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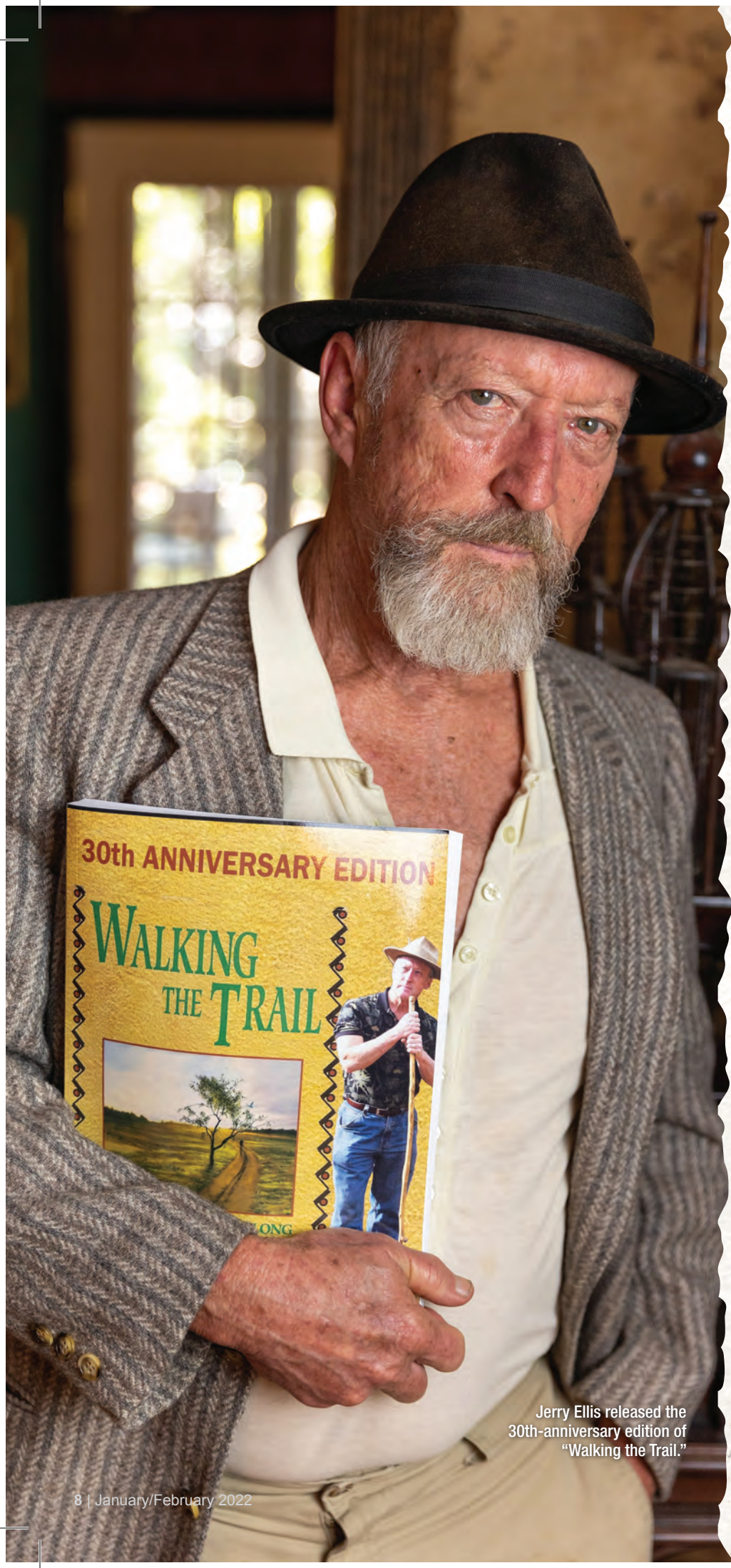


Jerry's journey

Local author recalls
life-changing walk

Little
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Making
science fun



‘Walking the Trail’

Jerry Ellis celebrates 30 years since the journey that changed his life

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Photography by MELISSA GAINES

As the hot afternoon sun bore down, Jerry Ellis stopped to rest underneath a shade tree. He took off his shoes and socks and rubbed his aching, blistered feet.

The 41-year-old, only hours into his walk on the Trail of Tears in September 1989, already felt exhausted. He wondered what he had gotten himself into and even debated whether he could go on. Sitting there hurting and discouraged, he heard a crow’s loud caw. Jerry’s grandfather had taught him when he was a youngster to call crows with his hands and to pay attention to the alerts of the birds. “When I heard that crow, I had the feeling that my grandfather was with me,” Jerry says.

