

# An Unexpected Friend

by Terry Ingalsbe



**S**tanding at water's edge looking past a cluster of tethered canoes I notice an empty picnic table – a green picnic table. Moving closer, it beckons to me to “come” and “sit down”. Suddenly my mind is flooded with fond memories of more joyful and carefree times...memories of other picnic tables, other times and other places..

There's been so many picnic tables over the years... some filled with family, friends and laughter while others belonged to strangers. I remember the faces and generosity of many of the strangers who willingly opened their baskets of delectable delights and shared their bounty with ravenous, half-starved thru-hikers. Amazed we could eat so much at one sitting, they took delight in hearing our stories of travel and adventure. As soon as a story would end more food – southern fried chicken, a box of home-made chocolate chip cookies or a succulent watermelon – would appear as if by magic enticing us to tell more of our adventure along the “spine of time”. Their appetite for adventure and our appetite for food and good company was nearly insatiable.

In those days picnic tables had many uses and served many functions. They were the perfect place to spend a night when the rain fell hard and heavy and there was no other shelter from the storm. It's amazing how dry it can be lying under a picnic table with a tarp draped across its top. A picnic table was also the perfect staging ground after resupplying in town. Boxes of food would be broken

down and re-packaged into plastic bags, weight re-distributed, maps and mileage discussed and debated. Joy was most complete after a long day's hike – no matter how hot or cold it had been or how hard a climb we had just endured – when a picnic table greeted us at night. I smile even now remembering my husband's excitement and delight every time he would triumphantly exclaim, "It has a picnic table!" as I'd emerge from the woods after reaching a shelter. We would waste no time settling in for the night and stay one.... or two.... or perhaps, if it were a particularly nice place to stay... three nights in a row.... all because of a picnic table.

Truman no longer walks beside me but continues to live in my heart. On some days his presence is palpable and as I move closer to the green picnic table, today is one of those days. How many picnic tables have we shared together over the years? It must number in the hundreds. Sitting under a hot sun at a green picnic table in the cool north woods I feel his presence once again. I watch as he unpacks his "food bag" searching its depth deciding what creative concoction he'll cook tonight. Searching carefully he sifts through bagged packages of dried goods, aromatic powders and various spices to arrive at just the right combination to satisfy a hungry palate. His camera, a blackbody Nikon heavy as a boat anchor always ready to grab a "shot", sits nearby. A stack of half written post cards, a purple writing pen and a writing journal are near the camera at the other end of the table and a small hand held radio tuned to a local NPR station softly fills the silent woods with soulful melodies.

Coming back to the present, sitting in a hot sun writing words on paper, a breeze blows gently in from the lake as tears of grief co-mingle with tears of joy and drop to the page. Whispering a prayer of gratitude I give thanks to God for all he has given and all His blessings – but most especially for the privilege of having been able to share my life with such an amazing and wonderful person.

A few minutes ago this picnic table – a green picnic table sitting near the water's edge was just a picnic table .... but no longer. Unexpectedly this picnic table has become part of a much longer lineage of picnic tables. – no longer just wood, paint and nails – it now bears the label, "friend".