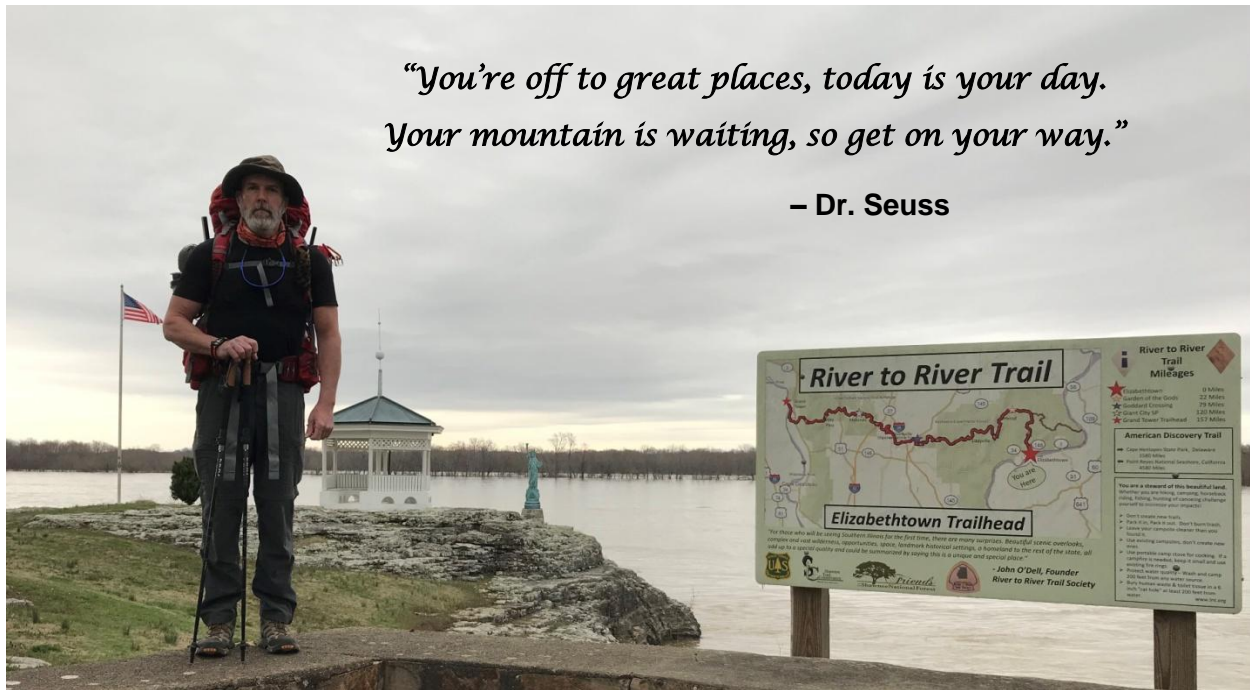


The Spirited Adventures of The “Only Noble Ladderman” (River to River Thru-Hike – March 2021)

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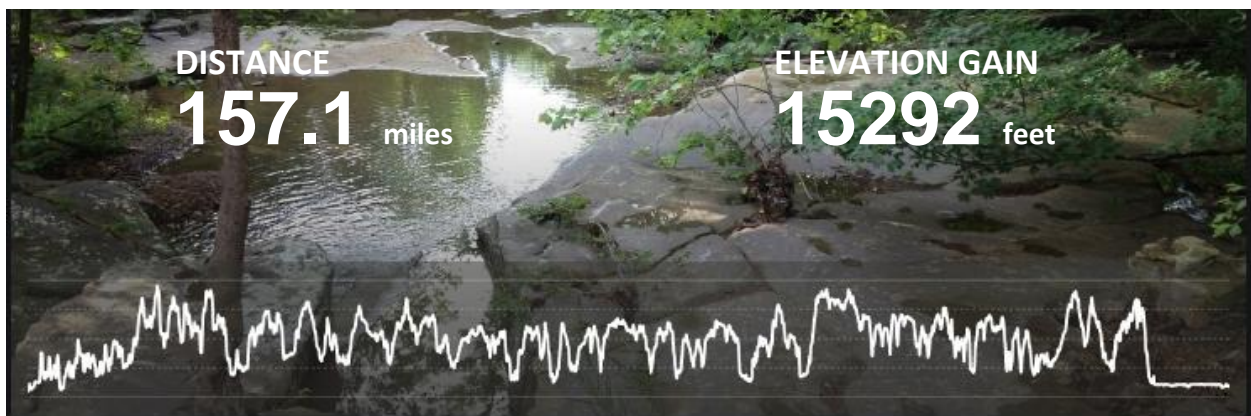
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Introduction:



Until this quest, I'd never backpacked for more than 3 days at a time and that was nearly 3 decades ago. Back in my younger days, while stationed at Langley AFB and the Pentagon in the late '80s and early '90s, some friends from church and I hiked most of the Appalachian Trail in the State of Virginia one 3-day weekend at a time. Many of us dreamed of thru-hiking the entire AT some day, "when we had time." It's hard to abdicate life's responsibilities to go frolicking through the wilderness for 6 months. I thought I might pull it off when I retired from the U.S. Air Force back in 2000 – you know, between careers; it never happened. Fast forward 28 years, I'm now 59 years old and nearing a time in my life when I'll have lots of free time. The itch to hike the entire AT is rearing its head once again.

