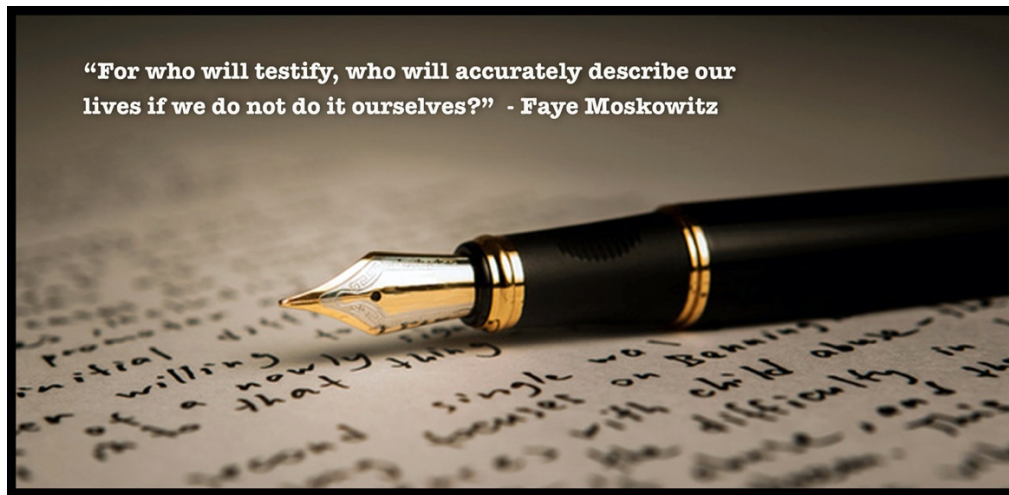


**Trail Angels  
Patty Mochel  
Hagan 1961-1970**



It was the fifth day of a week-long backpacking trip in a wilderness area of the Rocky Mountains. We had just left the summit, at nearly 13,000 feet, filled with green meadows, wildflowers, and rushing streams. "It will be easier now," said our group leader, something he has been saying to me daily. I had been struggling on this trip. Always the last to make it in to the campsite, I pitched my tent on the least attractive, stone-filled site. My 46-pound pack and the altitude left me with pounding headaches and sore hips. Worst of all, I was lonely.

I was one of two women from the Mid-Atlantic region, and we had very little experience on rugged trails like the ones we tackled in Colorado. The woman from Virginia was complaining constantly, and it seemed the others on this trip were getting bummed. They were way ahead of us and would have to wait while we straggled in. I realize now how stressful it must have been for them to be constantly waiting for the two laggards to show up. For Aseeyah and me, it was dispiriting to finally catch up, only to have them take off again. The ten of us were pleasant to each other, but there was no real camaraderie.

I had signed up for the Sierra Club backpacking trip after my 55<sup>th</sup> birthday, when I realized it was time to figure out what I really wanted to do before I truly got old. I had really fond memories of our CIT camping trip at camp in 1968, when we spent four days on a mountain with only tents and an ax – well, more than that, of course, but it was pretty minimal. I just loved being free from civilization, and I so much wanted to do it again. My husband had agreed to take our four kids to the beach while I tried out this trip. I loved the deep silence at night, and the slanting sunlight. But I wished I had a friend.

This day had become anything but serene. Deep snows had scoured away the topsoil on this side of the mountain, leaving a desolate landscape of bleached sand and stone pocketed by blackened pine trees. No trees, no shade, and the sun burnt through our clothes as we staggered down the steep path.

At last the trail plateaued and we entered a green forested area, heading for a campsite that should be just around the corner. Suddenly the sky turned black, the wind whipped up and a tremendous thunderstorm blew in. Sheets of rain buffeted us as lightening crashed around us, and I started laughing as we yanked rain jackets out of our packs and rushed ahead, looking for a place to stop. Finally, we found the campsite, and realized with a start that it was already in use. A tarp appeared in the distance, with two women sitting in lawn chairs underneath it. As we staggered along, gazing at it longingly, a long, dark, sinuous shape stretched out –an arm. It was motioning for us to come in.

We managed to get everyone under the tarp, and spent the next three hours laughing and telling jokes. The women were old friends who camped together with llamas every summer–the llamas were pegged nearby. When the storm cleared, they said they wouldn't mind if we pitched out tents there. We made our evening meals under the tarp, and when they learned one of our hikers had just turned 30, they produced a brownie and freeze-dried ice cream complete with candles. After dinner, the youngest man in our group pulled out a harmonica, and we sang for hours.



**Patty on the Summit**

I later learned that hikers call this serendipity an encounter with 'trail angels' - that when you're out in the wilderness and in a jam, someone would miraculously appear with exactly what you needed.

The hikers in our group had needed to coalesce, and the storm and our fortuitous rescue by the two women with the llamas allowed us to come together. The hours spent under the tarp and around the campfire gave us the opportunity to see each other in a new light. A new and refreshing ease came over us. A week after we got home, the young man with the harmonica emailed all of us the photographs he had taken at the summit.