

My Fifty States Backpacking Project by Dan Styer; 23 May 2015, revised 24 August 2015

Think of a song about America: “From the mountains, to the prairies, to the oceans white with foam”; “From the Redwood forest, to the Gulf Stream waters . . . the sparkling sands of her diamond deserts”; “I love thy rocks and rills, thy woods and templed hills”; “For amber waves of grain, for purple mountain majesties, above the fruited plain . . . from sea to shining sea”. Yes. Every one exalts the variety and splendor of American’s many landscapes.

Now think of a backpacking trail in America: Appalachian Trail; Pacific Crest Trail; Continental Divide Trail. That’s right: “From the mountains, to the mountains, to the mountains”. These trails don’t celebrate the variety of American’s many landscapes. What happened to the prairies, the pastoral plains, the diamond deserts, the oceans white with foam?

That was my thinking when I turned sixty years old. I had been backpacking, with great pleasure, since age fourteen years. Occasionally I had ventured away from mountains (the Pine Barrens of New Jersey on the Batona Trail; the high sage desert at the south end of the Idaho Centennial Trail, the pastoral north end of Pennsylvania’s Mid State Trail), but most of my walking had been mountains after mountains after mountains. I’m not complaining: I *do* love America’s rocks and rills, I always have, and I always will. But what about her other landscapes? I vowed to expand my wilderness travel to prairies and plains and coasts. Turning this nebulous desideratum into a concrete goal, I set out to go backpacking in every one of the fifty United States.

Here’s the status of my project so far: I’ve backpacked in 14 states (Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, West Virginia, North Carolina, Georgia, Colorado, Idaho, and Nevada). I’ve picked out tentative locations I’d like to backpack in most of the others.

Some are pastoral: Rhode Island’s Arcadia Management Area.

Some are canyons: Tennessee’s Savage Gulf.

Some are deserts: Utah’s Buckskin Gulch and Arizona’s Sycamore Canyon.

Some are prairies: Iowa’s Loess Hills and North Dakota’s Maah Daah Hey Trail.

Some have historical associations: Wisconsin’s Flambeau River, beloved by Aldo Leopold; Wyoming’s Titcomb Basin, where Terry Tempest Williams watched a coyote and “any boundaries I felt as a human being toward other creatures dissolved”; retracing the route of John Muir’s “First Summer in the Sierra”.

Some are lakelands: Minnesota’s Boundary Waters Canoe Area (also beloved by Aldo Leopold).

Some are wetlands: Virginia’s Great Dismal Swamp.

Some are virgin forests: Alabama’s Sipsey Wilderness and California’s Redwoods.

And some trace the shores of oceans white with foam: the beach of Mississippi’s Gulf Islands National Seashore; the Oregon Coast Trail; the Na Pali coast in Kauai.

The future is not fixed, so if you’d like to suggest your favorites, I’m all ears! You can view my project tracking map at <http://www.google.com/maps/d/edit?mid=ze1o7URz9pX8.kzcW9cyFNGR8>.

To finish the project I want to set out from my home here on Ohio’s Vermilion River, canoe south upriver to the North Coast Inland Trail (a rails-to-trails conversion) and then walk west for some distance on that pastoral trail. This will be far from a wilderness experience, but I’ve long wished to take a purely human-powered journey that started and ended at my very own threshold.

I will probably die with this project still underway, but even so it gives me hope and spirit.