

Bob & Todd's Excellent Adventure

by Bob
Schumacher
from ATM
#52

It was turning dusk, and high, thin clouds gave the sky a reddish glow as we stopped for gas on Interstate 80 just outside of Butte, Montana. On that high northern plain in late August, the first signs of Fall were beginning to appear - cooler nights, ducks and geese starting to flock for their journeys south.

Todd and I had been on the road for just over two months. In a few weeks we would be heading south and ending our 14,000 mile trek across the continent. It seemed to us that we had just begun and that our travels were winding down. Yet we had been on the road for two months, and we were still 650 miles and three weeks from home. We didn't know it then, but we still had some of our most fascinating training ahead of us.

- Journal Entry 8/25/96



This photo was snapped in front of ATM's offices, which are in Southern California. It appeared in ATM #47 accompanied by the following editorial comment: "Using the ATM Dojo Directory as their 'road map,' Bob Schumacher (Aikido of Los Gatos) and Todd Shirley (Aikido of San Jose) have begun an 80-day Aikido Tour....If Bob and Todd show up at your dojo, please welcome them."

THE STATE OF AIKIDO IN AMERICA: A SNAPSHOT

Let me say at the outset that the state of Aikido in North America is good: Aikido is alive and well. People practice in places of all sorts - well-established dojos in well-lit facilities, fledgling startups in borrowed quarters, industrial lofts, home basements, athletic clubs, YMCA's, storefronts, and commercial complexes. In all these places, complete strangers welcomed us. We were asked into homes and dojos without our saying much more than, "Hi! We're Bob and Todd. We do Aikido and are traveling across America."



Bob and Todd in front of the Alamo with members of the Texas Aikikai San Antonio.(Photo by Maria Escobar)

A question that we frequently were asked, and that we frequently asked those we met, was "Where is Aikido going in the US and Canada?" There is no consensus, but I think it is a fair summary to say that, while Aikido will thrive, it will look quite different in another decade. As the older teachers who trained with O-Sensei retire, the art's spiritual nature will change. Myths about the Founder will grow. Second and third generation teachers will add their own interpretations. Some dojos may drop all but formal, honorific attention to O-Sensei. After all, as we enter the 21st century, life is not as it was in early 20th century Japan or during Aikido's first expansion to America in the 1960's and '70's.

The larger, formal organizations are established throughout the country, and they will endure. At the same time, the smaller "semi-associated" groups and "ronin" dojos will continue to exist, as they do today. We will see doctrinal struggles. People will ask "What is Aikido anyway?" I think, however, that the day-to-day practitioners will hold Aikido together.



A postcard from Bob and Todd to the ATM staff from Antoine's, one of New Orleans' elegant French Restaurants.

These are the people we met on our travels - the dedicated Aikidoka who live throughout the land and come together two or three times a week in all kinds of weather - the people who really love Aikido and live it.

THE CROSS COUNTRY TRAINING EXPERIENCE

We started our trip in the heat of Summer and ended as Fall began. For the most part, we stayed with Aikikai/Hombu-style dojos, as this is our main affiliation. We also trained in some other schools; it's all Aikido. And we did some sightseeing at the Grand Canyon, Epcot Center, Washington DC, New York City, Niagara Falls, Yellowstone Park, and other places along the way.



Documentary evidence sent to ATM to verify that Bob and Todd (not pictured here) had arrived in Florida. The note on the back reads: "Wow! We made it to the Atlantic Ocean. We've seen 8 variations of shiho-nage but enjoyed them all. Today we visit the Kennedy Space Center."

What is it like for two people to do 2 1/2 months in a Ford pickup with a camper shell, traveling from one side of America to the other and back again to visit 30 or more dojos? It's an incredible experience! Virtually everywhere we went, we were genuinely welcomed. When we got to the East Coast, a photo and short story about our trip had appeared in ATM, and that opened other doors. "Oh! You're the guys we saw in the magazine," people would say.



Before visiting Niagra Falls, Bob and Todd swung into Canada, where they tried (unsuccessfully) to contact Senseis Fran Turner (Toronto) and Mary Heiny (Kingston).

