

A Personal History of the Wilderness Guides Council: Reflections of the First Netkeeper

by Marilyn Foster Hendee (formerly Marilyn Riley)

As my husband John and I watched emails for the 2014 Gathering at Oceansong come in we marveled at the WGC's continuing journey. All the Netkeepers that followed me and many other leaders in the membership contributed to WGC's growing edge. And the current netkeeper, Petra, and the nearly 100 committed people here today are taking us to a whole new level. I can just feel the positive energy.

But now my mind goes back to the beginning and how events evolved to create a need for WGC as a unifying organization for us wilderness vision quest and rites of passage guides. A short summary would go like this. It began with 26 guides meeting in the Saline Valley in 1988 and grew to over 200 dues paying members in 1999 - 2000. We created a Netkeeper position in 1992, (and I volunteered) initially to oversee a site registration system to track which guides were using sites where and when to avoid over use, and make sure no one would be there when you showed up with a group. In 1994 we officially created the WGC and expanded my Netkeeper job to handle paperwork, membership dues, budget, to plan gatherings, we developed a wilderness ethics statement, and began debating what kind of an organization we wished to be. That's the short story of how we began. If only it was that simple.

There is much more, and it goes back to a pre-beginning that set the stage for all that followed. A seminal event in the mid 1970's was Steven Foster and Meredith Little's formation of their non-profit organization "Rites of Passage". They were inspired and inspiring, running wilderness programs initially for youth, writing books like *"The Book of the Vision Quest"* (Foster & Little, 1988) and *"The Roaring of the Sacred River"* (ibid 1989, 1997), authoring articles, attracting grants and gifts to support their work and vision to "reintroduce wilderness rites of passage into modern culture". In 1979, I joined their vision, responding to my brother Steven's invitation to take over the Rites of Passage youth program so he and Meredith could focus on adult programs and building the organization. The year I arrived they personally led 13 youth vision quests and other programs. They really needed some help.

A few grants initially supported the youth vision quests, but now a lot of marketing was needed to sustain them and fill the trips with paying clients. So I, and a young poet, Jack Crimmins, began a rigorous schedule of presentations to local high schools, PTA and parent groups, social service agencies, experiential education conferences, workshops, booths at fairs and expos and speaking at environmental forums. I quickly

learned I had to adapt to the norms of each audience in my appearance and language, and emphasize the personal growth and insights to be gained by participants in our trips. There was a lot of fear of cults during this era which spawned Jonesville, religious cults like the Moonies, and back to nature communes. The marketing was hard work but by the 1980's my partners and I were leading 8 -9 paid vision quests a year. It was an exciting time.

Then in 1983 Steven and Meredith left to found the School of Lost Borders in Big Pine, CA to run vision quests and train potential leaders, a bold move toward expanding their work and vision. Soon I also left to run vision quests on my own, evolving into the creation of my own non-profit company, "Wilderness Transitions, Inc." with my great "elder" friend, Betty Warren. During this same 1980's era, a lot of other guides were also starting programs, many of them trained by Steven and Meredith, and the idea of a unifying organization of guides gained steam.

By then wilderness rites of passage was my passion and a big piece of my livelihood. During this time I also completed an MA in Psychology at Sonoma State University, completing a Master's degree project in 1986 titled "*The Psychology of a Modern Vision Quest*" (Riley, M. 1986). I eagerly joined in conversations and gatherings with other guides, my peers. I was really excited to hear that there would be a gathering (called by Ron Pevny and Steven and Meredith) of wilderness vision quest guides in the Saline Valley in January 1988. In my mind that gathering promised collegueship, a sharing of ideas and information on how others were doing—maybe we could all help each other be better guides? I looked forward to discussing our common challenges. Maybe we could organize to share with each other on a continuing basis? These possibilities were on others' minds too, and you could say the WGC organization was "conceived" among the 26 persons at that Saline Valley gathering, people like Meredith Little, John Davis, and Bill Plotkin who are still active in WGC today. Action from that meeting included launching the publication "Circles on the Mountain" and a commitment to meet again.

