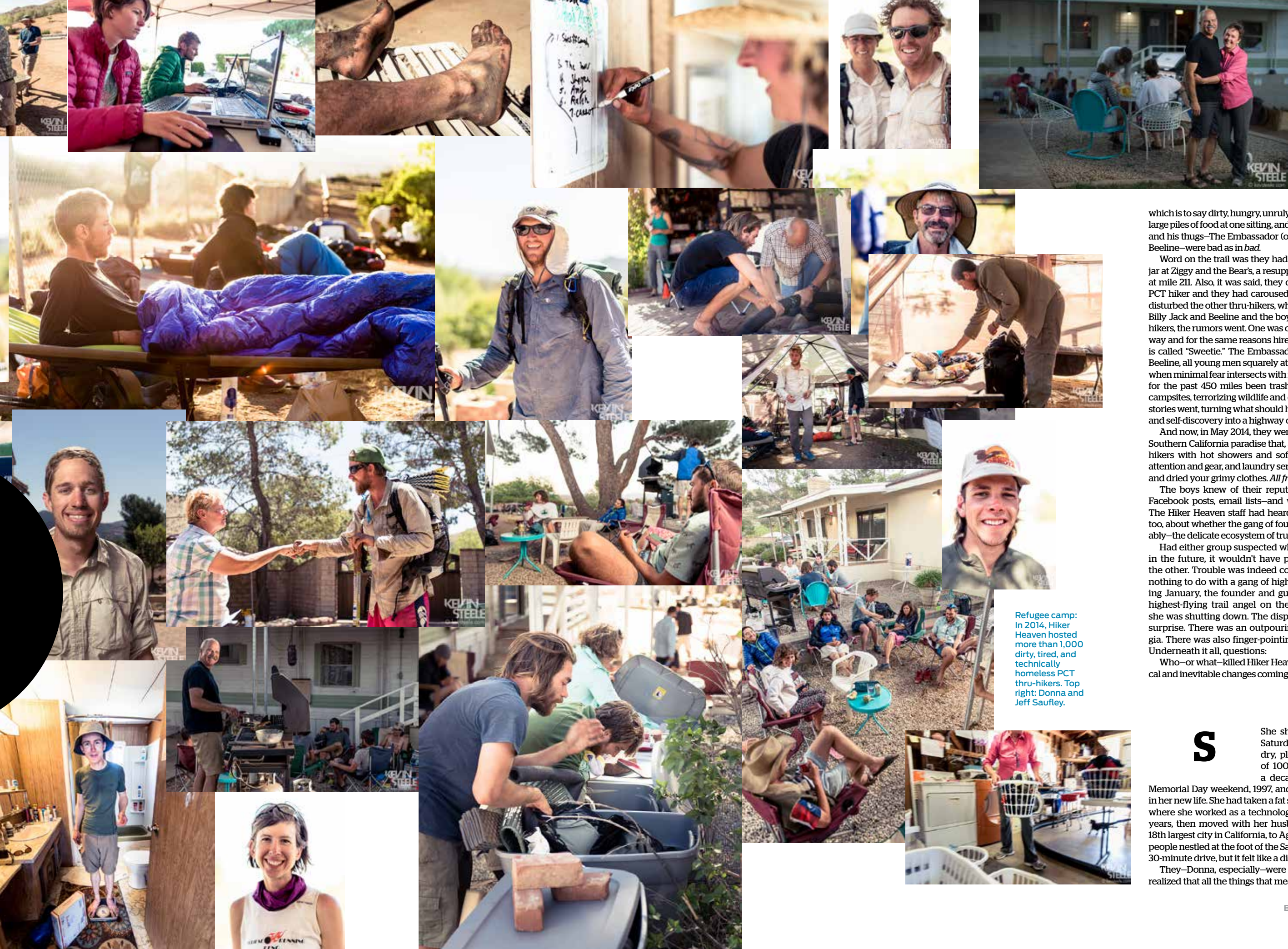




By Steve
Friedman
Photography by
Kevin Steele

Heaven Sent

For almost two decades, Donna Sautley opened her home to PCT thru-hikers every spring. Each year, hundreds of them stopped to rest and recuperate—for free—at her legendary oasis in the California desert. But has this trail angel become a victim of her own success?



