

The Watson Family: *Cycling to a New Life*

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PHOTO BY LANCE C. BELL

Sometimes we're presented with a chance to change course, to explore new possibilities, to live new lives. It takes courage to grab the ring and take the risk.

Meet the Watson family, whose six members – Nathaniel and Melanie, plus their two sons and two daughters – did just that when they chose to set out on a cross-country adventure on two triple tandem bicycles, with the ultimate goal of finding a new place to call home. Nathaniel had recently retired from a military career and completed a graduate program in analytical chemistry. The timing seemed right for a pause before embarking upon a career path in a new field. After selling their house, van and sundry possessions, the family said their goodbyes to their home and friends in Seattle, Washington, and set out on March 31, 2017.

Melanie and Nate Watson and their four children during a chance encounter (October 21, 2017) with *Mountain Discoveries* co-owner and photographer, Lance Bell, along the C&O Canal towpath at Lockhouse #70, Oldtown, MD.

The destination: Houston, Texas, where the couple could stay with relatives while seeking employment and a new home. Nathaniel and Melanie estimated that the journey would take the family from 13–15 months to ride through 19 states. They planned an itinerary taking a northern route across Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, North Dakota, Minnesota and Michigan until heading south through Indiana to Kentucky, east to Virginia, then south through the Carolinas and further south to St. Augustine, Florida, then west with a southern route through the states bordering the Gulf of Mexico until they reached Houston.

To record their adventures, post photos, and provide a way for friends and family to communicate with them en route, the Watsons created a website for a blog entitled “Dandelions and Tumbleweeds.” The site, <https://dandelionsandtumbleweeds.com>, features Melanie as lead writer, with occasional postings by the older children. Melanie uses nicknames for the children to protect their privacy. Links at the top provide answers to commonly asked questions and a map of the intended route.

Teamwork was a critical component of a journey that required stamina, cooperation and grit from every member of the family. Each bike was powered by a team consisting of one parent and two children, and equipped with four pannier bags, plus coolers and trailers in tow. Nathaniel led Team Frank, assisted by daughters Sissy, age 10, and Lil’ Mo, age 4. Melanie led Team Eleanor, assisted by sons Otter, age 9, and Tango, age 7. Their accommodations ranged from campsites to hotels to lodging provided by family, friends, and kind people they met who became friends, and through Warmshowers, a community of volunteers offering amenities to cyclists. Meals were usually simple, prepared with ingredients purchased along the way. The children’s education continued en route with homeschool lessons, supplemented with visits to libraries, parks and a host of attractions ranging from farms to theme parks to museums. Bonus activities included horseback rides, goat-tending and wildlife identification.

By the time the Watsons reached Kentucky in late September, they had become increasingly concerned about the feasibility of



A sampling of some photos from the Watson family blog – (top to bottom): Mt. Rushmore, SD; Camping at Wilderness Gateway, ID; Gulf Islands National Seashore, MS; Yellowstone River, MT; Antietam Battlefield, MD; Cavern Gulch Trail, Lewis and Clark State Park, MT; Monticello, VA; Lincoln Memorial, Washington, DC; Wright Brothers Memorial, NC; and The White House, Washington, DC. To see more cross country photos and adventures, go to: <https://dandelionsandtumbleweeds.com>.

THESE PHOTOS PROVIDED BY THE WATSON FAMILY



PHOTO BY LANCE C. BELL

following their planned route over the Appalachian Mountains, with its steep climbs and worn road surfaces. Their average daily mileage of 25 – 30 miles, the substantial weight they carried, and their hilly route were taking a toll on their bikes. They had heard about a rail trail known as the Great Allegheny Passage (GAP) that started in Pittsburgh, PA, and then joined the C&O Canal Towpath that extended to Washington, DC. This route would add miles, but cut their total climbing elevation by more than half. So they decided to change course, head north through Ohio, and then east into Pennsylvania to take this detour.

By chance, as the Watsons were riding along the Towpath near Spring Gap in Allegany County, Maryland, they were spotted by *Mountain Discoveries*' roving photographer and co-owner, Lance Bell. He followed them by car and met them in Oldtown, MD, where he learned about their journey and took a photo near C&O Canal Lockhouse #70. After a detour to visit the Antietam National Battlefield, the family continued along the Towpath until reaching White's Ferry, which transported them, plus bikes and trailers, across the Potomac River to Virginia. Friends in Alexandria welcomed them for a visit allowing them to explore notable attractions in Washington, DC, before continuing their journey south and onward to Houston.

On March 27, 2018, Melanie triumphantly posted, **"We Made It!"** on the family blog, celebrating a journey ending that day that covered 8,188 total miles and 361 total days of cycling through a total of 23 states.

The Watson family leaving Oldtown, MD, along the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal towpath trail, to continue their journey through Maryland and on to the next state to continue their cross country journey.

Reflecting on the family's ambitious journey, Melanie says, "The biggest 'wow' of the trip was a feeling of triumph experienced after achieving the distance cycled and the multitude of experiences that could never be replicated. An example was an invitation to do farm-sitting. The experience inspired the kids to ask if we could settle on a hobby farm. It was a gift. It could be a game changer.

"Another 'wow' was the ability to meet and interact with people face-to-face in fruitful engagement. We found fellowship with a variety of people who might have different outlooks on many issues. The kids had previously been more fearful of others. Lil' Mo was especially negative, but now she views the world with joy."

Melanie's blog post indicates that the Watsons aren't ready to settle down just yet. "This tremendous experience tempts us to continue adventuring and delay real life for a bit longer, so we are going abroad for some volunteer opportunities for the summer (without our bikes). We will begin job searching in earnest in August."

If the kids have their way, there's a good chance that the Watsons' next home will be a hobby farm.