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LET'S GO HIKING
by
Richard and Kitty Douthit

Hike in Kansas?
It's flat, you say, uninteresting?
Actually what walkers find is that rolling plains and hills and rocky streambeds which look so gentle from the windows of automobiles, pickup trucks and school buses can be remarkably challenging on foot.

In the backyard of almost every Kansas community is the remnant of a trail walked by the first settlers. Remember that the precious room in wagons was reserved for tools and household goods necessary to establish life on the frontier.

Whether your community lies along Pike's route to the Rocky Mountains, Black Dog's route to the summer pastures in Montana, Coronado's search for gold or the Mormon Battalion's route to California, the first men in these parts walked—and they didn't always find the going easy.

In a number of cases they kept minute records of their trips, often recording the plants and animals, the mineral deposits and the habits of the Indians they encountered. Washington Irving, Zebulon Pike and Coronado's accounts of their trips, to name a few, provide insight into the challenge of walking when it was a way of life instead of a sport or an educational adventure.

Small segments of many of the early trails are still accessible to Kansans who wish to become more intimately acquainted with their land.

The Kansas Park and Resources Authority published a study of the available public and private trails throughout the state in 1979. Included are many privately developed areas, camps operated by organizations and trails developed for special user groups.

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as well as directory of public trails
operated on public lands and developed
by federal, state, county and city aген­
cies.

Whether the objective is an hour-long
stroll down a nature trail or a weekend
of backpacking, hikers need to be aware
of certain standard qualities necessary
for a good trail.

Why hike on a trail at all?
It's not unusual to hear someone insist
that there isn't any need for trails.
"If I want to walk, I'll just go out in
the country and walk," these folks say.
Right?
Wrong.

There are several good reasons for
following a trail.

Most obvious is the fact that permis­
sions are important. Cooperation bet­
ween landowners, public agencies and
hikers is the basis for the development of
trails, and it is important that hikers
understand the agreements and stay o
the trails.

Besides, trails go somewhere. They
meander around getting there, to be
sure, but that is the whole point of hik­
ing.

Trail designers have spent many hours
scouting the area through which the trail
will go and they have taken into con­
sideration conservation techniques, as
well as identified an interesting varied
route.

Often they have found an abandoned
fence row, an old cattle trail or a terrace
which protected an abandoned field for
you to follow. Wild animals make their
own trails to their favorite food and
watering places, too, and often animal
trails are incorporated by trail designers.

It's surprisingly easy to find the way to
old Indian campgrounds, which should
give a novice hiker some idea how long
it takes to erase the signs of human
walkers.

That's why it's important to use a
trail. Not only is it fun to be part of a
tradition which keeps people going on
foot to the same place generation after
generation, if they use the same trail it
keeps the land intact.

It is also disappointing to find that a
misplaced trail, too close to a stream or
lake shore, has worn away the land and
disappeared.

Well-designed trails don't disturb the
environment. Instead they become part
of it and cooperate with the plants and
animals which live along the trail. At
Perry Lake near Topeka, backpackers
share the trail with deer, racoons and
coyotes, and that's an important part of the trip.

The time it takes to walk a few miles can restore a sense of perspective. Not only do the rolling hills become steeper, the rock faces more challenging, the walker begins to feel a kinship with the time it takes a tree to grow, a flower to bloom and seed itself so that it can grow again another year.

In the time it takes to sit quietly in a clearing and watch the birds, that same kinship can be re-established. Often the foot traveler begins to realize that the spot he has chosen, has been chosen over and over again by those who have been in that same place. Iris and lilacs at the edge of a lonesome clearing announce clearly that it was once a homestead. Sometimes further exploration will identify the foundations of buildings which have been gone a long time—or a row of stones, looking perfectly natural, turns out to be an abandoned fence.

Whether the reason for walking—a class project in environmental biology, a study of frontier life, a search for the plants and animals of Kansas or a stroll for pleasure—there is a place near you where you can become better acquainted with the earth on which you live by using your two feet.

WHAT KIND OF EQUIPMENT DO YOU NEED?

The best answer to the question is, that depends on how far you're going, and what the weather's going to be. Some suppliers will try to convince you that you need a full set of expedition-quality gear. You may indeed need that, if you're ready to go on an expedition. But this side of expeditions there are many days and nights of delightful hiking and pack packing.