B

Billy Jack and his thugs were just hours away, and word on the Pacific Crest Trail was bad news. Not bad news like almost all PCT thru-hikers are bad news,

which is to say dirty, hungry, unruly, smelly, able to swallow revoltingly large piles of food at one sitting, and cheap beyond belief. No, Billy Jack and his thugs—The Ambassador (old spelling, long story), Timon, and Beeline—were bad as in *bad*.

Word on the trail was they had stolen money from the donations jar at Ziggy and the Bear's, a resupply and rest stop run by trail angels at mile 211. Also, it was said, they drank even more than the average PCT hiker and they had caroused so loudly at Ziggy's that they had disturbed the other thru-hikers, who as a group are famously tolerant. Billy Jack and Beeline and the boys had been hassling single female hikers, the rumors went. One was called The Ambassador in the same way and for the same reasons hired muscle with a knife-scarred face is called "Sweetie." The Ambassador and Billy Jack and Timon and Beeline, all young men squarely at that magical moment in their lives when minimal fear intersects with maximal destructive potential, had for the past 450 miles been trashing public bathrooms, destroying campsites, terrorizing wildlife and other hikers, and generally, the trail stories went, turning what should have been a rugged road of serenity and self-discovery into a highway of coarse, brutish hell.

And now, in May 2014, they were only hours from Hiker Heaven, a Southern California paradise that, according to trekker lore, provided hikers with hot showers and soft cots, transportation for medical attention and gear, and laundry services where someone else washed and dried your grimy clothes. *All free*.

The boys knew of their reputation—spread by word of mouth, Facebook posts, email lists—and wondered if they'd be allowed in. The Hiker Heaven staff had heard all the stories, and they worried too, about whether the gang of four would pollute—possibly irretrievably—the delicate ecosystem of trust that sustained the unlikely oasis.

Had either group suspected what was lurking just a few months in the future, it wouldn't have paid nearly as much attention to the other. Trouble was indeed coming to Hiker Heaven, but it had nothing to do with a gang of high-spirited young men. The following January, the founder and guiding force of Hiker Heaven—the highest-flying trail angel on the PCT—posted on Facebook that she was shutting down. The dispatch took thousands of hikers by surprise. There was an outpouring of sadness and instant nostalgia. There was also finger-pointing, conspiracy theories, and grief. Underneath it all, questions:

Who—or what—killed Hiker Heaven? And did its demise signal radical and inevitable changes coming to the PCT?

Refugee camp: In 2014, Hiker Heaven hosted more than 1,000 dirty, tired, and technically homeless PCT thru-hikers. Top right: Donna and Jeff Saufley.

S

She should have felt grateful. It was a Saturday summer night in the desert: dry, pleasant, and a relief after a week of 100°F temperatures and more than a decade of soul-sucking work. It was Memorial Day weekend, 1997, and Donna Saufley's first night alone in her new life. She had taken a fat severance check from Fannie Mae, where she worked as a technology marketing representative for 14 years, then moved with her husband, Jeff, from Santa Clarita, the 18th largest city in California, to Agua Dulce, a hamlet of about 3,000 people nestled at the foot of the San Gabriel Mountains. It was only a 30-minute drive, but it felt like a different world.

They—Donna, especially—were after a simpler life, a slower life. "I realized that all the things that meant something to me had been put

on the back burner," she says. She wanted to spend more time with her son from her first marriage, Thomas Chyra, then 12. She wanted to spend more time with Jeff. And she wanted to get away from a trio of issues that had been plaguing her.

"The three Cs," she says. "Commuting, clock punching, and corporate crap—those were the things I didn't want in my life."

The open space was relaxing and inspiring, but Donna had begun to learn that relaxing wasn't one of her strengths. Neither was solitude. And tonight, Thomas was at his father's in Long Beach, and Jeff was at a bachelor party in the same city.