Pregnancy and Birth of the WGC:

While the "conception" of WGC was at the Saline Valley gathering, its "labor pains" began in 1992 at a second and larger Gathering of 51 guides at the Wellspring Renewal Center in Northern California (Riley 1992). This was an outstanding Gathering! We featured presentations by leaders of the wilderness vision questing/rites of passage movement—Steven Foster and Meredith Little, Tom Pinkson, Robert Greenway and John Milton. Concern was building then about the impact of questing on the land, and also for reserving questing sites established and coveted by some guides. Thus, an outgrowth of this gathering was creation of a "Land Use Network" in which guides would register their sites with a volunteer "Netkeeper"

Marilyn Riley, and would voluntarily limit their use of sites to once per year in desert areas and no more than twice a year in forested areas. That was the serious work. We also learned there were some great dancers among our members!

In **1993** about 30 guides met for one-day in San Rafael, California, and took another step toward organizing by writing and formally agreeing to follow a wilderness ethics statement with our questing groups. It was our first real consensus challenge, bringing together the diverse ideas of independently minded guides. I saw then that consensus on anything was not to be achieved without active debate.

In **1994**, a total of 26 guides met at the Ojai Foundation, in Ojai, CA and continued organizing by developing a purpose statement that said—“we are a network of wilderness guides whose purpose is to maintain and improve the health of wilderness ecosystems.” We also refined the wilderness ethics statement and developed a PLAN setting forth such things as membership standards and organizing principles. By consensus, we became The Wilderness Guides Council, established dues, and I was confirmed as Netkeeper and given a salary of \$75 per month. We were now an official organization—the birth of the Wilderness Guides Council (WGC) was complete, though still in our infancy.

I was so honored being selected to be the first Netkeeper of the new organization—and almost bursting with excitement for the chance to help grow this infant organization of colleagues engaged in our own heart-work. I knew it would be difficult—vision quest guides were an independent lot, many of them dedicated more to challenging organization than to building it. But from 15 years of guiding quests at that point I had seen the magic of the work. An organization for guides could help all of us. We could share ideas, improve our practices, and promote vision questing as a valuable and often transforming experience, and an important use of wilderness. Together we could help educate the public about this ancient process of seeking truth, healing and insight—and everyone would be better for it—the larger number of new clients we could reach, the new business supporting more guides, and improved practices to better care for our clients and the wilderness. And we could share the joy and pain on this collective journey. My ideal was to build community and increase professionalism at the same time. These things were especially important to me as a single woman trying to supplement my income by guiding quests. It was sometimes lonely work and it was hard to recruit paying clients. We needed to educate the public about vision questing, make it more visible, and we needed to work for high standards among all guides, and help each other.

WGC Getting Organized and Starting to Grow:

We met next in January **1995** for a day in San Francisco, only 30 of us as plans for another meeting at Wellspring were cancelled by rains and flooded roads. But in response to WGC outreach Steve Tabor, President of Desert Survivors, showed slides and participated in our discussions, increasing our awareness of conservation issues, including the new Desert Protection Act about to be passed by Congress. Steve urged us to work for protection of desert areas and wilderness. Was conservation work to be part of our purpose? This would be a continuing question for us.

I must make a short diversion here. By then my outreach about the WGC had attracted the attention of a University of Idaho Professor, John Hendee, who was studying wilderness experience programs. He wanted the WGC list of guides to find a program to study. Could I just give it to him? I thought we should meet and talk about it first. Fine, we were both going to attend Steven and Meredith's advanced wilderness leader workshop that spring. Well to make a long story short, after much talk he asked to do a study of my program and clients, and to do it with me. I wondered at the time, was this a creative "pass" or what? Turned out that it was! We did the study (Riley & Hendee. 1998), and it must have been successful because before it was completed we knew we were soul-mates, and married in early 1997.

