



Peter Jenkins

Author of *A Walk Across America* and *The Walk West*

ACROSS
CHINA

*ACROSS CHINA*_____

Also by Peter Jenkins

A WALK ACROSS AMERICA

THE WALK WEST (*with Barbara Jenkins*)

THE ROAD UNSEEN (*with Barbara
Jenkins*)

THE TENNESSEE SAMPLER (*with
friends*)

ACROSS CHINA

Peter Jenkins

A William Morrow/Sweet Springs Press Book

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*Where liberty dwells
there is my country.*

—BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

*ACROSS CHINA*_____

1

*A Low-Slung Mood*_____

I was hungry and bored and I was in such a dreary mood that I didn't feel like going anywhere. I was looking at some old slides, sitting in the funky green and white trailer that I used as an office, not even wanting to look out the window. The sky was a low-slung oppressive gray and it seemed that dismal winter skies and lifeless trees would always be here. It was the end of February. For the past two years I'd been working in this drafty trailer that sat behind Mr. Luther's grocery store.

Since our five-year walk across America had ended we'd moved to

Spring Hill, Tennessee (native pronunciation “Sprang Heel”). It’s a town of less than a thousand and our 135-acre farm borders Spring Hill’s eastern city limits. Here, just thirty-seven miles south of Nashville, there aren’t many eating places for humans to choose from. There are many more cows and horses around here than people, and plenty more hay and clover fields than restaurants. For lunch I could go to the Poplar House Restaurant and eat a fine hamburger of fresh-ground prime local beef and leave stuffed and smelling like smoke, or I could go to the Cedar Inn and get meat and three veggies and cornbread for a few dollars.

The Poplar House was next to Spring Hill’s only combination Laundromat and barber shop. The Cedar Inn was between the Red Raider Market (the only place in town to get dog food or diapers after 8:00 P.M.), and Anderson’s Hardware. Lloyd Anderson hadn’t been open too long, and that was the only place to get bolts and nails within ten miles.

No, I didn’t want to be friendly today. And if you live in a small town where you know just about everyone, it’s better not to go out in public when you’re in a raggy mood. Maybe I should just walk across the gravel parking lot to Luther’s and get a Diet Coke, a bag of cashews, and taco chips. Nah. Bubbly little Mrs. Luther would want to talk. She would talk to me while I was in line at the cash register, and then sometimes follow me out the door talking. I could learn more from Mrs. Luther about the folks around here than from the combined daily output of the *Daily Herald*, WKRM radio, and Channel 5-TV news.

I’d been sifting through hundreds of boxes of slides jazzing up my slide show. For the past few years I’d been invited to many colleges to “lecture” about my walk across America. I picked up the slides again, holding them up to the dull light coming through the window. I’d taken these on the high plains of New Mexico. The colors were the saturated golds and the electric purples of late summer, the western cowboy’s sky. I could see, too, the black silhouettes of gnarled fence posts and windmills. The slides took me there.

Why couldn’t I just get in my Ford pickup, head straight up I-65 to the Nashville airport and fly somewhere to warm sun and warm wind and warm, green ground? No, my wife, Barbara, was expecting me home for dinner. It was my turn to bathe the kids, Rebekah and Jed, and read them bedtime stories like *The Muffin Munchin’ Dragon*. There were our wood stoves to stoke. Then there were other demanding ladies, my herd of about fifty cows, and our bulls,