Her first night alone in this desert paradise. And Donna was restless.

She walked 15 miles to Agua Dulce's three-block-long main street and through the doors of The Pizza Place (now Big Mouth Pizza). She ordered roast chicken (when Donna delivers this story around a campfire, hikers always interrupt at this point to ask how the chicken was cooked and what it tasted like). As she waited, a couple walked in who smelled, even from a distance, and were filthy but strangely cheerful.

The newcomers reminded her of the grimy strangers she had spotted lurking on the porches and storefronts of Agua Dulce businesses—especially the liquor store—the past few months. Until a week earlier, Donna had assumed they were simply hungry and homeless. But Jeff had set her straight on a bike ride the previous Sunday. The loiterers were actually hikers and they were walking the Pacific Crest Trail. Jeff told his wife. They had covered 454 miles already, and had 2,200 to go. The dirty people were stopping to refuel, to rest, to get a cold drink.

And now here were a couple of them, in the grubby flesh, sitting right next to her in a pizza parlor. The couple asked the cook and the cashier and Donna if they had seen three other hikers, their friends, and when they all said no, the couple looked so crestfallen that Donna felt sorry for them. She felt sorrier still when she glimpsed them through the half open bathroom door trying to get their entire upper bodies into the sink basins, succeeding mostly in smearing a lot of dirt around. When the missing friends showed up, and the quintet was waiting for pizza, one of them asked, "Excuse me, Miss, do you know where we might stay tonight?"

There was a motel just down the highway, she told them, and she had never seen such joy. A motel! How far was it? Oh, about 7 miles. She remembers that their faces looked like Salvador Dali's melting clocks. She told them she would drive them there, but she didn't have a car, and she turned back to her chicken so as not to gaze upon those melting clock faces. And then she thought, "Well, Jeff and I talked about how those hikers were really hardcore—they were doing a marathon every day, and they were camping out, and they were carrying weight." And then she thought, "We have a trailer with a bathroom and shower and some bunks." And then she thought, "But Jeff is gone and maybe I shouldn't." And then she thought, "Well, why shouldn't I? It's my house, too. I'm a grownup and can do what I want, and if I want to invite people over, I will, dammit!"

In the morning, after Jeff had arrived home,



Send and receive:
In the Sauffleys' garage/shipping room, hikers pick up mail and use an automated system to create postage and shipping labels for outgoing packages.

when he and Donna watched one of the hikers—a great big guy—exit the trailer “and put down this little tiny stove, and this little tiny pot, we looked at each other and we thought, “That’s pathetic. That can’t be how they eat.”

Jeff whipped up platters of eggs and pancakes, served them with salsa and orange juice. The air was soft and the light was gentle. Donna and Jeff and the hikers sat at a table outside, and one of the trekkers said, “You know, this is trail magic.”

And one of the others said, “And you are trail angels.”

And, Donna remembers, “Something clicked in my little brain.”



The gang of four had been hiking for weeks. They were hot, tired, hungry, and thirsty. Mostly, they were dirty. But they’d started together, and none was thinking

of giving up. A friend of Billy Jack’s had died the previous winter and, Billy Jack remembers, “I went into a ‘I wanna do what I wanna do’ thing.” According to The Ambassador, “We decided we weren’t going to work for six months.”

Hiking great distances has long appealed to those in transition— young people gulping huge draughts of freedom before showing up for careers, middle-aged men and women who have quit their jobs and are looking for something they can’t name. In the past decade, though, what was once the exclusive province of dreamers and seekers has become a destination for all sorts—fundraisers, programmers on sabbatical, flex-timers, and movie fans. *Wild* (the film and the book), gets some credit for the PCT’s increased traffic. The film version of Bill Bryson’s *A Walk in the Woods* is due out in September, and will likely boost traffic on the already-popular Appalachian Trail. How do long trails change as they attract more hikers? Were Billy Jack and his friends catching the PCT as it had been, or were they getting a glimpse of its future? Was their rumored recklessness and disrespect a sign of the trail’s growing pains?

