

## Indianapolis Literary Club

October 21, 2013

### “ON THE ROAD AGAIN, AND AGAIN”

One year ago today, on October 21, 2012, I had the pleasant experience of staying overnight in a luxurious 5 star Spanish hotel, the *Hostal de los Reyes Catolicos*. This hotel is one of approximately one hundred hotels, called paradors (*paradores* in Spanish) found in the medieval towns and villages across Spain and the Canary Islands. International hotel chains are unable to build new hotels in the historic centers of these ancient cities. These paradors developed as joint ventures of the Franco government and private enterprise for retaining the historical aspect of these old city centers. They have successfully re-purposed the former convents, monasteries, castles, fortresses and hospitals built around the 12<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. The historic buildings are now modern hotels on the inside while retaining the historic both inside and on the façades. These paradors in the post-Franco period have become less affiliated with the government and more with private enterprise. The government now maintains the structures with their portion of the income generated from the hotel operation. This particular parador, the *Hostal de los Reyes Catolicos* was located in the city of Santiago the legendary burial place of the mortal remains of Apostle St. James the Greater. I happened to be there at the end of a 200 mile trek across Spain on the Camino de Santiago de Compostela. I

will go into more detail below on how I arrived there after explaining why I came to be on this religious pilgrimage.

Friends and acquaintances know I have been involved with particular interests or “enthusiasms” for various causes over the years. There have been causes such as Gleaners Food Bank, the Community Foundation of Boone County, the American Heart Association, Meals on Wheels and the Farm Heritage Trail. The Farm Heritage Trail is recreational rail-trail across Boone County. I spent most of my youth as well as most of my professional life as a lawyer in Boone County. It was as a lawyer I had the opportunity to assist in the development of this 10 mile recreational rail-trail. I guess there may be a fine line between building up your résumé and preparing your obituary. But the longest lasting “enthusiasm” has been for physical fitness and health, and most particularly, running, trying to put off the time for the obituary.

This “enthusiasm” for running has lasted for 35 years. That is how long I have been running the Indianapolis 500 Mini-Marathon. Because I was a long-time runner and in fairly good physical condition, this may have induced my law school friend, Phillip V. Price, to invite me to accompany him to Spain to participate in the religious pilgrimage known as the “*Camino de Santiago de Compostela*.” On October 3, 2012, my friend Phill (with 2 L’s) and his 27 year old son, William Price and I departed the Indianapolis International Airport in the

afternoon. We were taking the overnight flight to Madrid, Spain via Atlanta, Georgia. It was curious to note there seemed to be no *international* flights from the Indianapolis “International” Airport.

On the flight from Atlanta to Madrid my seat mate was from Albany, Georgia. She was returning to Spain for a family visit. Her husband was retired from the U.S. military and her adult children were U. S. university graduates. She seemed to be the only person in her immediate family interested in staying connected to her country of origin, Spain. She was very willing to share some of her country’s characteristics as we made this 7 hour flight to Madrid. As she was telling me about her region of Spain, I was becoming aware I knew very little about this interesting and varied country. Upon my return from Spain I would read James Michener’s tome *Iberia*. I was disappointed I had not taken the initiative to study about Spain before going on this adventure. I now highly recommend this practice prior to any trip to a foreign country.

By reading *Iberia* I have learned that when James Michener was taking summer classes in Scotland he took a job as a “chart boy” on a sea-going freighter. His ship was taking some Scotland coal to Italy and returning with a cargo of Spanish oranges from the Valencia area. These were to become Scotland’s world renowned marmalade. This brought about his introduction to Spain and for two decades he would visit Spain occasionally as he was writing his famous historic

fiction novels about other places. *Iberia* is a travelogue resulting from a fascinating compilation of his decades of research into the culture of the various regions of this exotic country he loved to visit.

Another famous author, Ernest Hemingway, was similarly smitten by Spain but wrote in a more contemporaneous and commercial fashion. From the 1920's to the 1940's he produced some of his best-selling novels as *The Sun Also Rises*, *A Farewell to Arms*, and *Death in the Afternoon*. These novels depicted events he experienced while an ambulance driver and a reporter during the war years in Europe. His novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls* was written from his experiences while covering the Spanish Civil War as a reporter for the North American Newspaper Alliance. From my encounter with people on the flight to Spain I was wishing I had taken a little more time to acquire fundamental information about this country I would soon be visiting.

