Preface to Trail Magic Stories

There are times in your life where all your knowledge and skill aren’t sufficient to help you make a good choice. These are the moments when you face no good alternatives and despair is about to set in.

Trail Magic is an Appalachian Trail term for when things are so bad and you are on the verge of despair, something miraculous happens saving you.

For example, you are driving up a one-lane road in the mountains of Northern Italy and round a bend head-on with a tractor-trailer coming straight at you. Maybe your muscle memory activates, or the stars align, and you get lucky, somehow, you survive.

This is a collection of stories of my personal experiences at such times.

Trail Magic Story 1

The summer of 1961, before heading for college in the fall, John Watson, a friend since kindergarten, and I were faced with what to do with the rest of the summer after our Glen Gray Scout Camp job ended early because of a fire that destroyed the mess hall.

Without much of a plan, we resolved to have an adventure – no real plan – just an idea that morphed one day at a time. We had a couple hundred dollars between us from our last paycheck.

Most of our teenage years we were fascinated by western movies and action dramas such as “Route 66,” “The Alamo,” and “Johnny Yuma – The Rebel.”

Convincing our parents we were going to visit one of John’s family members in Richmond, we boarded a bus to Baltimore, then started hitchhiking. Our first ride was with an Army Lieutenant Colonel from Fort Meade who was driving to Richmond. So, true to our word to our parents we spent the first night on the road with John’s relatives.

The next day, emboldened by our early success, we decided we would explore more of the South, so we continued to hitchhike to Raleigh, North Carolina where we camped out that second night on the lawn of a large plantation. No one seemed to notice us, and we left before sunup to hit the road again.

Figure 1 Hitchhiking Route
After some deliberation we decided to “collect” as many state capitols as we could – we already had Richmond and Raleigh.

We had our basic camping provisions of baked beans and soup in our backpacks. However, most often we would stop at a restaurant and each order a large plate of French fries to which we would add a couple bottles of catsup – in our minds that provided nutritional value.

By day three we had made it through to the northwest corner of South Carolina and on to Atlanta, where we again camped – this time in a cornfield. We learned that farmers expected people to take fruit and vegetables (in this case, sweet corn) from the first couple of rows from the road, so no one bothered us. Thereafter we took advantage of apples, plums, and oranges. We were living off the land.

On day four we passed through Montgomery, Jackson, Jefferson City, and Little Rock to Texarkana (on the border of Arkansas and Texas).

We had recently seen the John Wayne movie, “Alamo” and decided we needed to see the real Alamo in San Antonio along with the movie-set version in Brackettville, Texas. We passed through Austin and made great time getting to San Antonio. We visited the historic Alamo, now surrounded by city buildings and not very impressive, and walked the street scene. We managed to spend a sleepless night in a YMCA bunk room – never sure we should close our eyes because of the “characters” that were staying there.

Getting to Brackettville was a special challenge. It was not on the way to anywhere --and Texas has a lot of nowhere. Brackettville was not on any of the major highways, so getting a ride to this desolate location was harder than usual. We managed climb the remnants of the fake Alamo by nightfall of day five and camped on the deteriorated ramparts imagining the movie battle scenes.

Since we had told our parents we would contact them in a week after departing – it wasn’t a week yet, so, everyone at home thought we were still in Richmond.
Outside of Brackettville, a telephone lineman gave us a ride in the cab of his truck. He brought us for a brief stop at Langtry, near Pecos, Texas, then on to El Paso and Ciudad Juarez. At Langtry we were able see Judge Roy Bean’s, movie fame “law west of the Pecos,” courtroom.

Different from any other person who gave us a ride, the lineman gave me his business card and told us to call him in case we got stuck. Whenever I hear Glenn Campbell’s “Lineman for the County,” I think of this man.