The quartet left forwarding addresses and filled their packs. And like all new hikers, they looked forward to important milestones. They would clean up at the visitor center at Warner Springs, mile 111. They would relax in the cool mountain air of Idyllwild, mile 178. And after that they would arrive at the place they had all heard about but none totally believed existed. Not just another spot that offered services to the long-distance hiker. *The spot*. A place where you had your own cot? Where you could take a shower? And a van would drive you 30 miles to Northridge, where you could shop or exchange gear at REI? Laundry service? They knew how rumors spread on the PCT, so they didn’t waste much of their energy worrying about whether Hiker Heaven really was the oasis of legend.

They had more pressing concerns. Where would they camp tonight? How many miles would they log the next day? Would they find deep snow in the Sierra? How many of the so-called “Trail Angels,” so named because of their alleged kindness and generous natures, would actually demand payment for their services, as a few already had? If Hiker Heaven proved to be as good as the rumors suggested, could they afford it?

A year in Agua Dulce had taught Donna something. The idea of peace and quiet was reassuring. But the reality of it was unsettling. She needed activity. She had considered beekeeping, farming, organizing a company that provided



From top: Mr. Cup, named for his ever-ready mug; shower sign-up; washing up; loaner bikes.

secretarial services. Pancakes with the thru-hikers gave her another idea.

That summer of 1997, Donna spent a lot of time driving up and down Agua Dulce Canyon Road.

“Please, come and stay with us,” she yelled at the tired, the filthy, and the plodding.

“I got some looks, like ‘No thanks, thank you very much.’”

The Saufleys hosted 30 northbound thru-hikers and 20 southbound ones that year. Fifty hikers came the next year, too.

In 1999, a few former thru-hikers launched the first Annual Day Zero Pacific Crest Trail Kick Off, where they offered 22-mile shuttle rides south from Lake Morena to the starting point at the Mexican border. The veterans shared their knowledge with newcomers, and newcomers swapped thoughts on speed and equipment and plans. They’ve repeated the event ever since. After a few years, the PCT Kick Off invited vendors and speakers. Now there’s even a film festival.

As years went by, more hikers started the trek. More dropped out. More finished. The Kick Off grew. Hiker Heaven numbers jumped from 50 to 135 to 300 hikers per year. People would sometimes sleep on the Saufleys’s front lawn, or in their double-wide trailer. Twenty hikers would stay on a single night, then 30. The combination of generosity and location proved irresistible. Agua Dulce is just a few weeks’ walking north of the Mexican border. Since the vast majority of hikers head north, and don’t quite have their trail legs yet, they’re glad for any hospitality in the California desert. The spots on the PCT that offer similar services to Hiker Heaven are almost all located in the southernmost 700 miles. Farther north, as people have quit or spread out, such thru-hiker havens never see the kind of crowds that overrun the Saufleys’s every spring.

By 2014, when Billy Jack and his friends were approaching, Hiker Heaven was providing each hiker a shower, a clean towel, and internet access at one of six laptops. Each hiker could receive mail and packages. All of it would be arranged neatly in metal racks installed in the garage. Hikers could use one of the 14 bicycles in the yard to ride 15 miles into town. They could sign up for a daily van ride to a nearby doctor or dentist, or to REI. Hikers could relax on their cots (35 were scattered around the yard, as well as a lot of space to pitch a tent), or hang out at the computer tables, or chill in the single-wide set aside just for hikers. There, they would find a kitchen, couches, and a DVD player. Foot-sore trekkers who entered the kingdom of Hiker Heaven would be informed of all the things that awaited, then would be ordered to sign up for a shower, to hand over all dirty laundry, and to select clean clothes out of the plastic bins (labeled by size and gender) to wear while one of the volunteers washed and dried the filthy garments.