I like to think WGC really came out of the closet at our **1996** gathering when nearly 50 guides met at Stovepipe Wells, Death Valley. At that meeting we heard invited presentations about permits, fees and insurance by wilderness leaders from the Forest Service, BLM, National Park Service and WOGA, the Worldwide Outfitter and Guides Association, who at the time were the largest insurer of wilderness programs. We formed an Insurance Committee (led by Dave Talamo), and committed to develop model permit applications to help any member apply for agency land use permits. We achieved some "notoriety" too, when the WGC dance party was "busted" by the Park Police for making excessive noise.

But our visibility and good reputation was growing and I was soon invited to represent the WGC on a panel of "public land users" at a Federal interagency wilderness training session. There I was, touting vision questing in front of 100 land managers along with the grazing interests, back country horsemen, Outward Bound, rock climbers, and the SF Chronicle outdoor writer. None of these people knew much about vision questing, but they were interested and I was well received. It felt like an important presence for the WGC. But I was also asked about remnant stone circles, prayer ties left on creosote bushes, the extent of guide training, first-aid certification, permits and insurance. They liked the questing idea and were eager to be reassured that we were legitimate users of the public lands, well trained to lead our clients, and playing by the rules?

In **1997** we gathered again in Death Valley at Panamint Springs, had good councils and workshops, and appointed a Steering Committee and Conference Agenda Committee to guide and assist the Netkeeper in organizational matters and planning our annual gatherings. Representatives from the BLM and Forest Service were there and lead sessions on applying for permits and preventing introduction of noxious weeds. We now had nearly 100 members by then and my expanded Netkeeper workload was rewarded with a raise to \$125 per month. I was trying to earn it by building the membership with mailings and personal contact, providing greater service to all our members and expanding WGC visibility and outreach. I wrote an invited article on vision questing for the "Women in Natural Resources Journal" [Riley 1997]

WGC Enters Adolescence:

Our March 1998 gathering drew 96 people to Westminster Woods Conference Center north of San Francisco, and we began to experience more difficulty in achieving consensus. With more

people involved more time was needed to discuss different ideas of how we should organize

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and operate, and to make even routine decisions. But while we had some “testy” moments in council over various issues, all agreed it was a good meeting. Keynoters Bill Plotkin described his “Soulcraft” ideas for vision questing, and Gigi Coyle, then completing a book on the subject, talked about the practice of Council, which soon became a fundamental tool for resolving conflicts at Gatherings and elsewhere (Zimmerman & Coyle. 1996). We offered a well-attended first aid course so guides could get certified in wilderness first aid. My financial report documented a growing surplus and I was given another raise to \$250 per month.

I continued my efforts to expand VQ visibility by attending the 6th World Wilderness Congress in Bangalore, India and presenting an invited paper on *The Wilderness Guides Council: Expanding Professionalism and Community Among Leaders of Wilderness Vision Quests and Rites of Passage Programs* [Riley 1998]. I also read an outstanding paper contributed by my brother Steven Foster *Rites of Passage in the Wilderness: A Therapeutic source of Cultural and Environmental Recovery* [Foster 1998]. And John and I presented our study findings (Riley & Hendee 1998).

In March 1999 we gathered again at Stovepipe Wells in Death Valley, with more than 96 of our 204 dues paying members present. The WGC was experiencing growing pains, and also showed signs of full-blown adolescence. Clear divisions over some key issues had emerged, and my views were different than some outspoken members. For example, how organized did we want to be? Some favored no organization—just gather for fellowship each year—No Netkeeper! What part of the membership should be involved in WGC decisions—all the membership [as I believed] or just those who could attend the annual gathering? I felt strongly that achieving our organization’s stated goals depended on continued growth in membership, which would require the involvement of even those who could not be at our annual gatherings. But my mailed survey to ask members about their views on issues facing the WGC was very controversial—some members strongly opposing it. Even more controversial was the idea of voting, or majority decisions when consensus was impossible—which we sometimes experienced with 75+ persons sitting in council. I felt pushed into the role of “Mom”, trying to stay the course toward our stated goals in our adolescent environment. By now we were trying to use the “practice of council” to work toward consensus and it promised to help, but was not yet a game changer.