Jerry walked the Trail of Tears in reverse from Oklahoma to his home in Fort Payne over the next two months, pitching a tent most nights and walking during the day. The Trail of Tears represents the route used to remove the Cherokee and other Native American tribes from their homelands in 1838. “I was the first person in the modern world to walk the 900-mile route of the Cherokee Trail of Tears,” he says. And those two months on the trail changed his life.

Within six months of the walk, Jerry wrote the Pulitzer-nominated book “Walking the Trail: One Man’s Journey Along the Cherokee Trail of Tears.” It sold in two weeks to Random House, and he released the book’s 30th-anniversary edition last year. He’s now working with John Behring, a renowned television director and producer, as he writes a screenplay based on his account.

Jerry Ellis released the 30th-anniversary edition of “Walking the Trail.”



AT HOME

Nowadays, the author of 10 books spends most of his time at Tanager House, the Fort Payne home and retreat he and his late wife built on a ridge near the base of Sand Mountain. He also visits Rome, Italy, in the spring and fall. But it's at his Alabama home where he feels such a connection to his Cherokee heritage. His great-grandmother, a Cherokee, was born in 1836, and their family arrived in the Sulphur Springs area in 1837.

Jerry was born in Fort Payne, and he and his family lived at the bottom of the hill where he now resides. When he was 5, his grandfather gave him his first arrowhead.

He left home at age 17 and hitchhiked to New York City to stay with his sister, Sandra Lafferty, whose career as an actress had taken her far from home.

After hitchhiking back and forth across the country for a few years, Jerry became a student at the University of Alabama, studying English and history. He obtained a bachelor's degree there in 1970 and then took graduate classes in Oklahoma.

He worked as a screenwriter in the entertainment industry in Hollywood, but his wanderlust eventually took him all over the country to cities like Chicago, Oklahoma City and New Orleans. As he sat in a small, one-room apartment in Los Angeles he had an epiphany. "I knew I must walk the Trail of Tears," he says. He sold everything he owned and put together about \$800 to finance his trip. He prepared for weeks for the physical challenges before him.

Once he arrived in Oklahoma, a man gave him a ride from Muskogee to Tahlequah, and he woke up on a cool September morning, excited to start his journey. But the cool morning quickly turned to a scorching hot day, and that's when Jerry encountered the crow and felt he was not alone. During his two-month walk, he met several people along the way — many of whom were of Cherokee descent. They opened up, sharing with him their experiences, which became part of his story.

TURNING POINT

Jerry detailed his journey through the written word, looking back on the experience that had become a turning point in his life. "Walking the trail renewed my faith in a higher power and in humanity. For me, I honored my ancestors and redeemed myself for things I've done in my life," he says. "I felt like it was my destiny."

Success as a writer has taken Jerry to six continents for lectures about the Trail of Tears book and the Cherokee, and he hosts a writing institute each year. At one of his lectures, at a seminar at Denver Publication Institute, he met his wife. They were together 28 years before her death two years ago.

In 2001, the couple designed and built Tanager House, named for the songbird. Jerry also hosts an artist retreat each year at Tanager House on 60 wooded acres, and he leads workshops on writing, publishing and spirituality. The Italian-inspired home reflects the couple's interests — it's

filled with ornate carvings, a fountain and art they collected from all over the world.

His home may seem remote to some, but it's conveniently located near town. FTC extended service in that area recently, and having access to fiber internet makes communication much easier. Jerry continues to write and can do much of his research and search for information about his own ancestry while exchanging large files with publishers, producers or directors.

"Having fiber internet has made a huge difference for me," he says. "I can still live in an area I love while having connectivity to the rest of the world." 📶

Books by Jerry Ellis include:

- *Walking the Trail: One Man's Journey Along the Cherokee Trail of Tears*
- *On the Trail of the Pony Express*
- *Marching Through Georgia: My Walk Along Sherman's Route*
- *Walking to Canterbury: A Modern Journey Through Chaucer's Medieval England*
- *Ciao From Roma! Spring in the Eternal City of Love with Paolo Canova*
- *Cherokee History for Indian Lovers*
- *Two Wolves: A Cherokee's Journey to Feed the Sacred One*

Copies are available online. Autographed copies are available locally at the Mentone Cultural Center and at the Depot Museum in Fort Payne.