While I've done lots of day hikes since those days, there has been no "backpacking." The COVID 19 pandemic left me with 2 weeks of vacation I needed to use, so I thought I'd bite off a small chunk of wilderness to trek through and see if I still had the grit to pull off a long distance hike. And that brings us to "My Solo River to River Thru-Hike." At 157.1 miles, it would be challenging enough to test my metal, yet attainable given the time constraint – so I put in for vacation.



Logistics:

I started with perusing The River to River Trail Society Web Site, then digesting The R2R Trail Guide, and finally onto the maps – printing them out and hanging them on my basement wall in one continuous panoramic overview.

LET THE PLANNING BEGIN!

“Hope for the best, Prepare for the worst, and Pray you end up somewhere in between.” – Unknown

I, then, began the process of collating all of the information, guidance and tips I’d read. While some data was imbedded on the map pages themselves, other additional info could only be gleaned from the web site and trail guide text, as well as other trail hiker’s stories. Once the maps were marked up with towns where I might find electricity in case of solar panel failure, mile markers, camping spots, water access, and points of interest, etc., I was ready to plan my hike. Having only hiked the Little Grand Canyon, in that neck of the woods, I wanted to be able to take in as many of the sites as possible. And since logistically, my wife could only drop off, resupply and pick-up on weekends, I settled on a 2 week trek. And, to quote the trail guide, “To honor the spirit of those who first immigrated to Illinois...” – I chose to travel from East to West.

Gear:

Wow! Gear technology has changed tremendously in the past 30 years. A quick check of my backpacking gear from yore yielded an external frame pack (yes, I said “external frame”) with most of its plastic dry rotted, a camp stove I could no longer buy fuel for, and a water filter for which the filters were no longer available. I had sliced a gash in my tent, opening a box during one of my military relocations. Et Cetera, Et Cetera, Et Cetera. Suffice it to say, it was painfully obvious I was due for some gear upgrades. I searched a myriad of top 10 lists and watched more video reviews than I care to admit, winnowing down candidates for my new gear.

Once all my gear arrived, I ended up repacking 3 times ‘til I thought I got things just so. Think again – after an 8 mile shakedown hike, I was due for one more repack before I was happy with the 48 pounds on my back.

It should have been 45 lbs. but I threw in one luxury – a 3 lb. packable rocking chair (Helinox Chair Two Rocker). Remember, you’re not just hiking, you’re camping as well.

I loaded up the Avenza App on my iPhone, downloaded the River to River Trail map bundle, and was ready to roll. With all the planning complete, I was reminded of the old military axiom.



“No plan survives first contact.”

With that being said, a good plan is critical in giving you a base from which to

IMPROVISE, ADAPT, OVERCOME.

And I employed all three before reaching Devil’s Backbone Park.

“T” Minus 2 Days:

My trip actually began a couple of days early on Friday morning. To get a firsthand look and ensure there was no question as to where we would meet, my wife and I drove to the western terminus in Grand Tower and my resupply point at Livesay Spring. Then we were off to Cedar Hill River Cabins overlooking the Ohio River near the Eastern terminus just outside Elizabethtown for a 2 night getaway in Bentley’s Lookout complete with a hot tub.



On Saturday, we took a day trip to Garden of the Gods allowing me a little more time to hike on Day 2 and less time exploring. This place is phenomenal and fun! I can’t wait to bring my grandson up here to explore. On our way back to the cabin, we “thought” we would stop by Cave-in-Rock State Park since it was just up the road. Much to our chagrin, the Ohio River had other plans – the cave was completely submerged.



“On earth there is no heaven, but there are pieces of it.” – Jules Renard

Day 1: Sunday, March 14th — Elizabethtown to Battery Rock Leg (15.8 miles)



My wife does not do O’Dark Thirty. So, at 9:02am the “Only Noble Ladderman” began my trip in earnest from the banks of the swollen Ohio River in Elizabethtown. Having rained much of the week before my trip – the trail was quite soggy. I was a little surprised when I came to my first river crossing at Hogthief Creek. Good thing I had my 5-toe water shoes. Before my trip was over I would use them another 13 times (I lost count of the rivers/creeks I was able to cross by walking on rocks).



”You need special shoes for hiking – and a bit of a special soul as well.”
– Terry Guillemets



On the up side, all that rain made for a bountiful crop of mini waterfalls and flowing creeks. Is there anything more peaceful than the sound of a waterfall or babbling brook? On the downside, I lost nearly 30 minutes (equivalent to about 1 mile hiking) for each 5-toe river crossing – but my feet stayed dry.