Upon our arrival in Madrid the next morning, October 4<sup>th</sup>, we followed a well-marked route through the airport to the subway. My traveling companion had made this same trip in 2010 so it was best to allow him to set the course of this journey we were undertaking. Weaving our way out of the Madrid airport to the subway would just be the beginning of my appreciation of his valuable guidance.

Once we were on the subway we found ourselves immediately immersed in modern day Spanish culture. This was the typical Thursday morning rush hour for

Madrid. There were students heading for school and business people heading for the office, their daily travel eased with this efficient public transportation system. I thought of all the automobiles that were not on the streets because of these people on the subway. However, we did find the subway signage a little confusing. It seemed you could only read one half of the angled sign indicating the train's destination. When it became apparent we were heading the wrong direction we got on a different car, and ended up where we started. We finally deciphered this signage in the subway labyrinth and eventually arrived at the Madrid train station.

This is the same train system involved in the March 11, 2004 (or 3/11) bombings which killed 190 and injured 1,800 people, exactly 2 ½ years (or 911 days) after the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in New York City. Four different bombs were detonated within 10 seconds around 7:38 A.M., simulating the hour and minute of the 9-11 attacks exactly 911 days earlier in 2001. But bombs were not the concern of today's travelers or us. It seemed everything was business as usual in Madrid and we were pleased to have arrived at the train station in plenty of time to catch the next mode of transportation--the train.

It was to be a 3 hour train ride from Madrid which is located in the geographical center of Spain. We were going toward the northwest to the city of Leon, provided we could locate the correct train. We purchased our tickets from an automatic vending machine but were uncertain whether we were in the correct

waiting area. It was only after being reassured several times at the information counter that we decided we were in the correct area. (We began to feel we were in an area not frequented by many English speaking tourists.) Eventually the lobby sign indicated the train to Leon had arrived. At this point in time literally everyone we were sitting with stood up and like “lemmings over the cliff,” we all descended the escalator to the train tracks. The train tracks were on the lower level and at the end of the escalator we were checked through security similar to our friendly TSA folks at the American airports. Soon we were on our way to Leon where we would begin our pilgrimage as legitimate *peregrinos* (Spanish for pilgrims) hiking the Camino de Santiago de Compostela.

The trains of Spain are very modern with all the amenities one might expect from a first class transportation system featuring American television programs dubbed in Spanish and very adequate toilet facilities. As pilgrims we opted to be in Coach not First Class. Some locals on the train seemed very interested in practicing their English. However did they know we were from the States? We were to find this to be a common experience. From one such passenger I received dining recommendations on what to expect in the way of food along the Camino. I was really looking forward to *pulpos* (Spanish for octopus) a great delicacy of Spain.

So this was how my participation in a 1200 year old pilgrimage started—airplane, subway, and train before finally settling into the oldest form of transportation, walking. The idea of walking, simply going about by one's own foot power, seems to have fallen by the wayside in American culture these days. I was to learn from many of the international pilgrims along the Camino, walking is alive and well throughout Europe.

We stepped off the train in the Leon station after only **14 hours** of leaving Indianapolis. There is something to be said and appreciated about the conveniences of the types of transportation we have available to us today. In 1779 it would take Vice-President John Adams three weeks to cross the Atlantic Ocean. He was on this voyage to serve as our minister to France to negotiate the peace and trade treaties with England. His trip was hampered by the leaking of the ship only two days out of Boston. Bilge pumps were constantly used to prevent the frigate from sinking during their three week voyage. This near disaster could have resulted in the death of Adams along with sons John Quincy, age 12 and Charles, age 9 along with the other 300 passengers. This would certainly have changed the course of American history as we know it today. Due to the poor condition of their ship they were forced to terminate their sea voyage at the first port in Spain. From O Coruña they continued overland through Spain. To do so they travelled a

good portion of the same Camino de Santiago we were to hike however at Burgos they diverted to Bilboa on the northern coast and from there sailed on to France.