Donna depended on volunteers for a lot of labor. Men and women who had visited as hikers would return the next summer and help out for a few weeks. There were no rules other than be nice and be quiet after dark. There was no fee. Conscientious hikers had put up a donation jar in the trailer many times over the years, but Donna

always removed it. Now insiders knew that there was a jar behind the washing machines, and if hikers wanted to do more than thank the Saufleys for their generosity, they could leave money there. Most did.

By 2005, 40 hikers a night were coming to Hiker Heaven. One year, a busload of Japanese tourists drove up to the gates, snapping photos. In 2008, some nights 70 hikers crammed into the Saufleys's yard. They'd reached capacity. Exceeded it. Donna told hikers they could stay two nights, max. Still the numbers increased. Donna didn't want to turn anyone away, but even angels have limits. She set a cap of 50 people per night.

Donna called the organizers of the Kick Off and suggested they hold the event later in the season, maybe farther up the trail, to reduce the clustering and the problems it caused. She wasn't the only one experiencing the effects of hundreds of hikers starting within a few days of each other. Local merchants had complained to her. Maybe the organizers could make the Kick Off a reunion of sorts, mid-hiking season? People could travel to the event, and then return to the trail wherever they'd left off.

The organizers told her they weren't responsible for the hundreds of people starting at once, and Donna responded that, actually, they were responsible. Did they really think that inviting hikers to an event that took place for exactly a few days, at the beginning of the season, and treating those hikers like royalty—with food, drink, films, and PCT gear—would not draw throngs of people? And weren't throngs exactly what responsible stewards of the trail wanted to avoid? Things got heated. Harsh emails were exchanged. Some hikers took sides. That's when Donna got her trail name, L-Rod. It stands for Lightning Rod.

The feud flared for a year or so, then shrank to a simmer—neither the Kick Off nor Hiker Heaven was going anywhere. Donna focused her efforts on her own property. She replaced the 2,500-gallon water tank with a 5,000-gallon one. She added cots. She set up porta potties. But she still couldn't accommodate everybody.

"I've had to harden my heart," she says. "What do you tell people? I can't help them if they all decide they want to begin at once. You have to be pragmatic."

And more hikers kept coming, and more. And the crush of newcomers every day raises the question: Could a trail angel be too good?

B By the time Billy Jack arrived in pine- and cedar-scented Idyllwild, a mile high in the San Jacinto Mountains, he and his gang had heard even more about Hiker Heaven. There were campfires there.

There was a bar in town you could ride to on one of the free bikes. No one hassled you. Your laundry really was done for free. Could it all be true?

People on the trail continued to talk about Billy and the boys, too. They partied all night. They were loud. They defied park rangers, and the officials were now pissed at all hikers. Could all—or any—of it be true? In Idyllwild, hikers hushed when the wild bunch showed up. Some inched away from them. People looked at them funny.

"They're really bad!" Donna remembers people warning her over the telephone. "The bad boys are coming."

She wasn't overly concerned. She had heard all sorts of rumors on the PCT. Most were just that—rumors. She had been the subject of them herself. She knew, for example,



From top: Shade tents make for pleasant rest days; the give and take community food pantry.



warnings. They're grownups, they've got to know themselves."

As for Billy Jack and his wrecking crew? "We have to have an open mind," she told her volunteers. "We treat everyone the same here, no matter what we've heard."

T The number of would-be thru-hikers increased by almost 50 percent from 2013 to 2014, to 1,468. This year could be a record breaker (in the month *Wild* debuted, the Pacific Crest Trail Association's website traffic spiked 340 percent). And the more people come to hike the PCT, the more trail angels seem to pop up.

In recent years, hikers drank water from caches in the desert north of Campo left by Meadow Bob and others. They ate watermelon provided by Trail Angel Kay. At Gobbler's Nob, in the mountains south of Agua Dulce, hikers encountered a couple of trail angels named Band Aid and Ryan, who handed out bags of chips, candy bars, cold Cokes and beer, as well as hamburgers, vegan sausages, and Danishes. One played mandolin, the other guitar.

Blessed was the hiker who chanced upon Coppertone, a very tan, very fit man in his 50s or 60s who wore miniskirts and pulled his truck over at various spots, set out a few chairs, and put together ice cream floats, as well as bananas and cookies. All free.