The plan called for camping at established sites near a water source. Well, when I approached the first nights “planned” camping spot (1/2 a mile north of the Natural Spring at about the 10 mile mark) I was feeling a little spry. It was still only early afternoon so I thought I’d push on. After all, the forecast called for more rain overnight that wasn’t going to let up ‘til mid morning, so I thought I’d get ahead of the game by putting in a few extra miles today. I decided to shoot for the Battery Rock Leg. I should be able to find a suitable camp site there, I thought. At 6:53pm, I finally found some flat ground about 100 yards north of where the old Battery Rock Leg comes in. But alas, not an established camp site, nor did it have a water source. I did, however, make it a respectable 15.8 mile first day. I got camp setup before the sun went down, but ended up eating dinner in the dark and hit the sack.



Day 1: 45,077 Steps; 15.8 Miles; 9 Hours 51 Minutes.

Day 2: Monday, March 15th — Battery Rock Leg to Garden of the Gods Overlook (8.8 miles)

It sure did rain. It started about 2am and didn't let up 'til after 9am. I ate breakfast in my tent, packed up everything but my tent (again, while still in my tent) waiting for the rain to end. I was hoping to dry my tent and pack it away damp. There was a lull around 9:30 so I started breaking camp. Fifteen minutes later more rain came, so as you can imagine, I ended up packing up a **wet** tent. Didn't get on the trail until 10:21 – ouch! But I was 5.8 miles ahead of plan. 😊

Dinner last night and breakfast this morning had depleted my water supply. Note to self: If you're not going to camp near water, at least fill your Sawyer Squeeze bag and carry it the last few miles to camp with you. So, first thing on the agenda this morning was to find a suitable water source. I did not have to look far. With all the rain the week before and the rain from last night, every hill I came down had abundant water falls.

“All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was.” – Tony Morrison

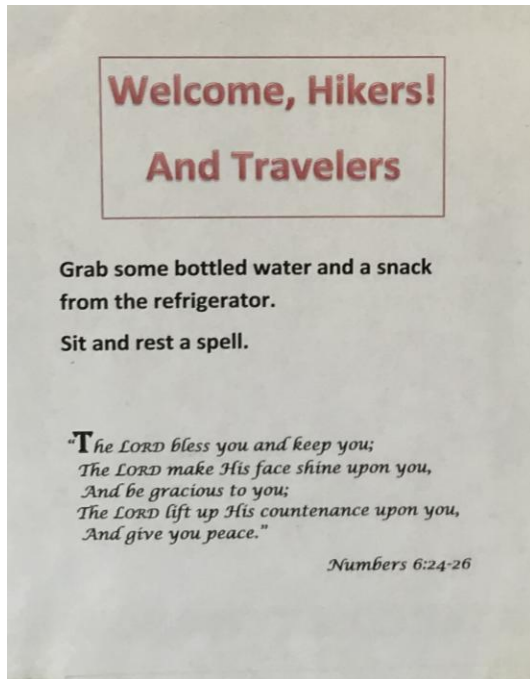
I had planned to camp at Garden of the Gods the 2nd night but opted to push on to the GoG Overlook instead, arriving at 3:59pm and racking up 8.8 miles for Day 2. I took extra water up to the overlook, and got right to work drying out my tent. While it dried in the breeze I set out my solar panel to soak up some of that elusive sunshine I hadn't seen in two days. I ate dinner sitting in my rocking chair, out on one of the rock outcroppings while I soaked up the View. Man, what a view!



Day 2: 26,077 Steps; 8.8 Miles; 5 Hours 38 Minutes.

Day 3: Tuesday, March 16th — Garden of the Gods Overlook to Benham Ridge Trailhead (13.9 miles)

I woke at 6, ate breakfast, broke camp and was on the trail at 8:16. The sunlight last evening did not amount to much, leaving my phone and solar panel desperately low on juice. Two hours later, as I'm walking along the road to Herod, I spy a pavilion out behind a little church – "I'll bet I can find some electricity there," I said to myself. As I approached, I not only found electricity, but a fully stocked mini fridge, as well. You rock, Herod Springs Baptist Church! ☺



"After a day's walk, everything has twice its usual value." – G. M. Trevelyan

So I pulled up a picnic table, plugged in my phone and solar panel, grabbed a cold bottle of water and a Cuties, and kicked back for the next hour and a half. Grateful for the power and refreshments, I left \$20 and the following note:

Awesome Ministry!!!

I'm on a 14 day hike on the River to River Trail. This is Day 3. Saw your picnic shelter where I hoped to find electricity. My solar panel hasn't been much help the last 2 days. And what do I find but a fully loaded fridge ☺