By this time we had accumulated more than a \$12,000 budget surplus, and the Council approved my proposals to contract for development of a WGC web site, a modest stipend for a web-master, and money for out-of-state committee member travel expenses so persons beyond California could participate in WGC business during the year. It feels here like I’m glossing over the conflicts we were experiencing—they were very intense at the time and I seriously wondered if I wanted to keep this job—some days I truly wanted to quit.

In March 2000 we gathered again at Stovepipe Wells, this time with 71 persons present, our total membership having declined to 164. At this gathering there was great council facilitation by Gigi Coyle and John Davis, and it helped heal some wounds over policy issues, also demonstrating that “the practice of council” could really help us. I gave up the site registration duties and a volunteer system was organized with coordinators for different regions in California. We had some good workshops. With a healthy budget surplus remaining I

was given a raise to \$600 a month for what was to be my last full year. A new Netkeeper would be selected at the next meeting.

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In March 2001 we gathered at Borrego Springs, almost all 48 members camping out. It was a good gathering—the tradition of meals provided on site by Tony Robichaud’s “Many Horses Café” began, we had some good workshops, a wonderful candle light opening ceremony, and my dear sister Farion Pearce was selected to be the new Netkeeper. The national economy was changing downward toward recession, and it impacted us. Membership was down to 152. I continued as Netkeeper 6 months to help with the transition. I wanted Farion Pearce to get off to a good start.

My husband John and I retired from leading vision quests in 2003, but followed what was happening in WGC and remained members. We attended the Gathering in 2004 at Anza Borrego, and the International Gathering in England in 2006 (Hendee and Riley, 2006). We also remained active in wilderness conservation, working with the WILD Foundation to expand the wilderness idea around the globe. In this international organization I find an audience receptive to wilderness vision questing and rites of passage. I’ll be ever the missionary for these ancient and cross cultural practices, and continue to support the WGC in expanding the visibility and credibility of vision questing and earth based passage rites. And I’ll work for more protection of more wilderness vision quests and rites of passage.

Conclusion:

Being WGC Netkeeper is not an easy job. Besides in-house business the national and regional economy impacts VQ guides business and thus WGC membership, and budget. Netkeepers who followed me—Farion Pearce, Scout Tomyris and Munro Sickafoose felt the impact of 2 major recessions, yet WGC continued to evolve and respond, setting the stage for renewed progress today under Petra Lentz-Snow’s excellent leadership. I see and feel the positive energy: from new members; a robust slate of active councils; the International exchanges with leadership from several members; taking the plunge to become a non-profit; the “hybrid vigor” from adaptations of the original VQ model reflected by guides running medicine walks, working with the 4-H, leading quests in high schools and universities, forest therapy, elder programs, and Meredith Little and Scott Eberle’s ground breaking work with death and dying (Eberle, 2006).

In closing, I celebrate your progress bringing WGC to this day, poised for even more progress. My heart (and John’s too) is with you. There are a lot of people out there with “nature deficit disorder” that need you! We wish you Godspeed, while we continue to pursue our elder careers as grandparents, and working to save wilderness in the US and worldwide so wilderness rites of passage will have places to continue.

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(1) 6th World Wilderness Congress Proceedings were published by the USDA Forest Service. For convenience, digital copies are available from 2mhendee@att.net

(2) This paper draws upon my presentations to WGC Gatherings at Anza Borrego, CA March 2004, and Oceansong, CA March 2014. WGC history is also documented in articles published in *Circles on the Mountain* and elsewhere, and minutes of WGC gatherings going back to 1988.

