"The next time we see you fuckers out there," a muffled male voice threatened, "you're going to wind up as road kill!" As the phone was slammed down, maniacal laughter could be heard.

"I can guess who that was," Proctor told Fred over post-walking coffee in front of the garage the next morning. "I bet it was one of those young hooligans who almost hit you and Marie last month."

"We should drive over there and have a chat with those boys, Proc," Fred spluttered. "Bring the bats along. maybe take a little practice with their heads."

"Not that I'm against the batting-practice idea," Jessie said to Marie, who was drinking diet soda with her at the bakery later that day, "but I don't want Fred and Proc to wind up in jail, either. I have a better idea." She leaned over and whispered to Marie, who laughed.

The work-week passed, and the race was seven days off. Late Saturday morning, having walked and showered, the two women drove Marie's pick-up over to the mill town of ----. Through the local grapevine, they had already managed to obtain the addresses and phone numbers of four of the eight young

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motorcyclists and their womenfolk (two girlfriends, a wife, and a mother). The boys' fathers were all either absent or dead. Calling ahead, Marie had ascertained that none of the bikers would be at home, either. Luckily, they had all gone off to the big late-summer rally in ----, a motorcycle Mecca fifty miles west.

In the trailers or small houses where they met the four women, over soda and chips that they had picked up on the way, Marie and Jessie wound up having four friendly, conspiratorial conversations. The six women determined that their common goal was to keep their men uninjured and out of jail. The conversations all ended with laughter and hugs.

Race Day dawned bright and cool, yet another example that glorious summer of "weather like it used to be." The day began with coffee and doughnuts provided by the Knitting and Weaving Association, and served on the lawn in front of the old Congregational Church just up the hill from the starting point at the crossroads. At a folding table inside the church's rec hall, older men and women collected the entry fees (\$10) and pinned big number placards to the backs of the entrants' shirts. The church was abuzz with laughter and nervous, good-natured chatter.

When #1 went to the first registrant, an older summer resident who served as recording secretary of the Lake Association, Proctor was heard to comment above the buzz, "Oh, oh, the fix is in!" But when Juney drew #2, people mostly oohed and aahed at her lean, sculpted torso, which was highlighted by a running outfit that looked as if it would not have been out of place on an Olympic sprinter.

There was one big surprise -- to everyone but Jessie and Marie, that is. Paying their money like everyone else, and getting their numbers, were three sinewy young men in denim cut-offs, t-shirts with heavy metal band logos, and flashy new running shoes. All three also sported the familiar black Harley Davidson caps with the orange and white logo. As they stood waiting in a tight group, steaming Styrofoam cups of coffee in their hands, they were joined by Fred and Proctor.

"Well, boys," said Fred, "I'm a little surprised to see you here. But you're welcome, just like everyone else. We folks in ---- are famous for our hospitality."

Proctor wheeled right up to the trio and held out his hand. "No hard feelings, boys," he said. "And may the best man --or woman-- win." Each of the bikers gave him a quick shake. Fred just nodded, his beefy arms crossed.

By the appointed hour, everything was set. Like big-city marathon runners, the fifty-six walkers were all grouped at the starting point, on either side of the World War One memorial plaque at the crossroads. The Grand Marshall of the event, ----'s First Selectman, repeated the rules, demonstrating the difference between legal and illegal gaits and reminding the contestants that there would be monitors along the roads to disqualify any cheaters and to make sure everyone stuck to the assigned route.

"No short cuts through the woods, boys and girls," he admonished. "Are we ready, then?" With a roar from the crowd, they contestants took their marks and were off.

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A little more than an hour later, the spectators at the crossroads saw the lead walker crest the hill from the north. To no one's surprise, it was Juney. But then, perhaps two strides behind her, came the youngest of the bikers, who turned out to be a fitness fanatic, himself, with a black belt in judo. As they came down the hill, he flew past Juney and won the race by a stride. Turning to the crowd, he hesitated for a moment, then performed an effortless back flip followed by a little Japanese bow. After that, the three winners –the judo expert, Juney, and, yes, Fred-- engaged in a group hug. The crowd roared.

This set the tone for the end of the event. There were cool soft drinks for the participants, served under the big maple tree in front of the Historical Society, just below the crossroads. Using a small battery-operated bullhorn, the Grand Marshall announced the results. As he did so, he handed out three red envelopes containing cash in the amounts of \$50, \$25, and \$10 to the first three finishers. Fred drew the loudest cheers and applause. The Marshall then thanked everyone who had supported, or participated in, the event. Since all the food, drink, and other supplies had been donated by various individuals and groups, the Fire Department realized a clear profit of \$475. Perspiring heavily, in full regalia, the Chief graciously accepted the manila envelope full of cash, explaining that it would go directly to the fund for the new engine. After a loud "Hip Hip Hooray," everyone went home.

A week later, summer ended. Most of the lake dwellers closed up their places and went home. Of course, the year-rounders were glad to have their hamlet to themselves again. There was also the usual let-down, but this year it was tempered by two perhaps lasting effects of the walking campaign. The women of the hamlet of ----and the mill town of --- decided to form a friendship society, which would meet bi-monthly at the bowling alley in the town. There were limits to this epidemic of amity, of course. When Marie suggested that Fred invite the judo champ over to --- to hunt deer with him, Fred shrugged and laughed. "Well," he said, "if he wants to do that, he'd better wear a bright red jacket over his black belt."

That September, with no further attrition and with four new recruits and two returns (called "Walk-Agains"), the walkers of ---- continued to greet the dawn on the roads in and out of the hamlet. Now they trudged up and down the steep hills against the backdrop of the gorgeous fall foliage. What might happen when winter dug its teeth and fangs into the hamlet remained to be seen, but there was already talk of snowshoes and cross-country skis. At the garage and general store, in addition to the usual jokes, there were one or two new ones about the physical un-fitness of the snow-mobilers and the "dirty dogs," or ATV riders. But these particular jokes never really caught fire.

In October, the Department of Health announced that personnel would be traveling around the state that winter to weigh volunteer participants in the various local walking programs. Special grants would be made available to those communities that showed the greatest aggregate weight loss. Even before the first walker stepped onto the official scales, the gossips of ---- had spent the grants a hundred times over.

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*Geistmann*, is currently running at [jukepopserials.com](http://jukepopserials.com). He has two volumes of short stories available on Kindle, *Raphael in Brooklyn* and *A Midwest Winter*.

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