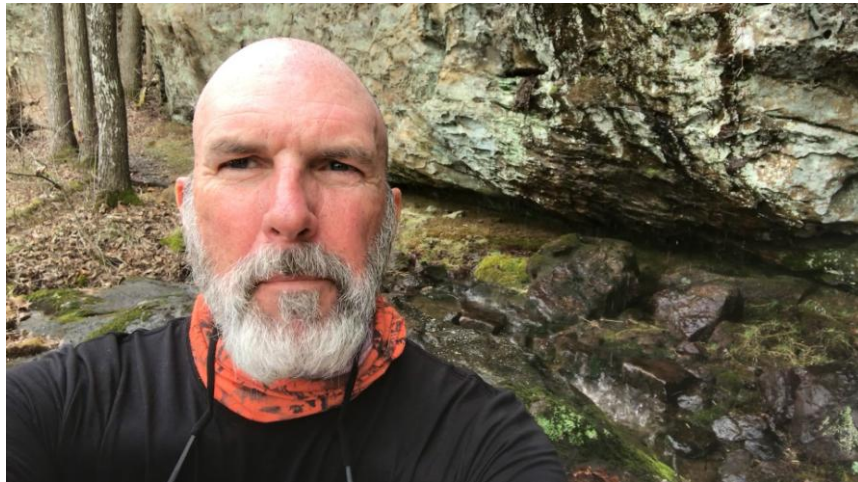
S W E E T ! ! !

Put this in the offering plate on Sunday. Thanks for the cold water, clementine, and electricity.

God Bless

Only Noble Ladderman

About a mile into the next two road miles, I catch up with Nemo. He is also hiking the R2R solo in a segmented flip-flop fashion. He parks his car at a trailhead, heads off in no particular direction for a number of days. As half his food supply is depleted, he does an about face and heads back to his car along the same path he just covered. Talk about IMPROVISE, ADAPT, OVERCOME. We walked and talked for the next mile or so until we came to the next river crossing, where he proceeded to cross in his trail runners. I told him I thought he was crazy for hiking in wet shoes – he assured me, “they dry quickly.” Not quickly enough for my blood. So, I killed the next ½ hour changing into my 5-toes, forging the swollen river, drying my feet, and changing back into my Merrell’s before hitting the trail again. I caught up with Nemo an hour or so later enjoying lunch next to a babbling brook. It was a little early for my lunch time, so I pushed on, blowing past my “planned” camping spot at Rocky Top Overlook. I finally stopped near One Horse Gap where I found a rock to sit on. A small water fall provided background music as I ate my lunch.



I ran into a couple of equestrian riders after lunch. I didn’t get their names, I’ll call them Barbara and Dale – after Barbara Stanwyck and Dale Evans on account of the way they were dressed. The ladies were dressed to the nines on horseback. We chatted for a few minutes before heading off in opposite directions. I believe they were headed for One Horse Gap Lake. Those were the only folks I ran into since I left the Ohio River. I never crossed paths with Nemo the rest of the trip.

Taking a look at the map, I decided I’d shoot for Benham Ridge Trailhead. I found a patch of flat, albeit soggy, ground about a mile past the trailhead at 5:10pm. I put in almost 14 miles today, bringing the grand total to 38, and feeling pretty good about my progress. I got camp set up and had the most delicious dinner thus far – Porcini Mushroom Risotto. This stuff is really good. I love their tag line.

Hit the sack early – they are forecasting rain for tomorrow and I want to get some miles in before it starts around 10:30am.

Day 3: 37,179 Steps; 13.9 Miles; 8 Hours 54 Minutes.



Day 4: Wednesday, March 17th — Benham Ridge Trailhead to Eddyville (15 miles)

I'm up at 5am. It takes the requisite 2 hours to get ready to roll and I'm on the trail at 7:02am. The weather guessers nailed it. At 10:30 sharp, the rain started with a drizzle and progressed to full on rain showers. I spent the day walking through the Lusk Creek Wilderness area in the rain. I'm sure I'd have enjoyed it much more on a dry day, but as a fellow thru-hiker put it – "You pick the days, but the weather is just a roll of the dice."

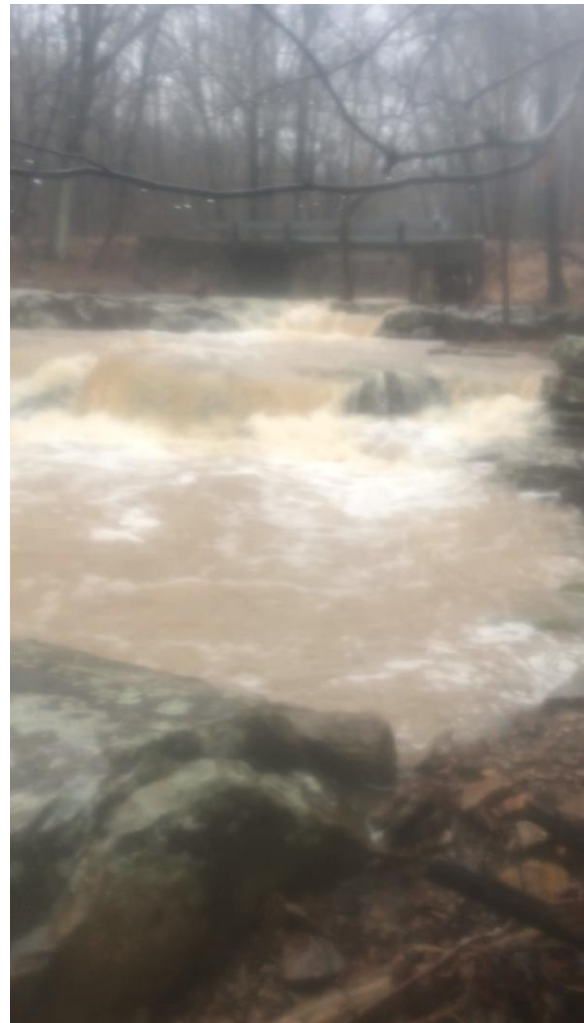
I planned to camp at Bowed Tree Crossing after, what turned out to be yet, another 5-toe river crossing at Lusk Creek. I do have to say the ice cold water actually feels refreshing on the tootsies, but I digress. It was clear the rain was not going to give up the ghost any time soon, and I was becoming leery of camping next to swollen creeks. So, you know the drill – I pushed on. At this point, I hoped to make Eddyville and find some sort of shelter, a clothes dryer and a fire to dry out my now soaking wet boots. Little did I know at the time, but I would hit the trifecta when I got to Eddyville. As I came out of the woods at Bear Creek and began yet another section of road miles, I was met with this – a torrent of cascading, angry water. The photo isn't clear on account of my phone being inside a zip lock baggie.

