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Book Review: 'The Last Great Walk' by Wayne Curtis

On hot days, America's most famous long-distance walker lined his hat with ice wrapped in cabbage leaves.

By Edward Kosner
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SAVE PRINT TEXT

Edward Payson Weston was a pedestrian little man with a lofty ambition—to walk farther and faster than any American had ever done before. He is lost today in the mists of American oddity, but in his time Weston—who stood just 5-foot-8 and weighed 125 pounds—was such a celebrated figure that tens of thousands of people greeted him in Chicago during his epic attempt, in 1909, to cover 4,000 miles in 100 days by hiking across the continent. He was 70 years old.

Weston's trek is the ligature on which Wayne Curtis constructs his engaging new book, "The Last Great Walk." Mr. Curtis not only paces along with Weston through snow, rain, heat and gloom of night but uses his heroic pilgrimage to meditate on the evolution of Homo sapiens from bipedal hunter-gatherer covering 15 miles or more on the savanna each day to sedentary modern man encased in cars, cubicles and La-Z-Boys while muscles atrophy and brain cells die.

THE LAST GREAT WALK

By Wayne Curtis
Rodale, 236 pages, \$24.99



Edward Payson Weston setting out to walk from New York to Minnesota in 1913. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

A true American eccentric, Weston was part stellar athlete—"walking's Hank Aaron," as Mr. Curtis puts it—part hustler. Born of Mayflower stock in Providence, R.I., in 1839, he was a sickly but restless child and was encouraged to take brisk daily walks to build himself up. He left school early on, joined a traveling circus, wrote articles for local papers and finally found his way peddling his mother's children's books door to door. He started walking for his supper around the time of the Civil War and never stopped. Soon he was America's premier pedestrian, winning purses and side bets in indoor walking races and outdoor long-distance competitions. He earned extra cash by giving lectures at various stops and selling pamphlets recounting his exploits.

Weston turned himself into a flamboyant spectacle. On one 1869 hike, he sported, according to a contemporary reporter, "a showy uniform with a lofty white plume stuck in military cap." Sometimes he wore a Marine-style military tunic; at other times, purple velvet pants, white stockings and a polka-dot shirt. On especially hot days, he would line his hat with ice wrapped in cabbage leaves. At the end of an 1861 march from Boston to Washington, D.C., Weston wangled an introduction to Abraham Lincoln, who had other things on his mind but managed to praise his "great powers of endurance."

Weston's road uniform was more subdued on his 1909 transcontinental walk, but his white mustache—a Fu Manchu/walrus hybrid—turned heads. Thousands cheered as he set out from the main New York post office opposite City Hall on the afternoon of March 15, 1909, bearing a letter from the city's postmaster to his counterpart in San Francisco. He would not deliver the letter until July 15, having braved a host of torments and mishaps on the long way west.

The Walking Man, as Weston was called, kept no journals of the trip and never wrote an autobiography, but Mr. Curtis deftly reconstructs the journey from the voluminous newspaper coverage it inspired, not least Weston's own near-daily dispatches to the *New York Times*. As Weston plods west, the author intersperses updates on his progress with chapters exploring man's origins as a far-ranging biped and, eventually, the effects of the automobile's 20th-century usurpation of the pedestrian's right of way and way of life.

Some hyperbole inevitably creeps in. Mr. Curtis proclaims that Weston's journey amounts to "a critical turning point in our nation's history," which turns out to be the beginning of the end of long-distance walking in America. At another point, he insists that walking is the unique trait that "makes us human"—although others have argued that self-consciousness, written language and other characteristics more accurately separate us from our quadrupedal fellow mammals. And he argues that modern man's retreat from eons of walking "is one of the most radical things we've ever decided to do."

Still, Mr. Curtis's examination of the biomechanics and salubrious benefits of walking and of every aspect of the pedestrian life is full of fascinating insights and factoids. He speculates on why early man's brain expanded long after he started walking upright: Now that his hands were free for tasks, natural selection favored specimens whose larger brains thought up useful activities. Mr. Curtis reports that only 13% of American children still walk to school; that Australians and Swiss walk twice as much as Americans; and that sedentary TV watching can reduce one's lifespan; and that walking can slow memory loss with aging.

The transgression of "jaywalking," Mr. Curtis relates, was invented during World War I by automobile interests ostensibly for pedestrian safety. The idea was to shame walkers into crossing only at corners. The "jay" referred to wasn't a bird but an old term for *rube*—only a hick would be dopey enough to cross a city street in the middle of the block.

At its best, Mr. Curtis's prose can remind the reader of John McPhee in his prime. "Automobiles," he writes, "are the Plato's caves of the modern world. From them we see only shadows, the rough outlines of our existence. . . . The detailed lines of the etchings around us are lost, replaced with hulking shapes whizzing by at sixty miles per hour, vague and often amorphous forms, save for the jaunty and startlingly blue *Best Buy* sign and the inquisitive yellow eyebrows of the *McDonald's* arches jutting over distant rooftops."

Even such evocative descriptions can't entirely make up for the inexplicable absence of photographs and maps from "The Last Great Walk." To glimpse the picturesque Weston, the reader has to resort to *Google Images*. And you have to trace the walker's daily progress cross-country in your mind's eye or retrieve your school atlas from its dusty bookshelf.

But Mr. Curtis does include a reference to priceless YouTube film footage from 1905 that shows the "amiable mayhem" of urban streets at a time when pedestrians were learning to scramble for safe passage at the dawn of the automobile age. With a camera rigged on the front, a cable car heads along Market Street in San Francisco as horse cabs and carts and right-hand-drive automobiles trundle alongside men in derbies, boys and working men in caps, and women in long dresses. Miraculously, no one is maimed.

It was in San Francisco that Weston finished his transcontinental trek four years later. Slogged by horrific weather and unforgiving terrain—especially in Wyoming—he had walked for 105 days (not counting 17 Sundays, when he rested), five hours and 41 minutes. He had covered 3,925 miles (2,500 along railway tracks), averaging 38 miles a day. Weston was lionized by ecstatic crowds and civic worthies, but he considered his effort a failure, having taken five days longer than he had planned.

So a year later he embarked on a second cross-country trek, but this time he walked west to east from Los Angeles. He had the prevailing wind at his back and chose a southerly route, skirting dread Wyoming. His goal was to finish the trip in 90 days. He made it in just 78, averaging more than 45 miles a day. On May 2, 1910, a half-million New Yorkers greeted him as he handed a letter to Mayor William Jay Gaynor from the mayor of Los Angeles.

Still, Weston's second hurrah failed to captivate the nation the way his first had, and the Walking Man toddled back into obscurity. Long separated from his wife, he lived in upstate New York with a young woman identified as his adopted daughter (she was suspected of being the mother of a little boy in the household). He licensed his name for walking socks. When he was 86, a mysterious gang of men attacked his home and shot him in the leg. He moved to Manhattan and lived on a pension provided by a benefactor.

This providential interlude didn't last. Walking to church one morning, he was hit by a skidding taxi. The accident left him first wheelchair-bound, then bedridden. He died two months after his 90th birthday. "The walker would walk no more," Mr. Curtis writes. "The automobile had won."

—Mr. Kosner, a magazine and newspaper editor, is the author of the memoir "It's News to Me."

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