When hikers left the Saufleys, many headed 25 miles north to the home of Joe and Terrie ("Trail Mom") Anderson, which is known as Casa de Luna, because there is a montage of *derriere* photos mounted on a wall inside. An arrival at the Andersons is often offered a beer, and always told to put on one of the scores of Hawaiian shirts hanging on a rack outside the front door. She's told to throw her gear down, then to relax on one of the old, saggy couches arranged in a U in what passes for a front yard. "Hiker Heaven is run with corporate efficiency," Terrie Anderson says. "This is more like hippie day care."

But regardless of style, trail angels will face growing pains as the number of PCT thru-hikers increases, just as their counterparts on the Appalachian Trail did a generation ago. Even the most well-meaning help, after all, can have unintended consequences.

The Appalachian Trail Conservancy publishes a "Suggestions for Providing Trail Magic" document that advises angels like the well-meaning Meadow Bob to, among other things, "Be present if you provide food

DONNA DIDN'T WANT TO TURN ANYONE AWAY, BUT EVEN ANGELS HAVE LIMITS. SHE SET A CAP OF 50 PEOPLE PER NIGHT.

or drink. Unattended items—including their packaging—can harm wildlife . . . or hikers . . . [and] . . . are considered litter . . .”

In order to reduce crowding partly created by those who have been too helpful to hikers, the ATC now encourages “Flip-Flop” thru-hikes, meaning a hiker might walk from Georgia to the halfway point, catch a bus to Maine, then travel the second part of the trail southbound. The ATC hosted the inaugural “Flip Flop Kick Off Weekend” in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, in May.

As the AT angels have learned, more hikers mean greater water needs, more health code concerns, more expenses. Though there are still a handful of angels who open their homes on an informal donation basis, the vast majority of non-camping spots along the AT today are for-profit hostels. “Trail angels are more icing on the cake than an institutionalized part of the Appalachian Trail journey,” says Laurie Potteiger, Information Services Manager at the Appalachian Trail Conservancy.

On the AT, there are angels and there are hostels. The difference is not so apparent on the PCT, where some angels make clear that \$20 donations are not voluntary at all, because they can’t afford to provide the service for free. Most hikers gladly pay, but some complain, and point out that if donations aren’t voluntary, then the angels aren’t angels.

The Saufleys don’t like to talk about how much they have spent on Hiker Heaven, but

it’s a fair guess, considering their expenses and their decidedly informal approach to donations, that they haven’t made any money. One novel financing solution: A group of former hikers calling itself the Wolverines dedicates itself to raising and distributing funds to the angels who provide the most services. One year, they raised enough money to buy Hiker Heaven a commercial grade Speed Queen washer, a new front-loading dryer, and some new cots and screen tents.

It took a generation for the AT to evolve from a network of informal trail angels to a place where businesses could operate. Will the PCT eventually grow enough that the Wolverines won’t be necessary?

When Billy Jack and the other brigands arrived at Hiker Heaven, the boys were prepared for disappointment. “By

then I thought of it more as a mythical stop,” Billy Jack says. “A place of legend.”

Donna had no reservations. “They all look like dirty, homeless people,” She remembers thinking. “And this group is kids! They hardly have any money. They’re doing it on a wish and a prayer, and they’re doing it!”

The boys showered and put on clean

clothes from the well-organized bins, staked out cots in the peaceful yard, rested, rode bicycles into town. It turns out that everything they had heard about Hiker Heaven was true.

As for the rumors about the Gang of Four, almost everything the angels had heard was false. What happened, according to Billy, was that he and the boys washed their clothes in the bathroom sink at the Warner Springs visitor center and when they hung them to dry on a nearby fence, words were exchanged with a visitor center employee, who thought the laundry an eyesore. That employee must have mentioned his encounter to someone else, who mentioned it to someone else . . .