After our one very long day from the U.S. to the Leon train station we began our walk toward the historic center of the city. My travelling companion was generally familiar with parts of this city as he had spent time there on his 2010 pilgrimage. His familiarity with various towns along the Camino, as well as the country and language in general would be a real asset during our trip. Even so we still would find ourselves in need of some assistance to locate the official starting point of our pilgrimage. With the guidance of a very quick stepping elderly nun (the first of many angels along our Camino) we made our way through a maze of narrow streets. I began to notice bronze shells imbedded in the pavement and sidewalks as we walked. These shells were the first of the many different artistic emblems which blaze the trail along the Camino. I would be seeing many of these in the coming weeks. I have no explanation why I didn't think to photograph the first of these artistic shells and I regret not being more focused on making a more detailed photographic record.

We arrived at our first overnight accommodation, a former convent, the *Santa Maria de Carbajal*, now a municipal albergue. Here we would become official pilgrims or *peregrinos*. To become a pilgrim of the Camino de Santiago de Compostela the requirement is to simply register at a location authorized to issue

pilgrim passports. There is no fee charged for walking the Camino. You just sign up and travel at your leisure.

This particular hostel was staffed by French and English volunteers. They recorded where we were from and how we intended to traverse the Camino. One may do the Camino by horseback, bicycle or by foot, “*via pied.*” After this information was registered we were issued our official *Credencial del Peregrino*.

This Credencial or “passport” is required to stay overnight at the various *refugios / albergues / hostels* along the way. This allows us to gain admittance, as these accommodations are exclusively for pilgrims to stay overnight. This pathway across Northern Spain has been traversed for more than a millennium as a religious pilgrimage to pay homage to the mortal remains of the Apostle St. James the Greater. The towns and cities we pass through have developed special provisions to cater to the thousands of pilgrims passing through on their way to the city of Santiago de Compostela.

The feast day of St. James is July 25<sup>th</sup>. When this occurs on a Sunday, that year is declared to be a “Holy Year”. During a “Holy Year” the annual participation of the Camino swells to over 300,000. 2010 was a “Holy Year” when my friend did 400 miles of the 500 mile route. In 2012 the normal traffic along the Camino was approximately 200,000 pilgrims. That is a lot of tourist traffic any way you figure it and the small towns and villages seemed fairly well

prepared for it. There were special rates for overnight accommodations all along the Camino (\$5 to \$10 Euros) and “pilgrim menus” for moderately priced meals (\$5 to \$10 Euros) at most restaurants and cafes to keep one properly fueled for such travel.

Upon checking into a refugio, the *hospitallerio* would stamp the passport. Also, the eateries and churches along the Camino would stamp your passport as a permanent record of the places visited along your journey. Each stamp was uniquely designed and dated. At the end of the pilgrimage the passport is to be presented to the clerk in the pilgrims’ office in Santiago where it is carefully inspected. When it is determined the required distances have been attained to qualify one as an official pilgrim, a “*Compostela*” or Diploma is issued, declaring the holder to have successfully attained pilgrim status.

This passport would become a practical reminder of when and where we stayed over the coming weeks since the many overnight accommodations would soon begin to blur into one another. I also neglected to take photographs of all these *refugios* because I either forgot to do so or was just too tired to do it by the time we arrived at our destination. I would again call this a lack of focus. Each refugio had sufficient facilities to meet our needs. Those would be first a toilet, second a hot shower and third a bed, essentially in that order. Having travelled in Italy I noted a similar lack of toilet seats in the public restrooms in Spain. I am at a

loss to explain this phenomenon. Perhaps it has something to do with the Mediterranean Diet?

There is a protocol to follow when staying at the hostels. Upon arrival you present your passport to the volunteer *hospitaliero* and pay the small fee or make a donation. Next we will be assigned to sleeping quarters. On the way to the dormitory we remove our hiking boots and place them in a rack along with our hiking sticks. This keeps the sleeping quarters free of dirt from a day of hiking and eliminates tripping over walking sticks that seem to get in the way. This also eases the work of the volunteers who are to get the place cleaned and ready for the next flock of pilgrims coming along the next day. You claim your bed by rolling out your sleeping bag. Throughout the afternoon and evening other pilgrims will show up and do the same. They all know the procedure.

