

Philmont for Women
By Jean Rishel, Advisor 2002 709D-7
Advisor SNJC Venturing Crew 60

What is Philmont *really* like for female trekkers? I had read a great deal from female rangers on the Philmont Exchange, as well as numerous books on backpacking and low-impact camping, in the two years that our Venture Crew prepared for the Great Hike. We also participated in half-a-dozen shakedown adventures. Regardless, there were some surprises when I arrived in New Mexico.

Let me start by explaining that I've always been recognized for my brains, not my athletic ability. As a matter of fact, with the exception of an 8-week badminton stint my senior year, I never got an A in gym. It wasn't until I met my husband that I learned anything about hiking, camping, or the great outdoors. When my husband and two sons returned from a 2000 trek at Philmont, my daughter and I decided that if they could do it, so could we. Jessie convinced the leaders of our local troop to support a Venture Crew, I signed up as advisor, and the dream was born! With a great deal of support from our male leaders who'd done the trek before, we began preparing, shopping, and recruiting. By spring, 2002, we had a wonderful mixed crew which included my husband, older son Evan (our crew chief), daughter Jessie, I, my friend Mary and her son Danny, her exchange student, Rebecca, from New Zealand, our friend Alicia, our nephew Dustin, and three additional scouts from another troop, Justin, Jon, and Fritz. We flew, along with 68 other scouts and advisors in a Southern New Jersey Contingent, to Colorado Springs for two days, and then bussed down to Philmont on July 9. Our trek began on the 10th, a fire-modified (FM) version of Trek 23, and ended 12 days later with a bus ride back to base camp. Within our crew were 3 middle-aged advisors, an amputee, an arthritic knee, an asthmatic, and some deadly fears of bears, mountain lions, and airplanes. But we all finished the trek in good health, and most of us would go back again.

The point is, if we can do it, you can do it!

Following are my views regarding equipment, facilities, backpacks, and some of the camps and activities we visited.

Toileting: Let's start with the important one. Philmont is not yet really ready for female trekkers, and certainly this is way more difficult for the women in your crew. If you can't relax and pee on a log or rock, learn now. Most camps offer open-air wooden outhouses, but these are for defecation only. When using the outhouses, you carry a stick to run around under the "rim" and chase off spiders, etc., before sitting down. Toilet paper (always carry some in your pocket) can be used and disposed of here. There are some camps, however, where only open wooden boxes are available. Bring along another crew member to post as guard. You will also have a crew shovel with which to dig pits for defecation for those times when no outhouse is available. All urination is done by sitting or squatting above a rock, stump, etc. Although I had practiced this on shakedowns (seriously—this did not come easily for me), there were times early on when

we were in a very crowded camp and the woods were full of boy scouts. How do you relax when you hear voices coming at you from all sides? Until I gave up on modesty (about 4 days), this was very difficult. I confess to occasionally using an outhouse for the purpose, as there was nowhere else to go. But by the end of the trek, I considered myself a pro! If you learn to shake and air-dry, you don't have to be bothered carrying the soiled paper to the next camp.

Menstruation: Count on it. Three of our five females had their periods during the trek, and a fourth was living on borrowed time. If you are at all irregular, the physical and mental stress will bring this on, so be prepared. They do sell pads and tampons at some of the commissaries, but it can be days before you can trek to one, so carry what you'll need. Again, privacy is a tough issue here. Philmont was designed by men, for men, who clearly never had to deal with such things in the wide-open. Head for the woods with a friend to stand guard, or use an outhouse if available. You cannot, however, dispose of soiled articles anywhere. The best advice I found was to carry an empty Pringles' or Crystal Light canister stuffed with small, empty ziplocks. Keep the trash in there until you can dispose of it at a staffed camp. One of our girls volunteered to be our trash compacter, so that she could hide her used junk under the supper trash each night. You may want to consider talking with your doctor about short-term hormones to bring on your cycle early (like, before you leave!), especially if you are a heavy bleeder or prone to serious cramping. However, our crew members tolerated the annoyance quite well, and I think it's a shame there isn't some additional patch or recognition for surviving *that* on the trail!

Hygiene and beauty: Forget it. I read all the stuff from the lady rangers about no deodorant, no shampoo, etc., and I thought—no. There must be a way to do this and still maintain some grace and beauty. I bought biodegradable shampoo and soap, baby wipes, and salt-crystal type all-natural deodorant, determined to sneak it into my pack before hitting the trail. Then we weighed our backpacks...and mine weighed more than 45 pounds (and well more than a third of my body weight, as I am short and small). This was followed by our ranger's talk about the harm of using deodorant, and the fact that, due to the drought, we wouldn't be seeing a shower again till we returned to base camp. I ended up dumping everything but the baby wipes and an extra bandanna. As things turned out, we never got into camp early enough to use the wipes (can't use anything with a scent after late-afternoon because of the bears), but I did occasionally use one in the morning, on my face, arms, and chest. A few times, we landed in a camp with an unguarded tap, and I used my bandanna to wipe some of the dust and grime off my limbs. I did carry small nail clippers and a file, which came in handy because my nails ripped, cracked, and chipped constantly in the dry climate. Even cut all the way back, they were impossible to keep clean. Pulling our hair back in ponytails or braids was the only reasonable solution to hair care. The girls wore bandannas during the day, which also helped. But after 12 days, you will have flat, oily hair. Bring a hat with a brim and wear it when you get in to camp and have to face strangers. Sadly, I lost my baseball cap on Day 3 and had to adopt a Rambo-style bandanna thing after that. The good news is that I have never, ever, allowed my hair to go unwashed and collect oil for so long—so it shouldn't need hot-oil conditioning now for a long time!

You will be dirty on the trek. So will your crew members. You will smell bad, and the smell from your boots at night will be unbelievable when you pull them off in your tent. Be prepared, laugh about it, and it really will be all right. In the higher elevations, it is cooler and damper, and pine needles and sap will be everywhere. In the lower elevations, it is unbelievably dry...your lips will crack and there will be dust and dirt everywhere. Lip balm really didn't help much, but my lips healed quickly once off the trail. Remember when you were little, and your mom wouldn't let you play in the dirt? Well, now you can...and you will...so you might as well try to enjoy it! Just don't let your mother know.

Washing clothes: We had big plans about washing out socks and underwear every few days. Unfortunately, we were a slow-trekking crew and rarely made camp early enough to leave time for this. Without showers (where the guys on past treks had often done their laundry), keeping a supply of clean clothes was really difficult. At Fish Camp, we borrowed a big metal washbasin and washboard and attacked our dirtiest, most necessary items. Of course, it was too late to use soap (a smellable), so we settled for stream water and lots of elbow grease. This was Day 4 and the frustrations had been building, so I actually enjoyed standing in the cold stream and scrubbing away. We got some of the kids to lug the dirty washwater back to the sump for disposal. Many of the streams and smaller lakes are dried up at Philmont this summer, due to the drought, and you cannot wash or swim anywhere anyway, so don't count on that as a fallback for staying clean! Another day, we put water in ziplocks and sloshed some clothes around. We spread them on bushes to dry, or pinned them to our backpacks as we hiked.