After exploring El Paso and crossing the bridge to Ciudad Juarez, leaving our packs in a locker at the bus terminal, we hitched a twenty-four-hour ride with “one-legged Eddy”. Eddy drove a stick shift car using his remaining leg to manage both clutch and gas pedal -- his feet were incredibly fast! We were never sure how he lost the leg, but his history seemed rough-and-tumble -- he admitted that he had just been let out of jail. For that long a drive he was grateful that both John and I could drive and also share gas costs. We only stopped for gas and restroom breaks, sleeping in shifts while driving. We passed through Las Cruces with a brief sight-seeing tour around town. Eddy left us at Deming, New Mexico.

Given some of the characters we had encountered, we begun to worry that we had no protection and decided to buy a handgun in a local Deming pawn shop. I was able stuff the gun in the webbing between my back and pack board, so it was not visible, but easily accessible.

From Deming we had a ride of about 60 miles to the eastside of the town of Lordsburg, New Mexico. For some reason we decided to cache our packs (and the gun) before entering town.

Once in town, we were hailed from a door of a store asking if we were interested in buying a gun. We indicated “maybe.” Somehow word must have traveled from Deming, our last stop.

As we entered the store, we found ourselves surrounded by five sheriff’s deputies all pointing shotguns at us. It seems there had been a murder of a two girls during the night while we were riding with the Texas lineman. Fortunately, I produced the business card the lineman had given me, and the deputies were able to quickly verify where we had been on the night of the crime -- trail magic.

Whew!!!

We were given a sheriff’s escort out of town to the west and were told we could proceed on our journey without “bothering” the town further.

However, we had left our packs (and gun) on the east side of town. That night we hiked around the town in the desert, recovered our packs and then returned to the spot where we had been dropped off earlier and quickly secured another ride.

Another “Whew!!!”

Several easy rides and we now found ourselves near Bakersfield, California, where we would meet up with a high school friend, “Mohot.” We were tired, filthy, and hungry. Mohot’s house had a pool, that we managed to trash with our dirt and clog the filter with hair.

* Mohot – a nickname he had picked up in high school since he was so skinny, he looked like Mahatma Ghandi.
We had now been gone for a week – time to call home.

Dad: “How are you doing?”  Me: “Fine”
Dad: “How’s your money?”  Me: “Fine”
Dad: “Where are you?”  Me: “Uhhmmm. California. At Mohot’s”
Dad: “How did you get there?”

He was furious!

Dad: “You get a bus or train ticket now and get back home!!”

I replied we would plan to leave in a couple days after we had an opportunity to tour California. We figured it would be another week before we needed to call home again.

Then the three of us hitchhiked to Oregon, Idaho, Carson City, Nevada, and back to California. After struggling to get rides, the lesson learned was that three people hitchhiking is much harder than two.

After dropping Mohot at home we headed south into the Mojave Desert, then on to the fabled Route 66. It was mid-August and the daytime desert temperatures were in the low 100s.

After nearly a day in the blistering sun with no one willing to stop for us, we concluded this route was a huge mistake. It was so hot, if you stood on the highway pavement, your foot left an impression. We were near the intersection of Route 66 and the highway that headed to Las Vegas. As night fell, we decided we’d better pitch a tent away from the road in the desert. We could see storm clouds looming and we expected this to be a big “gully washer.”

Then another trail magic event happened.

At about ten o’clock we heard a lone car traveling at very high speed. I raced to the highway to stick out my thumb. The car blasted past, screeched around the turn, and sped northward. Then, we heard a squeal of tires from several miles up the road along with the crackle-boom of an approaching thunderstorm. The car raced back. It was a convertible with a drunk man and woman, who asked if we wanted a ride. Throwing caution to the wind, we accepted. They had to put the top up because of the storm, but we piled our gear, unpacked, in the back seat and squeezed in.

With a screech of tires, the car then sped north to Las Vegas, cooler temperatures, no storm, and maybe more opportunities for rides -- and the lure of Las Vegas gambling and cash.