

Long ago lesson in welcoming the stranger

I've never worshipped at St. Peter in Hancock, but I have recited plenty of prayers near that Washington County town.

Father Jack Lombardi, pastor of St. Peter, heard this story July 22, when he rode shotgun as we drove the route, from the Baltimore Basilica to the "Rocky" steps at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, we will take on our "Feet for Francis" pilgrimage next month.



In addition to familiar spots in Canada and Europe, Father Jack has gotten out of his comfort zone and led pilgrimages in, or visited, India, Peru, Russia and Tanzania. Australia/Oceania is the only continent I have visited that he has not. He has also never through-hiked the length of the C&O Canal Towpath, which passes less than a quarter-mile to the south of St. Peter Church. I was supposed to, circa 1967, before the well-laid plans of my Boy Scout troop unraveled.

From Georgetown in Washington, D.C., to Cumberland, the towpath snakes 184 miles along the Potomac River. The attempt to hike it over two weeks was a departure for Boy Scout Troop 188, sponsored by St. Rose of Lima Parish in Brooklyn, which usually took summer camp at Broad Creek, in the wilds of Harford County. Starting the Towpath at the western terminus and walking downhill wasn't much help, as thunderstorms, mosquitoes and fatigue conspired to have us pass too many of those mile markers on backroads or Route 40, in the comfort of the down-shifting box truck that was supposed to shepherd supplies, not Scouts, to campsites.



Nearly five decades later, vivid memories of that trip remain.

·No. 1, never attempt to wait out an electrical storm under a railroad trestle. I can still summon the muscle memory of a lightning strike zapping me in the back of my legs. My fellow stragglers and I made double-time, and by the grace of God stumbled upon the campsite that had been made for us.

·No. 2, the waters beneath the Monocacy Viaduct are an inviting place to chill an 8-ounce bottle of Coke.

·No. 3, our adult leaders, most hardened World War II veterans, were softies at heart.

Today, we would call him homeless. Then, he was just a railroad hobo, something straight of a Jimmy Rodgers song. In black pants and white oxford shirt, he came

strolling down a hill from the tracks at dinner time, asking for help. Maybe it was near the Paw Paw Tunnel, maybe Brunswick, maybe outside Hancock, but the man sat down and dug into his dinner with the same relish as hungry 12-year-olds, and likely with considerably more appreciation. The next morning, he came back down the hill, from wherever he had passed the night, and joined us for breakfast. We broke camp, continued the slog toward Georgetown, and never saw the man again. I struggled to absorb from adult Scout leaders knot-tying and semaphore. They were quite successful, however, in passing down lessons about welcoming the stranger in out midst.