

Schroeder Section Hike

It was almost four years ago on December 23, 2019 that my four oldest kids, Zach, Emma, Matthew, Noah, and I, took off on an unseasonably warm day with a friend and his son. The goal was to segment hike the entire River to River trail by the time Zach and Emma graduated high school, which they will do in May 2024. Over the course of 11 segments, we were joined by family and many friends. Our longest single day was 17 miles into camp at Panther Den, and we had many overnights spent just off the trail, and one next to the lodge at Giant City State Park. We finished the trail at Grand Tower on November 12, 2023, a little less than 220 years after Meriwether Lewis stopped across the river for the night as he noted in his diary.



Schroeder family at Elizabethtown 2019

Although I began the trail with a significant amount of backpacking experience, and my kids had gone on a few trips prior, I wasn't sure quite what to expect. Zach and Emma were 13 at the time, Matthew 11, and Noah was 9. As a married father of 8 kids (our youngest, Kate, being born a little more than 5 months before we started) and as a child psychologist and VP of the Department of Psychology & Wellness at Easterseals in Evansville, Indiana, life was already quite busy. Also, with a desire to avoid prime bug season (we only had two segments that were not between October through March, both in May), and trying to navigate having a vehicle(s) at both the start and finish, I knew the logistics of finding weekends/holidays and fellow travelers would be a huge key to making this possible. This was especially true given my work schedule and school/athletic schedules were something we constantly had to work around. We had one day hike segment (from Bassett Road to High Knob) but the rest of our segments were weekend/holiday segments with one overnight, with the exception being our segment from the campground at Ferne Clyffe SP to the Giant City Lodge, where we did 27+ miles on Friday/Saturday after Thanksgiving, with a night in the cabin and a family style dinner as a reward for the kids (and us two dads). I also recognized that we would be at the mercy of the weather to some degree. While I knew that part of the adventure would involve cold and some rain, I didn't want to subject our young kids (and others) to extreme weather (e.g., thunderstorms, ice/snow) on the trail (of note, our coldest start was 25 degrees out of Giant City and our kids still talk about the notorious six mile slogfest from One Horse Gap to Bethesda Church).

Yet from the beginning, in the spirit of John O'Dell, I really felt that God was calling our family to this journey. And so, the most essential component of this adventure was repeated prayer to God in supplication for safety and in gratitude for the countless gifts on and off the trail. By the end of the trek, I was astounded at all the ways God revealed Himself. After God's guidance and care, I realized that the next most important component was my fitness, and that of our kids. Having been blessed with an active life of running, biking, and swimming, I quickly realized that in order for this trek to be possible, my fitness (and that of my kids) was not only necessary for the trail (physically and psychologically), but also to avoid different illness/injuries that could have derailed certain segments, or the trek as a whole.

Beyond this, the coordination of gear and segments was the next challenge, and it became an adventure before and after the trail (I am glad to take a break from cleaning and drying bladders for a while). For years prior, we had slowly started buying our kids backpacking gear for birthdays and Christmas gifts, and this continued throughout the trail. We were blessed that on every single segment (which I always sent out advanced details to a Men's backpacking group that I lead), at least one (adult) family member or friend made the commitment to join us, even as we got further away from home. This not only provided for great camaraderie, but also allowed us to drop a vehicle(s) at the end before we started the trail so that when the segment was done, we had an immediate means of transportation waiting. Especial thanks goes to Dave Rolwing, Mike Bacon, Matt Beyer, and Dawson Schroeder (and their families), who joined multiple segments and made logistics possible. Thanks also to Bill Gilmour for all his advice and assistance on the trail.

As with any adventure of this magnitude, it's impossible to capture so many memorable moments in a brief article, but for those interested in hearing much more about this adventure, check out my forthcoming book "On the Trail With My Kids: From the Ohio River to the Mighty Mississippi." But whether it was eating steak under the Cold Moon on top of One Horse Gap, swimming in Lusk Creek Canyon on a 90 degree day just before the official beginning of summer, or drinking coffee on a frigid morning in downtown Makanda next to the memorial for Boomer, the trail was overflowing with unique adventures that kept all of us excited to come back for more. As we walked the final miles into Grand Tower with a youthful crew of 18 leading the way, I was flooded with gratitude for everything that made this possible.



Schroeder family at Grand Tower 2023

For more information about our adventure and planning for this kind of hike, I can be reached via email (jimandamyschroeder@gmail.com) or through my website (www.james-schroeder.com).