Kansas parks and campgrounds now offer a wide variety of nature and interpretive trails, and a short walk on a summer afternoon calls for no special equipment. The clothes you have on will do nicely, and you'll be back before you get thirsty.

The pressure changes as you add the miles. Your feet will soon tell you that you need shoes, or boots. Going barefoot will tire you much quicker and, besides that, it's dangerous. As you get further from the trailhead, too, you give the weather more and more time to change. Take along another layer or two of clothing—two thin layers are more efficient than one thick one. Put on a hat for protection against sun or cold, whichever comes first. Add a poncho or
raincoat if rain threatens. And a bottle of water and a lunch. A small first aid kit may come in handy. This sort of equipment fits neatly into a small daypack which hangs from your shoulders. Most people can carry ten to fifteen pounds quite comfortably.

The big problem which strikes a hiker who’s adequately dressed is water. None of the outdoor water in Kansas is safe to drink unless it’s treated. The best idea is to carry your own or to use public supplies, which are tested frequently. We seldom carry more than a quart or two. When you look for a campsite for the night, there must be water there. Water is heavy, and no one can carry enough to take him very far.

Good outdoor clothing is easy to find in the work clothes department of local discount or ranch store. Pick those fabrics designed for easy care, for they dry quickly. And buy a generous fit which gives the body plenty of room to move and ventilate. Clothing creates a climate around you which keeps you comfortable. What you need is insulation and windbreak.

Many a good all day hike has been ruined by footache. Study your feet and listen to what they tell you. Take along some moleskin to patch the hot spots before they become blisters. And think of moving up to some sort of boots. The best buy is a pair of six-inch work boots, available at any store where working men and women go for shoes. And try thicker socks, maybe two pairs of them, a thin pair inside the thick ones. Most experienced backpackers wear wool, summer as well as winter, for the insulation and the cushion it gives.

Serious backpakers usually got started this way, walking around town, wander-
ing over a neighboring nature trail, go­ing further and further away before tur­ning back. I remember an incredibility beautiful day high in the Colorado Rockies, when we had neither shelters nor sleeping bags and we had to be back down the mountain before dark. And it was three o’clock . . . . I said then I had to become a backpacker, because I didn’t want ever to have to leave such a place just because I couldn’t stay here tonight.

A “backpack” is a very different piece of equipment than a “day-pack,” in two particularly important ways. First, it has a frame, either a shining sort of a ladder outside or several stays within the walls. This frame picks up the weight and transfers it downwards. The other vital feature is a waist belt, preferably padded, which secures the bottom of the frame to your hips. Maybe we should call these things “hip-packs,” because you carry the weight on your hips, not on your back. Most people carry 25-40 pounds quite comfortably. Don’t be fooled by the el cheapo models—both the frame and the belt are absolutely essential.

You have to have a backpack because, if you decide to spend the night on the trail and make some more miles tomorrow, you need a shelter and a sleeping bag, and more clothes and more food. All that means more weight.

A good shelter is more simple than most people think. Get 100’ of nylon cord and a 9 x 12 plastic tarp at your local discount store. Cut the cord into various lengths, and burn the ends to keep them from raveling. String one between two trees and tie the tarp over it in an A-frame style. Tie down the corners and you have a dry, comfortable spot for one or two people. Bugs? Take along a small bottle of repellent for your face, put the rest of yourself in your sleeping bag. Summer’s the only time they’ll bother you anyway.

Later on, if you grow to like backpacking, you can move up to a nylon ripstop tarp, much tougher and more dependable. Or a double-walled backpacker tent, more comfortable and much, much more expensive!

Sleeping bags? You can spend $300 for an expedition model—and find yourself sleeping hot most of the time you’re out. Actually you can be comfortable most of the Kansas year in rectangular camper model from mail-order house, for about $20! If you do get cold, put on some clothes inside the bag—or do as one famous packpacker, Jim Kern, does—carry red flannel pajamas and wear
them! Gloves and socks and a stocking cap help, too.