2nd Note to Self: Add a waterproof cell phone dry bag to your gear list.

Sure was glad to have the aid of a bridge to make this river crossing!

Meanwhile, back to my trifecta. A water logged guy walks into a bar. No, it's not the start of a joke.

I pull into Eddyville at 3:29 after a soggy 15 mile Day 4. I deposit my backpack on a picnic table under the outdoor dining area of Shotgun Eddies and walk in...to a bar. I pull up a barstool and order a beer. After explaining my predicament, I asked if Eddyville had a Laundromat. That inquiry was met with a resounding, NO. My next question was met with better results. "Is there someplace in town where I could take shelter from the impending storm?" While there was a lull presently, thunderstorms were in the forecast for the overnight. One of the ladies at the bar offered to open up the community center for me – Wow! Better than I had hoped, I was thinking a pavilion. Then a guy at the end of the bar offered to run me up to his place to use his dryer – Sweet! Then he asked me if I was a serial killer. After I replied in the negative, he offered his hand and introduced himself.



So, I paid both our bar tabs, loaded my pack in the back of John's pickup, and we headed for his house. After a brief conversation with John and his wife, she offered up lodging in their bunk room they have set up for their hunter friends, and wait for it... a HOT shower. How could I refuse a hot shower, with the sun going down I was beginning to catch a chill in these wet clothes. Renee threw my things in the washer and called the bar to let them know the R2R hiker would be spending the night at their place. After my shower, we went out to the garage and sat around an antique potbellied stove, where my wet boots were propped up drying.

Shelter Clothes Dryer Fire + Hot Shower

The Q U A D F E C T A !!!

I must be living right, I thought.

We were talking about our days serving in the military when a friend of theirs stopped by after work for a beer. It was the husband of the lady who had offered to open up the community center – “It’s a Small World” popped into my head. Having been a really hard day, I head to the bunk house to turn in for the night.

“For hiking is one of those things that you can only do when you have the determination in you.” – Unknown

Day 4: 42,974 Steps; 15 Miles; 8 Hours 27 Minutes.

Day 5: Thursday, March 18th — Eddyville to Trigg Tower (15.7 miles)

I wake well before dawn to pack up and catch a ride with John back to Shotgun Eddies. I thank my gracious host, grab my pack, and am walking the streets of Eddyville in the pre-dawn light at 6:23. It's going to be a sunny day, and it's nice to be hiking in dry boots, Hooah!

I planned to camp just the other side of Millstone Lake / Bay Creek Dam, but as luck would have it, I missed the campsite (I guess I should have turned right after I crossed the dam). I missed the Hippie bus as well. Once I arrived at Tin Whistle, I decided to push on to Trigg tower – hoping to get a good sunset picture from on top of the tower.

I made it to Trigg Tower at 4:36pm covering 15.7 miles. I set up camp and up the tower I went.



How disappointing is that “sunset”? It looks more like it's gonna snow. ☹️ I had the luxury of a late start in the morning; having put in two back-to-back 15 mile days. Besides, I have to slow roll the next two days lest I blow by my, hard and fast, resupply appointment. So I resign myself to shoot for sunrise. The sunrise would not disappoint!

*“If you can't be in awe of Mother Nature,
there's something wrong with you.” – Alex Trebek*



Day 5: 47,997 Steps; 15.7 Miles; 10 Hours 13 Minutes.

Day 6: Friday, March 19th — Trigg Tower to Max Creek Trailhead (9.1 miles)

I wake in time to catch that awesome panoramic picture of the sunrise from atop of Trigg Tower. I have breakfast, break camp and am on the trail at 9:08am. No fantastic stories to share on this leg, but I did see a few crazy critters out in the woods.



“In every walk with nature, one receives far more than he seeks.” – John Muir

I had planned to stay at Max Creek Vortex, but again, with all that water I pushed on another 1.3 miles to higher ground at the Max Creek Trailhead. I arrived at 3:18pm having only hiked 9.1 miles. After setting up camp, I wandered into the woods for a nature call and found this. What next, indoor plumbing?



