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The Columbian A3

Walking club members say 'you see the world differently' when you **explore on foot**



# Pedestrian perspective



Photos by JAMES REXROAD for The Columbian

Volunteer Dan Scheidt, of Portland, and walker Susan Woodside (and her dog, Pongo), of Portland, lead walkers through east Vancouver neighborhoods. The Vancouver Walking Club has been around (under different names) since the 1990s, mostly made up of retirees who like to walk, talk and stay healthy. At top, Dan Webster shows off some of the patches that walkers can earn by keeping their eyes open and checking off specific sights on their routes.

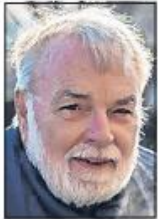


By **SCOTT HEWITT**

The Columbian

**Q:** Why did the walkers cross the road?

**A:** To mark the end of a big year, to explore interesting and beautiful places, to visit with old friends and make new ones — and to get a healthy yet moderate workout while they're at all that.



**Dick Baker**  
Vancouver  
Walking Club  
organizer

"I've walked in other countries and in all 50 states," said Dorothy Steedle, president of the Vancouver Walking Club. That's the latest name for an evolving group that has absorbed several others across the past few decades, like the Clark County All Weather Walkers and the Vancouver USA Volkssporters.

"Volkssporting has been declining, but I think all clubs are declining," Steedle said. "We're all aging, and we're not bringing in younger people. The '90s were the glory days. All the walking clubs were very busy."

"Once, we had a big international walk in Vancouver, in the 1990s," fellow club organizer Dick Baker said. "They were called the Discovery Walks. It was a big thing. We'd get thousands of people from all kinds of different countries, and the city



**Walkers gather at the McMenemy's restaurant in east Vancouver to register and pick up maps for their Vancouver Walking Club outing on New Year's Eve morning.**

provided support."

While clubs may grow or shrink, walking for both fitness and friendliness never seems to go out of style. On New Year's Eve morning, dozens of Vancouver Walking Club members — plus a few visitors from sister clubs in Oregon — launched from the McMenemy's restaurant on Northeast 162nd Avenue (which opened an

hour early, so the club had someplace warm to convene and get organized) and toured, on foot, eastside Vancouver neighborhoods and Pacific Community Park.

Participants got to choose between various carefully mapped local walking routes, including a 6-kilometer

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# Walkers

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route that headed northeast through the neighborhood around Maple Crest Park, and a 5-kilometer route that crisscrossed nearby Pacific Community Park and the adjacent neighborhood to the south. Some ambitious walkers did both, in tandem.

"Some of those guys have really long legs, and they can really cover some ground," said walker Eileen Anderson, who said she'd be limiting herself to one route.

The New Year's Eve event was a big one for the Vancouver Walking Club, which also hosts regular Wednesday group walks in different locations. Nearby clubs in Portland and vicinity also host regular, frequent, low-key group outings. Some walkers who turned out on New Year's Eve morning said they walk with some club or other, somewhere in the region, several times per week.

"There are trails and routes set up by each club," Steedle said. "In each town or city, they try to select the most interesting things to see. Myself, I like seashores. I like quaint downtowns. I like city parks. There's so much in this country to see."

Dan Webster, an organizer of the Cedar Milers walking club of Cedar Mills, Ore., was on hand with opportunities for walkers to undertake



Photos by JAMES REXROAD for The Columbian

**Walkers wait for their guides at the McMenemy's restaurant in east Vancouver on Wednesday morning. Their gospel: Seeing the world on foot, and making new friends as you go, is better in every way than speeding past it in your car.**



**Volunteer Dan Scheidt, of Portland, leads a pack of walkers Wednesday morning through east Vancouver neighborhoods on a 5K walk.**



**Walkers go through a variety of neighborhoods and surface streets on their 5K walk. The Vancouver Walking Club has been around since the 1990s.**

various fun challenges. One of those challenges is alphabetical, with participants striving (or striding) to earn letter patches that spell the word WALK. To earn each patch, you've got to check off various items that begin with that letter — so, for example, to earn a W patch, you've got to spot water towers, watering holes, water treatment plants and waterways. To earn an A, the requirements are antique shops, arenas, auditoriums and arches.

"You see the world differently when you are walking," Steedle said. "You see more, you notice more than when you're driving. You're more alive, I'd say."

### 'Car-free' in Germany

As the original term "volkssporting" suggests, turning the simple act of walking into an organized, social community pastime arose in Germany.

"The real thing was, it was the German economy," said Baker, who lived and worked in West Germany in the 1970s as a civilian connected with the U.S. Army there.

Early in that decade,

Baker recalled, a worldwide energy crisis prompted West Germany to close its freeways on certain Sundays. Those empty roadways filled up with people who made a point of getting around on foot — or on bike, or rollerskates, or other people-powered, nonpolluting method of transportation — and made all that into a community festival, too.

Volkssporting had already been growing in Germany since the 1960s, but these new "automobil-freie Sonntage," that is, car-free Sundays, provided a big assist. Since then, Baker said, Germans have made walking from town to town a signature point of pride.

"Each little village would welcome all the walkers, and they'd have an oompah band and a town celebration," he said.

U.S. Air Force veteran Bob Hall said he remembers those days in Germany. He was stationed there in the late 1980s, Hall said, and was one of many veterans who brought a renewed appreciation for walking back to the States with him.

"When we got back to

the U.S., all us GIs were volkssporting," he said.

When Hall retired, he said, he faced the big, scary question of what to do with his time.

"They took my computer away, and they took my phone away," he said.

But the answer was obvious, because Hall was already an eager hiker and former marathon runner. In addition to joining local volkssporting clubs — first in Portland, then Vancouver when he moved here — he's also undertaken some really epic walking challenges.

A few years ago, he walked the entire Pacific Crest Trail, 2,653 miles. More recently, he traversed the whole country on a Liberty Walk.

According to its website, nonprofit agency Liberty Walks is based in Eugene, Ore., where it aims to build civic-minded connections and reduce the politics of division and fear in America

by sending just plain folks on coast-to-coast walks.

"Look at this wonderful group of people," Hall said of the small mob who turned out for the New Year's Eve morning walk in Vancouver. "We share our life stories. We share the same kinds of life issues."

### 'Just curious'

Pat Jewett of Vancouver said she's gone on more organized, sanctioned walks — both group and solo — than she can possibly remember. Some of those have been with volkssporting clubs like Vancouver's, she said, but some were spurred by other fitness and walking boosters, such as a Colorado-based company called Run The Edge, which lets you log your miles and try different challenges.

Run the Edge's "Run the Year" challenge spurred Jewett to walk 2,025 miles in 2025. This year, she

said, she'll try for 2,026.

Jewett said she enjoys checking out every little street, more or less, in every town she visits. Over the past year, she said, you might have spied her exploring culs-de-sac in Oregon towns like Scappoose and St. Helens.

"I'm just curious," she said.

Occasionally, there's even an elaborate multi-club outing that involves Amtrak — like the time groups of volkswalkers in Portland and then Vancouver climbed aboard the northbound train and got off in Centralia, where they spent the day touring the town on foot, said Anderson, who walked New Year's Eve morning.

"We all like to walk," Anderson said, "but the train is fun, too."

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