Beware the cheap bags featuring waterproof bottoms. Instead, buy a sleeping pad made of closed cell foam, now widely marketed under several different brand names. Even a thin piece long enough for hips and shoulders and head provides excellent insulation, and a water barrier between you and the ground, too. Or, carry a small piece of plastic tarp to spread around on the ground under your shelter—and keep your equipment as well as you and your bag up out of the wet.

Later on you may want to move up to a down bag, designed to fit closely around your body for maximum conservation of body heat. If you're bent on winter backpacking, you need two of them, one which fits inside the other. Someone along the trail may have a different kind of pad, too, one you like better. Some of us still use air mattresses. They're more comfortable and work well in summer. But they'll freeze your tail when the ground's cold!

More clothing? Well, not much more. Most of us carry one change of clothing, maybe two changes of socks. Depending on the weather, you need more, and better, layers. Perhaps another shirt, a heavier one, or a sweater. A better windbreaker, perhaps a "mountain parka," which always has a hood. You'll be amazed at how much more comfortable you are when you cover your head, say, with a stocking cap and the hood.

Gloves? Yes, they mean comfort, and safety, too, if you're cooking around a hot stove or fire. When it's really going to be cold, switch to wool, underclothes, pants, shirts, hat, as well as socks—it dries from the inside and always feels toasty.

Food? One of the ways some people glamorize and mystify backpacking is to tell long stories about gourmet meals which come magically from small plastic pouches. But for most trips you never need to go beyond the supermarket down the street. Take a couple of hours and wander through reading labels. You'll find lightweight and dried foods aplenty, cereals and milk and fruit for breakfast, cheeses, crackers, nuts, and candies for lunches, and a wide variety of dinner dishes and desserts. Try out some of these things at home, see how you like them, and give yourself time to experiment with better combinations.
Cooking? Surprisingly enough, many backpackers simply don't. They pick already prepared foods which provide them with an adequate diet for the time they're out. Thus, they minimize the hassles and give themselves more time for important things like sunsets and hummingbirds. Most of us, though, carry small stoves nowadays, because we like hot drinks, and hot meals, too, especially when it's cold outside. Elaborate cooksets are available, but you can do nicely with lightweight pots from the dime store. Fires? We seldom use them anymore, and in many places there's no wood left to burn, anyway.

The point is that lack of equipment need never keep you from going on a hike. Even if you want to go out for several days, you can borrow some things, improvise others, and have just a delightful time for very little expense. Later on, as you get more seriously interested, you'll find some supplier is making just what you need. By then, you'll be a backpacker, self-propelled, self-motivated, and self-provisioned. See you on the trail!

**WHY NOT BUILD A TRAIL?**

Here in Kansas we are part of a great national effort to build the hiking and backpacking trails we need. But when we organized the Kansas Trails Council six years ago, few of us had had experience building trails. Mel Baughman, a professional forester, did spend a lot of time in the woods, and he had a growing interest in trail-building. Jim Copeland had grown up backpacking the Pacific Crest and still thinks of it as his home trail. Dorothy Stanley Moore had been the first Kansan to work in the
Volunteer Conservation Corps. But all of us were experienced backpackers and hikers. We had walked thousands of miles of trails all across the continent, and we knew what we like and why.

As we worked on our Bicentennial Project, the Perry Lake National Recreation Trail, we often sat around the campfire at night and talked about what we were doing. Gradually we clarified the natural steps you have to take, if you do it right. Here they are.

**Permission.** Wherever it is, a trail just entices people to walk it. In every project we've done, there have been people walking behind us the same day we made the clearing. The owner of the land, or the responsible manager, needs to understand this implication from the beginning. Get official permission first.

**Scouting.** One of our sobering discoveries was that it takes a group to scout a trail—you can't do it alone. Trails are social things. You and your colleagues need to look at all the surrounding terrain before choosing the route. We estimate you'll need three times as many days for exploration and design work as you will for the clearing and construction. The best time of the year for scouting is winter, when the days are cold and bright and the leaves are off the trees.

**Flagging.** Sooner or later you start making decisions about where you're going to put the trail. We mark the route with blue surveyor's tape, hanging a streamer here and there on convenient twigs and branches. At first we flag it lightly, until we are sure of what we
want to do. Later we put up plenty of flags, so the clearing crews know exactly where to do their work.