I sat around; eating dinner and watching the tall trees sway in the wind. Gotta meet my resupply tomorrow at 1 o'clock – better get some shut eye.

Day 6: 28,572 Steps; 9.1 Miles; 6 Hours 3 Minutes.

Day 7: Saturday, March 20th — Max Creek Trailhead to Livesay Spring (8.2 miles)

I'm up at 5am; have breakfast, break camp, and head off for 2.2 road miles to the "Great Divide."



A quick photo op to commemorate the occasion, then it's another 6 uneventful miles to my resupply point at Livesay Spring.

“Of all the paths you take in life, make sure a few of them are dirt.” – John Muir

I arrive a little early at 11:15, registering 8.2 miles for Day 7 and 85 miles for my first week. My wife meets me at the appointed time and we head off to Marion for a much needed shower at the Pilot truck stop. It's normally \$12 bucks or free if you drive a truck and buy their fuel (I drive, but buy fuel at our company facility each day). As I begin to pay for my shower, a fellow driver offers up one of his free showers – he's on his way home and doesn't need it. I told you I was living right. Smelling a little better and wearing clean clothes, my wife will now be seen with me in public. I should tell you I washed up each day using something called Dude Wipes – great invention by the way, highly recommended.

Next, we go across the street to Jimmy John's for a #8 Billy Club Box Lunch and an ice cold drink. Aaaaahhh! After lunch, it's time for me to head back to the trail and my wife to head back home.

After setting up camp, I head down to the Livesay Spring to fill my water bottles. Then, it's time to enjoy an ice cold beer. Double Aaaaahhhh! Week two begins in the morning, so it's off to bed.

Day 7: 21,320 Steps; 8.2 Miles; 3 Hours 58 Minutes.

85 Miles Down - 72.1 To Go

Day 8: Sunday, March 21st — Livesay Spring to Ferne Clyffe State Park (15.5 miles)

I awake at 5am to a very cold morning. Thanks to my resupply, I had fresh berries and a banana for breakfast vs. the regular instant oatmeal. Breaking camp was interesting – as I pulled the fly off the tent, the condensation froze. There wasn't much I could do about it 'til it warmed up a bit so I packed it with the rest of my gear and was on the trail at 7:47am.

After a beautiful short hike thru the pine forest, the 5.1 boring road miles went by fairly quickly and I arrive at Ferne Clyffe State Park backpack camping area at 10:52. It takes an hour or so to dry out my tent and set up camp. Can you believe it – the fly was still cold when I pulled it out of my pack.



Following the guidebook's "highly recommended" alternative, I head off to explore Ferne Clyffe SP. It is a beautiful Sunday afternoon as I head down the trail toward Hawk's Cave senza backpack. I run into a hand full of folks out exploring the trail and I walk, for a time, with a high school science teacher and her tiny dog named Moose. As I arrive at Hawk's Cave, I find a few families climbing the massive boulders. When I descend the trail down to the main waterfall, I run into throngs of folks out enjoying the sunny spring day. By the time I finished exploring, I must have seen

hundreds of families enjoying this fantastic state park. I'll be back to explore another day.

*"I go to nature to be soothed and healed,
and to have my senses put in order."*

– John Burroughs

I finally make it back to camp having put in 12½ R2R trail miles and tallying 15½ miles for Day 8. I enjoy a leisurely dinner before heading off to bed for the night.

Day 8: 37,017 Steps; 15.5 Miles; 7 Hours 51 Minutes.



Day 9: Monday, March 22nd — Ferne Clyffe State Park to Panther Den (15 miles)



I'm up before dawn, eat breakfast, break camp, and am on the trail at 7:40am. I head off thru the park and up the Boy Scout Trail to catch the R2R in Goreville to begin the first of 8.3 grueling road miles. I could not image anyone enjoying the road miles in the heat of summer – it must be brutal. With so many road miles today, it was nice to enjoy the view and especially the sounds at Bork's Falls for a time. I finally re-enter the woods at 12:45 and head up to Panther Den City.

When I arrive at Panther Den at 2:33pm, I go about setting up camp and put the solar panel out to soak up the afternoon sun. With the chores finished, it's time to explore! This place is sweet. The next time I visit, I'll have to find a way on top of these massive rocks. With another 15 mile day in the books, it's time for dinner and a good night's sleep.



"Between every two pines there is a doorway to a new world." – John Muir



Day 9: 38,294 Steps; 15 Miles; 6 Hours 54 Minutes.

Day 10: Tuesday, March 23rd — Panther Den to Giant City State Park (10.2 miles)

As always, it's up before dawn – this morning I'm on the trail at first light (6:22am). I'm excited to have only minimal road miles today and want to arrive early to begin my down day.

I enjoy the trail miles, especially after all of yesterday's road miles. Along the way, I am fascinated by all that Mother Nature has to offer. I take the short side trip to check out the Hidatsa Earth Lodge. I wonder how much longer this wooden hut will be standing.