In Leon, there seemed to be a lot of noise at the beginning of the evening as the pilgrims dining area was just off the dormitory. It was not unusual for many pilgrims to prepare their own meal for the evening as each hostel offered a basic cooking facility. Some of these pilgrims were already 300 miles into their pilgrimage and were probably enjoying an evening with friends. We were just starting our pilgrimage so all of these people were strangers to us.

After showering from our long day of travel from the States, we availed ourselves of dinner at a local café featuring a low-cost “pilgrims menu.” I couldn’t

make much sense of the menu and the waiter kept bringing extra things we didn't order as they knew we were pilgrims. Perhaps the waiter didn't realize we would be taking our first steps the following day on our "Camino" early the next morning. We enjoyed our first real meal in Spain and went back to settle in for the evening. I recall being awakened around midnight hearing what sounded like school children playing outside our building. I eventually realized the locals were simply out with their children as the Spanish keep much later hours than we do in the States.

The next morning was a true cacophony of international languages as everyone was packing up and getting ready to head out on their way. Perhaps because this hostel was a former convent, the ladies had one end of our dormitory separated by 4 x 8 pieces of plywood set up as a temporary wall. This was the only time I noticed segregation of the sexes. Also this hostel had *café con leche* with toast & jelly included in the price of the accommodations. We had a quick bite to eat before heading out while it was still dark.

As we departed the historic heart of Leon in the early morning hours of October 5, I again discovered Leon to be a good sized city. We were making our way by the shell emblems or yellow arrows and sometimes with assistance from more angels along the way.

By the time it was light we came to a very old and large building which was one of the early hospitals from the middle-ages built to house pilgrims and crusaders (or some military force) but are now the luxury hotels I mentioned earlier. This particular parador in Leon was used by Martin Sheen in the 2011 movie, *The Way*. As portrayed in the movie, he and his 3 companions had been staying in the crowded hostels and sleeping under the stars since leaving St. Jean Pied de Port, France. The rich American doctor portrayed by Sheen offered to put them all up for the night in the \$300 U.S. rooms and they all graciously accepted his generosity. We proceeded on.

It was a long morning just getting to the edge of Leon's city limits and on into a small town that seemed to be having a street festival. I was really too pre-occupied with the weight of my small backpack (only 14 pounds) and my too warm jacket, to take in whether this was some important festival of the region. I never found out. I do recall passing one of the stalls selling pastry that had a solid coating of sugar so I purchased and devoured it as if I hadn't eaten anything since starting out that first day. Apparently the early morning café con leche and toast back at the hostel had long ago metabolized.

As we were leaving the city, the suburbs, and smaller towns dotting the Camino we diverted from the motorized corridors heading out through a more agricultural region. The guidebooks noted we could take either of two routes so

we opted for the less congested and but slightly longer route to our first destination on the Camino. I began to feel this might really be the Camino I was expecting—right out along a path across open agricultural land. This would be the way things would go for the next several days except for passing through very small villages.

Out across this rural area sometimes the road would be as straight as an arrow as far as you could see, and other times just rolling fields. Sometimes there were crops being grown but often the fields appeared to be fallow. Every 10 to 15 kilometers we would come through a small village with at least a Coke machine and sometimes an espresso machine. Most of the time there would be a flowing well with safe water in these small villages, just as in Carmel. Our guide book would indicate if there would be no water available so we would be prepared to carry more than usual. Only one time did I run out of water and had to make a donation for a bottle of water from a unique roadside stand.

We usually travelled between 13 to 18 miles a day depending on the elevations we were encountering. The short days were hiking through the rainy mountains and the longer days were on the drier flatter areas. This first day out was a flat to rolling landscape for 15 miles which put us at our destination around 3:00 P.M.

I recall being absolutely thrilled to see the very first albergue we stayed at that first day we were out on the Camino. The Villar de Mazarife had a large

beautiful mosaic as the “city limit” sign and our albergue (a private one) would be the first albergue we came upon. There were three hostels in town but we were standing right in front of this one and I was bushed. The owner greeted us, stamped our passports and asked if we wanted to purchase a meal along with our sleeping accommodations. We all agreed this looked like a nice place so we took a chance the meal would be OK.