**Clearing.** We were surprised to find how quickly a group of eight or nine volunteers, using loppers and small bow saws, can clear a beautiful trail through the woods. For the first clearing we simply open up a 6' x 8' path which can be walked by a tall man wearing a backpack.

**Refinement.** Trails are made by peoples' feet, and the tread they leave will soon tell you where they want to go. Sometimes the best-laid plans of the designers simply go awry. We're already improving the Perry Lake Trail as experience teaches us the better routes. Sometimes in rough terrain the tread will need to be smoothed over. Blazes and signs may be necessary at this stage, too.

**Clean up.** The first builders may be in a hurry, and they may leave brush and debris behind. The trail may meander past old homesteads and trashheaps. Here and there another limb may need to come out. To make a trail a more beautiful and pleasant experience, you may want to clean it up.

**Maintenance.** A trail is a living thing, and someone has to take care of it. Trees and bushes will try to reclaim the space. Some travelers may leave their trash behind. And, sad to say, some of them will destroy any markers or signs you put up. You'll have to work on your trail from time to time if it is to continue providing a pleasant experience for travelers.

All across America volunteers are mobilizing to work with federal, state, and local governments to create and maintain the hiking trails we need. In
the East thousands of volunteer workers rally every year to keep the world-famous Appalachian Trail alive and beautiful. The same kind of cooperative effort is creating the Pacific Crest, the Continental Divide, and the North Country National Scenic Trails. Add to those systems some five thousand miles of National Recreation Trails, including nine here in Kansas and another almost ready for designation. Let's build some more this year!

A KANSAS LEADER'S LIBRARY
On the Great Outdoors in Kansas

Trails in Kansas: A Special Study.
Topeka: Kansas Park and Resources Authority, 1979. The only comprehensive survey of all the trails in Kansas, including those used by hikers, backpackers, canoeists, horseback riders, motorcyclists, educators.


ON FIRST AID

ON BUILDING AND MAINTAINING TRAILS
Proudman, Robert D. AMC Field Guide to Trail Building and Maintenance. Boston: Appalachian Mountain Club, 1977. By far the best source on building and using the longer backpacking trails. The Club has been doing this kind of work longer than anybody else and Proudman, their Trail Supervisor for many years, has distilled all their wisdom into a handy pocket manual.


ON THE SPORT CALLED "BACKPACKING"
Fletcher, Colin. The New Complete Walker: the joys and techniques of hiking and backpacking. New York: Knopf, 1974. This is still the masterwork—until you’ve read Fletcher you just don’t know what the sport is all about.


just an equipment guide; includes chapters on many aspects of contemporary wilderness life.


*Backpacker*. The only magazine which has survived—there used to be three of them. And this one gets slicker and better all the time. Published six times a year. It's now
the best source of good current information. It evaluates some type of equipment in every issue.

Thomas, Lynn. *The Backpacking Woman*. Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1980. Someone had to do it, and this author has done it very, very well! She deals thoughtfully and competently with the special problems women face on the trail. Includes profiles of season-
ed women backpackers. And a winsome discussion of the gifts the sport gives us all.

Jack, Nancy. *The Complete Pack Provision Book*. The most sensible of all those books on cooking outdoors and on the move. Written by a Kansan from her twenty years of experience. It offers reassurance and gentle encouragement to the uneasy beginner.

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**BACKPAKER MAXIMS “Tried and True Sayings”**

If your feet get cold, put on your hat.

You don’t need a fire—you are afire.

Thin layers of clothing work best—take one off to cool, put one on to warm.

Food calls for water isn’t you. Eat short if you’re short of water.

A hiker’s best friend is his whistle. Don’t get caught outside without it.

Choose boots to fit the foot and the trail—an extra pound on your feet equals ten pounds on your back.

On the trail cleanliness is not next to godliness, it’s more. Clean your cookpot and save your stomach.

Wool insulated even when it’s wet, and it dries from the inside.

Leave your sheath knife at home—a three-inch pocket blade is enough to meet all your trail needs.

The creatures keep their distance, you’d better keep yours. Those cute little fellows have knives in their mouths, and they may use them on you.

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