“To walk in nature is to witness a thousand miracles.” – Mary Davis



Four miles later, I arrive at the Giant City Lodge. It's only 12:50, but they let me check into my cabin early. When I booked my cabin, they were running a special for March (stay a 2nd night for half price) so I splurged and got a Bluff Cabin. I purposely skipped lunch, opting for the highly recommended



“Famous All-You-Can-Eat Family Style Chicken Dinner” I'd heard so much about along the trail. I was not disappointed. After dinner, I climbed the Giant City water tower to watch the sunset. With lots to explore the next day, I turned in early.



Day 10: 32,567 Steps; 10.2 Miles; 6 Hours 24 Minutes.

Day 11: Wednesday, March 24th — Down Day (9.8 miles)

Even on my down day, I'm up before dawn. By the time the sun comes up, I'm exploring the Giant City Nature Trail, then over to the Devil's Standtable Trail, all before breakfast. I enjoy a hearty breakfast at the Lodge before heading out to the Post Oak Trail and the "unadvertised" Bluff Trail; where I soon found myself looking down upon the Devil's Standtable.



I frittered away the sunny afternoon; relaxing on the cabin's back porch, imbibing a Saluki Dunkeldog, listening to the breeze blow up the bluff, watching the trees sway, and the buzzards soar. Then, I'm off to dinner at the Lodge.



"Just living is not enough. One must have sunshine, freedom, and a little flower." – Hans Christian Andersen



Day 11: 32,567 Steps; 10.2 Miles; 6 Hours 24 Minutes. (All off the River to River Trail)

Day 12: Thursday, March 25th — Giant City State Park to Quetil Trail – Alto Pass (16.4 miles)

I'm up and gone with the sun at 6:17am. The forecast is calling for several rounds of rain today, so I'm hoping to get in some miles before it starts. As it turns out, it only drizzled for a short time each of the first two times during my hike; the rain that came as I was setting up camp was another story.



I arrived at the Rock Dam/Spillway around 12:30 and found yet another soggy campsite. It's still early and I really don't want to get caught on the wrong side of the spillway if it rains hard tonight. And besides, I wasn't thrilled with the prospect of backtracking to Trail 379 in the morning. I'll push on to the Quetil Trail in Alto Pass, I thought. Crossing the spillway was quite a challenge; the algae and moss made for slippery conditions. I ended up scoring the algae in order to gain purchase on the rocks below. With the help of my 5-

toes, I made yet another successful water crossing. Unbeknownst to me, there was a 2nd, higher and dryer, campsite on the other side. But, by then, I had already set my sites on Alto Pass.

I arrive in Alto Pass around 3:30pm and head down the Quetil Trail (a short nature trail along the path of the Cairo & St Louis Narrow Gage railroad used before it was abandoned in 1981) to the rock staircase that leads to the top of the bluff. The view from atop the bluff is amazing and I got my second glimpse of Bald Knob Cross (I saw it yesterday from Giant City SP). I'll get to see it, up close and personal, in the morning.

But first, I need to find a place to camp. I spoke with a local police officer who was catching up on his logs from atop the bluff. "Is it okay to camp along the Quetil Trail," I asked? He said, "Lots of folks camp down there, just be sure and camp down below the main trail." So, back down the staircase I went, grabbed my pack, and went searching for a suitable campsite. Everything was soggy, of course. But I did find some flat ground near an intermittent stream and proceed to set up camp.



As I laid out my footprint, I look up to see these amazing sculptures.



*“Should you shield the canyons
from the windstorms
you would never see
the true beauty
of their carvings.”*

– Elisabeth Kübler-Ross



About the time I finished admiring the sandstone carvings, I hear a clap of thunder. I **almost** got the tent up before the rains came. I threw all my gear in the tent, finished securing the fly in the rain, crawled in, and that’s where I stayed the remainder of the night.

Day 12: 48,220 Steps; 16.4 Miles; 9 Hours 31 Minutes.

Day 13: Friday, March 26th — Quetil Trail to Inspiration Point (11.6 miles)



I awake at 4am and am on the trail by 6:36. A couple hours later, I arrive at Bald Knobs Cross of Peace. The 3 mile round trip side excursion is well worth the trip. What a spectacular view! What an awe-inspiring monument to hope, joy, peace and faith. I spent about an hour on the second highest peak in southern Illinois at 1,030 feet before continuing on my journey.

Clear Springs Wilderness was a pretty moderate hike. It seemed to follow the ridgeline for most of the trail. The guide book was right; Hutchins Creek turned out to be a significant water crossing. 5-toes to the rescue with pants rolled up past the knees. With that much water, I decided not to stay near the creek and pushed on to Inspiration Point.

I arrived at Inspiration Point around 2:00pm and was greeted with yet another spectacular vista.