And maybe the rumors were fueled by a case of mistaken identity during the same incident. The way The Ambassador tells it, another hiker made a huge mess in the visitor center bathroom. “Five minutes later, I walk in and wash my hair in the sink without making a mess and a young thru-hiker walks in and assumes it was me that made a mess. That’s what started all of the emails.”

What none of the rumors mentioned: The next day, the young men returned to the visitor center and helped older volunteers unload supplies for the food bank there. These were thugs?

Coincidentally, the gang’s arrival in mid-May coincided with the wedding reception for Thomas, Donna’s son. He had married a girl who lived nearby. She loved hiking, and

Donna was delighted.

The party was lively. The Saufleys provided food and drinks and live music. All the hikers lucky enough to be present were invited, including Billy Jack and his companions. Donna and the boys danced together.

People stayed up late. Things got a little wild.

The morning after, a couple hikers got in Billy Jack’s face. They had heard him up carousing, drinking, making noise. Chances are they had heard the rumors, too. Did he have to be such a jackass?

“Hey, dude,” Billy Jack replied, “I was with the groom!”

In 1970, when Eric Ryback became the first person to thru-hike the PCT, he carried an 80-pound pack, because resupplying food was so difficult. He went hungry often, and no doubt he couldn’t have imagined a trail angel serving pancakes on Cajon Pass. Was it better then? Or do all these little moments of generosity add up to something special, a human kindness borne of the wilderness? Which trail would you rather hike?

On January 24, 2015, Donna posted on the Hiker Heaven Facebook page: “This is a sad day for Hiker Heaven. It has come to our attention from a respected source that our existence as trail hosts is causing a bottleneck on the trail,

and problems for hosts and towns upstream [north] of us. This is something that we take quite seriously, especially in light of the ever-growing popularity of the trail. We have always sought to be part of a solution, not cause anyone a problem of any kind. We tried as much as possible through every means to not impact others, only asking the same in return, but alas. We regretfully announce that Hiker Heaven is henceforth closed and will no longer host hikers . . . I thank you all for the gift of your friendship, and letting us be a part of your adventure. I will be taking our website down, and recommend hikers send their boxes to Acton Post Office, which is where I will forward any boxes received. You can camp at the Acton KOA (\$15 per night). Wishing you all the best.”

The news was shocking, the delivery calm and reasonable. The reality was messier. The feud between Donna and the PCT Kick Off organizers had heated up, when organizers’ claims that the Kick Off was dedicated to Leave No Trace principles sparked long-simmering tensions over crowding. The “respected source” Donna mentioned was someone from the Kick Off committee who wrote that Hiker Heaven was causing bottleneck problems of its own, adding for good measure: “Your constant whining about the Kick Off tarnishes your good image . . . You seem to think it’s OK to bash the Kick Off at every opportunity . . . Good luck with your pity party . . .”

Donna had never heard a word of complaint from anyone up the trail about any crowd-

ing she had caused. She had worked the past decade to limit the impact Hiker Heaven had on the trail, on the environment, and all she had asked was that the Kick Off folks do the same. And now they were blaming her? She had had enough. Sure, she was pissed off. But as soon as she made the decision to shut down, she realized it was the right decision, for reasons having nothing to do with her anger. She would get to spend more time with her family, less time dealing with crises. When she and Jeff wanted to relax, she says, “We’ll have the longest days and the nicest weather available just for ourselves.”

People asked her to reconsider. She didn’t. They posted messages excoriating the Kick Off organizers. Donna preferred to talk about how she and Jeff planned to hike this summer, and spend time with her new grandson.

“There’s got to be a hundred things that make me glad I’m quitting. I really want it to be known—the things I’m angry about—those aren’t the reasons I’m happy about this.”

So, no smoking gun. Differences of opinion, and some intemperate words, but no arch villains. No great mystery.

The secret behind Hiker Heaven’s demise is no secret at all. After 18 years of operation, it was, just as Billy Jack suspected all along, a place too good to be true. ■

Steve Friedman gave a ride to Pinecone and Windsong and bought a meal and gave a ride to Billy Jack and Ox. No crowding occurred.