Since we arrived early in the afternoon there were not many pilgrims who had checked in yet. We had our pick of beds in the dormitory style sleeping room. Then we started the end of the day routine of the typical pilgrim: showering, putting on clean clothes and doing the day’s laundry.

While our laundry was hanging out to dry on the back fence, we retired to the welcome shade of the pergola in the front yard. We couldn’t believe we were joining other pilgrims hailing from the U.S., let alone Indiana. There were two brothers from Brookville, Indiana (the only Hoosiers we were to see on the Camino) and a couple from California, who were most generous to share their bottles of wine. By the way, these were about the only Americans we were to see on the Camino. We also made use of this down time to get on the internet to send emails back home (normally available everywhere for 15 minutes a 1 Euro).

Dinner was a typical Spanish meal of paella. This one was of the vegetarian variety. I gave this meal the highest marks over the next 3 weeks of dining in

Spain. As we would generally be eating in restaurants from the “pilgrim menus,” this particular meal set a high bar by which to compare all others. Few measured up, not even the octopus (*pulpos*) that had been so highly touted on the train. I am glad I took a nice picture of this paella cooking in the giant wok.

After dinner we collected our clean dry clothes and packed them away and got our gear ready to start off in the morning (in the dark again). As would be our routine for the next couple of weeks we turned in early. “Early to bed, early to rise” would be the slogan of the day throughout the Camino for us.

On the subject of turning in for the evening and sleeping, an issue that I had not really counted on was beginning to rear its ugly head—that of snoring. I was unable to find the earplugs I had purchased, just in case this was to be a problem. Eventually, my travelling companion gave me his pair which he would not need as they would not protect him from his own snoring—possibly the loudest of all snoring I heard along the Camino.

I noticed very early the next morning (Day #2) that not every pilgrim had taken the advantage of organizing their gear the night before. A flurry of headlamps flashing around the room, shuffling, clomping, stuffing, unzipping, zipping, snapping and buckling was a more than subtle wake-up call well before the lights came on at 6:00 A.M. Typically we would be walking by 7:00 or 7:30 and I seemed to always be the last one out of albergue.

At this first albergue out on the Camino we were also furnished a nice continental breakfast to start the day. If an albergue did not have breakfast items available we would walk a short distance and take a break for a morning café con leché and a chocolate pastry. There were always such places coming along to take a comfort break with more than adequate facilities aside from the missing toilet seats. Taking a break throughout the day was important to keep your spirits and energy level up to an effective level. These breaks in the day proved to be a good time to chat with other pilgrims. The others we met were generally from England, Australia, France, Germany, Japan and South Korea. Interestingly, I didn't meet too many pilgrims from Spain.

So there you have it. This routine of my Camino was followed for 14 days, the same thing day after day until we covered 200 miles to Santiago. It was not unlike the movie "*Groundhog Day*" in that we repeated the same thing day after day, only the beautiful scenery changed. The theme song of the Camino, if there were a theme song of the Camino would have to be "On the road again, I just can't wait to get on the road again," and again and again.

In the end we were blessed to arrive at the Cathedral in Santiago in time to observe the "Pilgrims Mass" in progress. This Mass at times features the presentation of the giant silver and bronze sencer called a "*Botafumeiro*." This 3

feet tall smoking container gets swinging back and forth going up to 90 feet in the air over the packed cathedral of “standing room only.” It was truly a sight to behold and a wonderful culmination to our pilgrimage across a portion of Northern Spain.

If you would be interested in knowing more about this pilgrimage in general, I can recommend the 2011 movie *The Way* available at the library or download it from Netflix. The Heartland Film Festival is showing a new 2013 documentary highlighting the journey of six different international pilgrims titled *The Camino: Six Ways to Santiago*. Additionally there are many short videos on You Tube available for viewing on your home computer. I can recommend a professionally prepared video by the Hoosier Rails to Trails Council. This video may be found by entering “*David on the Camino*” in the You Tube search box. Be sure to turn up your speakers. Thank you for your time and attention. Buen Camino!

Prepared by J. David Cook for the Indianapolis Literary Club on October 21, 2013