"The best views come after the hardest climb." – Unknown



After taking this panoramic shot of the most breathtaking view of my trip, I followed the bluff – poking my head out every rock outcropping I came to. I sat for a while on one outcropping, watching a dozen buzzards soar on thermal updrafts. After a while, the trail came to an end. It was then that I realized I'd left the trail some time ago. I could see the parking lot at McCann Springs, so down the mountain I went. I arrived at 2:47pm, found a suitable campsite, and setup for my last night on the trail. I found myself a little low on water and the creek at McCann Springs Trailhead dry. ☹️ As luck would have it, there were many visitors heading up to Inspiration Point by car. I stopped one on their way down, explained my situation, and asked if they had a couple of bottles of water they could spare. As it turned out, I stopped the right car. The gentleman in the backseat worked for the forest service and directed me to a spring just around the corner on Snake Road less than a ¼ mile away. He added, "If you get to the Big Muddy Levee, you went too far." Hallelujah!

It was time to cook dinner and get ready to hit the sack. Gotta get an early start if I'm gonna meet my wife on-time.

Day 13: 40,625 Steps; 11.6 Miles; 8 Hours 11 Minutes.

Day 14: Saturday, March 27th — Inspiration Point to Devil's Backbone Park (9.9 miles)

I'm outta bed at 4am and on the "trail" by 6:11am. I put trail in quotes 'cuz it's hard for me to consider a 9.9 mile path atop a levee a "trail". This was by far the most tedious segment of the trip. **UGH!**

But it did have two redeeming qualities. First, the view of the bluffs and Inspiration Point is not to be missed. As the guide book admonishes – Look Back!



Second, I found it geographically fascinating that Grand Tower Island is actually part of Perry County, Missouri. So, for the record 2.75 miles of my 157.1 mile trek actually took place in Missouri. Incidentally, it's a 30 mile one-way road trip to get to the rest of Perry County, Missouri.

I arrived at the western terminus at 10:46am and was unable to see the Devil's Bake Oven Arch. As was the case on the Ohio River and Cave in Rock, the Mississippi River was also running high and the Arch was underwater. ☹️

Day 14: 26,146 Steps; 9.9 Miles; 4 Hours 27 Minutes.

“Somewhere between the bottom of the climb and the summit is the answer to the mystery why we climb.” – Greg Child

Takeaways: Conclusion, Overall Thoughts and Lessons Learned

I am really glad I took two weeks to complete the trek. Shooting for the Fastest Known Time (FKT) doesn't interest me at all. It's supposed to be "all about the *journey*, not the *destination*" – isn't it? I was able to take my time and thoroughly enjoy the trip. I had forgotten how much I enjoyed camping. Two weeks is not nearly enough time to explore all that Southern Illinois and the Shawnee National Forest have to offer. To that end, one weekend at a time over the next several years, I'll be revisiting this wondrous latitude of Southern Illinois – camping and exploring with my grandkids. My 13 year old grandson and I already turned Giant City State Park inside out just a month after my hike. Garden of the Gods is next on our itinerary.

I gotta say the simplicity of the days was rejuvenating – all the cares of the world fell away for a time. Each day's cadence – early to rise, breakfast, break camp, hike and explore, setup camp, dinner, early to bed – REPEAT. What a life!

Over the 14 days, I estimate, I logged 105¼ hours hiking 174.9 miles, took nearly ½ million steps, climbed 727 floors during the course of a total elevation gain/loss of 15,292 feet.

A few thoughts on timing (1st week of spring) – no bugs, no hunters, and no heat/humidity – 'nuff said.

I wholly enjoyed the side trips. Ferne Clyffe State Park, Quetil Trail, Bald Knob Cross, Giant City State Park and Inspiration Point all added a few miles to my journey, but added immeasurably to my contentment. My sojourn at Giant City SP was truly refreshing. Vittles at the Lodge were quite tasty and offered a nice break from oatmeal breakfasts and dehydrated dinners.

I must confess, I had never heard of "Trail Magic" until I read Caleb's account of his R2R experience. I had to look it up – unexpected acts of generosity on the trail. Well, I gotta say, I experienced Trail Magic in spades. Thanks again to all the purveyors of Trail Magic bestowed upon me during my R2R Thru-Hike.

This segment would not be complete without a few notes on gear.

- **Trekking Poles** – I never used them before this hike. They helped on the up hills, slowed me on the down hills, and aided immeasurably during river crossing balancing acts.
- **Footwear** – Do your research, and whatever you do, break them in before your hike. Blistered feet are a sure-fire way to end your hike.
- **Socks** – I bought 5-toed thin base layer liner socks. Take a look, I think they made a real difference.
- **Water shoes** – Hiking in wet footwear is a recipe for blisters – it's imperative you keep your feet dry. I couldn't have done without my 5-Toes.
- **Cell Phone Dry Bag** – Cell phones weren't invented the last time I backpacked. I didn't even think about it 'til Day 4.
- **Watertight Tent** – Do your homework. Remember the old adage, "*You get what you pay for.*"
- **Trash Bag** – I used a single bag as a pack liner by day and a pack cover by night to keep the dew, as well as rain, off my pack. Get the 5mil thick contractor bag – you need something tough enough to withstand the daily packing and unpacking.
- **Pack Cover** – Do you sense a theme here? You gotta keep your gear dry.

As I finished this passage I realized it contained a lot of advice on Feet and Water. I'm not sure if that means anything at all. But I leave you with one last quote.

*"May your **FEET** take you where your **HEART** wants to go!"* – Soni Gusain