Over and over, I was struck by the open, friendly, warm receptions we received. Here are just a few examples:

We were standing in front of Bond Street dojo, in an inner-city location in New York, waiting for the padlocked iron gates to be opened for six o'clock practice. A woman stopped a couple of doors down and called out, "Are you here to do Aikido?" We turned around and, in the middle of millions of New Yorkers, found a fellow Aikidoka whom we had met two years before at the Santa Cruz Summer Retreat. Recognition opened the doors for us to a great evening of training.

In Michigan, we were invited into the home of Paul and Kathy Lastas of Grand Rapids, and we did two great nights of practice at Nippon Kan Grand Rapids and Aikido of Grand Rapids (Yoshinkan). This was all on the strength of our having met once at a workshop.

In Texas, we were treated to a great Sunday of training and sightseeing and to a barbecue by the sensei of Texas Aikikai San Antonio - all on the basis of a phone call from our campsite in El Paso.



A group photo from Nippon Kan Grand Rapids (MI). In the middle of the front row is Tony Ulichnie Sensei. To his left are Kathy and Paul Lastas. Behind them are Bob and Todd.

In Alabama, we were treated to a special Friday night practice with a few students of Aikido of Birmingham's Greg Faulkner in the basement of his home. (It's an interesting experience training between a cinder-block wall and an iron support post!) This visit, too, was the result of an on-the-road phone conversation.

We visited at Koichi Barrish's Kannagara Dojo in Granite Falls, Washington. On a nine-acre site resplendent with a Shinto Shrine, we partook of morning misogi in the flowing river and a chinkon ceremony as well as an Aikido practice. We were housed with a dojo member in true Aikido friendship.

I could go on with 30 or more examples, but I will restrain myself.

As we traveled, I found that, to meet the experience of yet another new dojo, it was necessary to "empty my cup" every two or three days. If I didn't do this, it came back to haunt me. For instance, I remember once, in Denver, meeting vigorous shomen-uchi attacks with preemptive vigor, as I had learned. Very graciously, the sensei quietly suggested that I might be confusing his students, since they were taking a more paced approach to ukemi at this point in their development. I learned to go into each new dojo with a fresh mind and new eyes.



The lobby of the Old Faithful Inn, Yellowstone National Park. The Inn was not listed in the ATM Dojo Directory, but Bob and Todd inexplicably decided to stop there anyways.

THE INNER JOURNEY

At the beginning, I didn't know that the inner journey was going to be as tough as it was. In certain ways, it was even longer and more rewarding than the outer journey.



Last September, ATM received a note from Rev. Koichi Barrish, which said, "Bob and Todd spent 4 days at Kannagara Jinja [Granite falls, Washington] to finish their trip. They experienced Aiki Keiko, O-Misogi, Chinkon Sai, and formal Shinto Ceremony." (Barrish Sensei is on the right in the photo.)

Long hours on the road gave me a completely new perspective. When you drive hundreds of miles a day on interstate highways in summer heat, you occupy your mind with many thoughts. For the most part, I avoided idle mind-tripping. My friend Todd gave me "thought experiments" to work on while he studied his Physics and Chemistry. I also dredged up lots of deep stuff to work on. An excerpt from my log book might provide some idea of what was going through my mind:

8/26/97, Helena, MT. Tuesday afternoon -warm, approaching 90° at campsite. Training this week with Clint George at Last Chance Dojo. Great experience - good people. In the inner journey, it is now time to pay attention to my life, peace, happiness, a struggle,-

- to understand (why? Is faith not enough),
- to generate energy (tap source),
- to be happy (what does that mean?),
- to find self-confidence,
- to have ki flow,
- to be fit physically, coordinated,
- to be non-defensive, mindful, truthful, self-assured, competent.

Covering great expanses of time and territory, we get a perspective that we miss when we are caught up in ordinary, daily life. I came back with a quieter mind, more humility, and a deeper understanding of myself.

RETURNING HOME

We got back in mid-September to practice at San Jose and, two days later, at Los Gatos. I drove Todd over the hill to school at UC Santa Cruz and returned home. This was the physical end of the trip. The spiritual journey continues. As Frank Silvey, instructor at Aikido of Los Gatos, said when watching the video clips that we had taken on our trip, "It's all Aikido." That's Aikido's beauty - and its hope.



Rev. K. Barrish, Tim Geil, Todd, and Bob entering the river at Kannagara Jinja (Granite Falls, Washinton) for morning O-Misogi (purification).